The Reparations Debate: Issues and Ideas

TODD LEEDY

The papers in this issue are edited transcripts of oral presentations given at the Walter Rodney International Conference held at Binghamton University, State University of New York, Binghamton, on November 6-8, 1998. Professor Ali A. Mazrui, Ambassador Dudley Thomas, Q.C., Professor Jacob Ade Ajayi, and Professor Ricardo Laremont were participants on a panel devoted to the topic of reparations. Similar presentations to those printed here were made at a Round Table of the African Studies Association held in Chicago, Illinois, October 29-November 1, 1998. Todd Leedy of the ASQ Editorial Committee provides an introduction.

Over the last fifty years, the accepted definition of reparations has undergone a significant transformation. Prior to the horrors made evident at the end of World War II, reparations existed as an international political device through which nation states could extract money from one another for behavior outside acceptable limits. Political and military power determined the nature and direction of such reparation payments between nation states. Reparations for the harm inflicted on a race or class of people have gradually become more accepted in both national and international legal systems. Germany will have paid over 100 billion DM to Israel by 2005. The United States government has paid over $1 billion to those Japanese Americans it illegally interned between 1941-1945. These and other examples indicate that nation states may now be held liable for damages caused to a particular race or class of people. In the midst of heightened visibility for such cases in recent years, the Organization of African Unity adopted the Abuja Declaration in 1993, committing the OAU to seek reparations for the Atlantic slave trade.

On what basis are these claims being made? The most obvious deleterious effects of the Atlantic slave trade occurred in those areas frequently raided for captives. Many areas became depopulated, often resulting in the resurgence of natural environments previously carefully managed for productive and health reasons. Other areas encountered overpopulation as people sought safety and protection from the trade. This could also generate substantial, long term environmental effects. Such situations were often cited by early apologists for the trade who argued that it played an important role in alleviating population pressures. Communities that survived despite continued raiding found themselves facing shortages of the agricultural labor and/or artisans crucial to local economies.

Patrick Manning’s complex simulation model calculates Africa’s population in 1850 to be roughly half of what it should have been given a moderate 5% growth rate over the previous

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150 years. Joseph Miller’s study of the Angolan trade concludes that probably as many slaves died in capture or transport to the coast as were eventually transported. A similar number of people simply fled to other regions. For the Angolan zone alone, this amounts to a worst case scenario of 100,000 - 120,000 dead or displaced persons annually. Scholars such as David Eltis or John Thornton, however, have used their own calculations to suggest that the entire Atlantic trade (not simply the trade in slaves) constituted such a small percentage of Africa’s economy that shifts in the nature of the slave trade would have had only a minimal impact. Thornton also contends that African participants long remained able to control the extent of their involvement and usually maintained an upper hand in their relations with European traders.

More subtle and harder to quantify are those forms of enslavement based on dependency and negotiation rather than capture. Most African societies had various types of dependent relationships. These systems of clientship or pawning rested upon the perceived benefits for the parties involved. The crux of Paul Lovejoy’s argument is simply that these systems of dependency were inevitably altered by the growth of the Atlantic slave trade. The dramatically expanded demands of the Atlantic trade transformed existing systems of dependent relations such that more people were funneled into the slave market. Elites who accepted pawns or clients to secure a debt began to alter the negotiated terms of dependency, seeking access to commodities available only in exchange for people. Weaker members of society found their options for improving or securing their social status increasingly constrained.

So, arguably, it was not simply that Africa suffered a loss of crucial labor power with the subsequent economic, demographic and environmental results, but also that the politics of local rule became more violent and expropriative than anything previously experienced. Slavery in many areas of Africa actually increased following the end of the Atlantic trade as slave prices dropped and commodity prices rose. Labor bottlenecks in the production of newly viable goods were frequently solved through the appropriation of unfree labor. Dependent relationships which had previously benefitted both parties now came to resemble those forms of chattel slavery so familiar to Europeans. This increasing similarity, coupled with violence which continued even after the Atlantic trade had been outlawed, ironically provided one of the key points used to rationalize the onset of European colonial conquest.

The authors featured in this issue of the African Studies Quarterly fundamentally agree on the overwhelmingly negative impact of the Atlantic slave trade. The central question of Ricardo Laremont’s essay therefore is not to debate the extent of damages caused by the Atlantic trade, but rather to examine the various options available for gaining some form of reparations. Pursuing legal action through the International Court of Justice on charges of genocide would depend on the litigants consenting to the jurisdiction of the Court. However, creating a UN tribunal modeled on those at Nuremburg and Tokyo would allow responsible states to be charged with crimes against humanity. Another avenue would seem to be tackling the responsible states individually through local political action. In this instance, pressure for a legislative solution may have more impact than any legal action. Japanese Americans only obtained reparations from the political process after 10 years of fruitless litigation.

Ali Mazrui has another option in mind. He makes it clear that reparations are due to Africa not merely to rectify the Atlantic slave trade, but also to address the damages incurred under colonial and neo-colonial systems. The consequences of Europe’s historical imperatives in the
development of Africa are perhaps best known through the work of Walter Rodney. Interestingly, Mazrui argues that reparations should be paid not for the negative impact of Europe upon Africa, but rather for Africa’s positive impact upon Europe, i.e. how Africa developed Europe. Without the slaveship, there would be no spaceship. Thus reparations should be undertaken not as attonement for previous wrongdoing, but as just rewards for long term contributions to the modern world. In addition to bilateral development aid, interim reparations would take the form of institutional capacity building, expanding democratization and strengthening global coalitions. These goals define reparations in terms of the continent’s long imbalanced relationship with Europe, moving beyond the level of individuals or states.

Ambassador Dudley Thompson provides a moving call for reparations, dismissing previous efforts as meaningless and ineffective. Thompson cites historical precedents to prove that other “debts” have already been paid (in the cases of Germany, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States). He examines historical distortions to illustrate that this debt remains outstanding, despite claims to the contrary. What matters, though, is not the guilt but the responsibility of the nations involved. An admission of guilt is only the first step towards assuming responsibility. Placing responsibility at the nation state level would logically result in reparations at a similar level. Thompson calls for an “African Marshall Plan” wherein full monetary compensation is achieved through capital transfer or debt cancellation. Only after escaping from the foreign financial stranglehold can African states be regarded as independent.

The Abuja Declaration came about as Africa faced increasing political and economic marginalization. It is clear from the text that reparations are not simply an issue revolving around the Atlantic slave trade. All the discussions of reparations presented here move beyond slavery to engage contemporary issues of power and development. Reparations thus become a broader attempt to redress the historical relationship between Africa and Europe. Whether the OAU follows political or legal strategies, admission of guilt and acceptance of responsibility will remain difficult to achieve. Asserting that only western nations involved in the trade should pay neglects the existing evidence for African involvement in slave raiding, trade and ownership. Furthermore, such an approach risks subsuming African agency under the looming structure of expanding European capitalism, denying that Africans had a direct and crucial role in shaping their own history. In addition to assigning responsibility, the main difficulty facing the reparations movement will be to determine the number and nature of the beneficiaries. Who will actually be paid and by whom? Determining individual reparations recipients will remain an unwieldy task, while payments to states or governments may never find their way to the damaged. The enormity of clarifying these legal and political questions has so far tended to prevent the reparations issue from entering mainstream political discourse in either Europe or the United States. Until those fighting for reparations overcome such basic logistical issues, even the most heartfelt appeals will likely fall on unresponsive ears. For as Mazrui states, "at the moment the flesh is weak and the spirit is not even willing."