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## ON REPARATIONS

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The history of claims for reparations after slavery and the slave trade is long and complex. Indeed, it is longer and more complex than is commonly acknowledged. Demands for reparations are not a recent phenomenon; they do not result from contemporary debates about individual and collective identities. It is reductive to think of these demands – as many people would like to – as without precedent, “anachronistic,” or as “present struggles” over memory or history. Though sometimes made for good reason, these arguments are always full of fire and fury and, more often than not, signify nothing.

The idea of reparations has been elaborated since the eighteenth century by slaves and freed slaves, in various ways and deploying various strategies. It has always faced almost insurmountable obstacles and has, as such, known many failures. The material and symbolic demand for compensation brought by men and women who had themselves been subject to heinous trafficking or slavery – or who were related to someone who had – took many forms. From pamphlets and petitions to more formal appeals to the legal and justice system, they sought either public apologies or financial compensation. Whilst the term “reparation” was infrequently used, many synonyms had clear meanings: the fair and justifiable demand that grave and deadly injustices be rectified by material or symbolic compensation. Unsurprisingly, enslaved peoples were always aware that their condition was indefensible and intolerable, and of the dehumanisations and violence that underpinned the “social death” (as Orlando Patterson calls it) that marked their lives.

This sharp consciousness of their suffering nourished sometimes hidden but always active and intentional forms of resistance, denunciation, reclamation. Just because most of the time the demands for reparations have not been successful does not mean we should devalue or underplay their historical importance. Anyone who definitively underplays the role of slaves themselves as agents in the history of slavery, slave trading and of abolition needs to profoundly rethink their position.

Historical analysis is not only about what happened or what seemed to have happened. It is also very much about what could have happened, about what many people imagined could have come to pass, or what they tried to make happen. As historians, what we have to go on is always slim. The actions of individuals are not always easily discernible or understandable. It is even harder faithfully to describe their motivations. Their actions were only what was possible in the conditions they faced. Making someone a slave is inhumane. Changing slaves’ situation was very difficult: there were many attempts which did not all come to fruition. These attempts also have not reached the archives intact. Nevertheless, though rarely easy to hear, reconstitute or identify, they remain legible as rumours, fragments and clues. There is, therefore, no reason to ignore these attempts’ existence. Writing this history, in a rigorous and documented way, is difficult. It is a work of interpretation.

The history of reparations cannot be understood on a purely national level, on a case-by-case basis. Like the historical phenomena that have provoked them, the history of reparations is enriched by an attention to its transnational and comparative dimensions. This is not to advocate inattention to the peculiarities of each slave society and the specificities of each abolitionist and post-abolitionist trajectory. But, in the same way that slave societies register common traits, so there are similarities in the arguments for and against reparations. Like the memorialization of slavery and the slave trade in museums, public monuments, or cultural tourism, from Benin and Senegal to France, from Ghana to the United States, the history of reparations has evolved as a result of the circulation of arguments and protest on a global scale. Again, methodological nationalism is futile, though many benefit from its uninteresting rewards.

The question of reparations remains to be addressed and resolved. Against some predictions – some relieved, others celebratory – the question has not disappeared from public discourse. The historical legacies of slavery and the slave trade, and the unstoppable accumulation of social inequality and discrimination that they represent, have not suddenly resolved themselves or vanished. To ignore or avoid them, or to summarily devalue them on the basis of arguments about authority or “political correctness” (a concept abundantly invoked but that remains to be defined with any substance whatsoever) does not make them go away. Especially if we consider that, unlike considerable reparations paid to slave owners as a means of compensating for abolition (justified by hysterical and alarmist visions of socio-cultural rupture, with analogies in the present), the victims (and their descendants) of both processes were rarely afforded similar generosity. The memorialization of slavery and the institutionalization of the public memory of slavery and the slave trade has taken place on a global scale. It has assumed different expressions and a recurrent public dialogue has taken place. However, it is obvious that the industry of memory and memorization has not been enough to achieve a modicum of consensus, justice and social peace. There have been many initiatives, few consistent official projects and still less the capacity to produce substantial changes that could correct the disintegrating effect of the legacy of slavery. The numerous and painful wounds have not healed. To a certain extent advocating redress stems from both the recognition of the inadequacy of mere memorialization, and also from dissatisfaction with its practical consequences. Memory needs the most rigorous history possible. Without it we can hardly face, let alone solve, the problem of reparations and we will be even further from the public dialogue we desire: fiery and furious, perhaps, but signifying something.

These are just some of the many key arguments to keep hold of from the most recent book by historian Ana Lúcia Araújo, a professor at Howard University in the United States of America. *Reparations for slavery and the slave trade. A transnational and comparative history* (Bloomsbury, 2017) is obligatory reading.

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