

REPARATIONS: PAN-AFRICAN AND JEWISH EXPERIENCES

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It was mentioned earlier that I come from Jamaica, and I live in Ithaca, New York. I have a multiple identity. I actually came from Jamaica last night, stopped in Ithaca, and came here. I come from a region, which I call an invented region.

We literally come from all over. Most of us from the Caribbean, who have African ancestry, are the product of the largest and longest forced population transfer in history, the transatlantic slave trade. Here is a region, which was involved from its European dominant origins – whether it was deliberate or consequential – in absolute genocide of the indigenous inhabitants.

In my own country, Jamaica, there is literally not a trace of the Arawak Indians. They have all disappeared. [Jamaica] was simultaneously invented by the twin forces of slavery and colonialism, which were two keystones in the Pan-African mobilization movement. Here is a region where you have the only places of black majority populations outside the African continent, which gives an instinctive Pan-African sensitivity to the region. Here is a region linked at once to the slave trade in the Americas and the colonial experiences in continental Africa. Therefore, it fuses two very important historical elements in the black world reality. There is, we may say, the inevitability of a racial frame of reference in the Caribbean environment just as there is the inevitability of an international global frame of reference. Because our invention was part and parcel of early Western European expansion.

Indeed, through subordination we were very much part of the origins of the contemporary, Western dominant international system. However, it has in turn provoked a long history of agitation and mobilization for racial liberation for racial freedom. It is no accident that the Caribbean has had throughout the centuries its fair share of Pan-African actors and activists.

I want to make some preliminary reflections on the Holocaust, the Nazi Holocaust some people call it, or others call it the Jewish Holocaust. (I would love to know because Nazis and Jews are polar opposites, but the two terms are used synonymously. I am sure by the end of this conference, my mind will be much clearer as to the appropriate terminology.) One of the most astonishing things about the Jewish genocide, the Holocaust, if you will, is not only when it happened, but also where it happened. It happened in the mid-twentieth century, in the middle of civilized Europe. Originating in Germany, which was supposed to be distinct by high art, high literature, high culture, it produced the most uncivilized brute of a man and his doctrines. We know the genocide was not targeted only at Jews, but more Jews died disproportionately.

A distinctive thing is that it was planned in advanced. It was a fully ideological agenda. I do not want to underplay other instances of ethnic cleansing or genocide elsewhere. I am not doing that, but you look at a place like Cambodia or even Rwanda. In Rwanda, it was targeted at the minority Tutsis and the moderate Hutus. So it did not have a fully ethnic frame of reference, as did the case of Germany. Genocide in Rwanda was caught up in the middle of

civil conflict, power struggles, the politics of the moment, the politics of retaliation. It was brutal indeed, but I think there is something so especially brutal about advance planned genocide. Frankly, it forces us to reflect seriously about the nature of civilization, the nature of moderation, and the nature of development.

My country, Jamaica, had three hundred and seventy years of British colonial rule and almost a couple hundred years before that under the Spaniards before we got our political independence in 1962. So you understand that is why I speak in this very curious way [audience laughter]. English is my first language, with my own distinctive accent thrown into it. When we consider civilization, modernization, and development, we have to critique more fundamentally some of the assumptions that the “advanced” Europeans have of themselves. This is one fundamental underpinning of Pan-African sensitivity and Pan- African behavior.

I may use another analogy. Apartheid in South Africa was regarded by many as the most technologically and economically developed country in Africa. But you do know apartheid was by far the most underdeveloped system of social relations on the African continent - in the early twentieth century, on top of that. So again we reflect on those particular notions...

I must here incidentally add something to what Professor Miles said about relations between the government of Israel and the Third World countries. I am reminded here, and this was one of the unfortunate episodes in African-Israeli relations, when in the 1970s and 1980s Israel, of all countries was actually quite a firm supporter and ally of South Africa. What even made it more outrageous, if any of you know South African history, was [that] many of these pro-apartheid architects were pro-Nazi, and many were jailed during World War II for siding with the Nazis. So these are some important issues we have to think about. You also have to remember that many African countries did not break diplomatic relations with Israel. In fact, much of black Africa did not go along with much of the North African Arab approach to isolate Israel. It was not until Egyptian territory was occupied by Israel that much African sensitivity was galvanized for a time, when some countries broke diplomatic relations with Israel [later restored]. So I think we have to look at it in a much more holistic context.

Now, the notion of “holocaust” which I am glad a colleague of mine [Shawkat Toorawa] raised. Some black Pan-African thinkers have actually begun to use the concept in relation to the black experience. Not only that, I ran across a title of a book a couple of days ago about Christopher Columbus and the “African holocaust.” Some may not like it, but I think we must approach it in the sense that this is not an attempt to appropriate or to deflect the concept. “The Holocaust” is one thing; “a holocaust” may be applicable to situations where we can draw experiences from common suffering, and in that sense create more empathy than competition.

World War II, Hitler, the fight against Hitler – this was an important watershed in Pan- African thinking and behavior. World War II loosened the seams of Western imperialism that landed a charter in 1941, which determined the right of peoples to self-determination. The Allies knew they needed the support of their colonial subjects, and not least in Asia. They needed their support in Asia because Japan, as you know, was using [unintelligible]. So the dynamics of the war then started to produce a way in which the dominant imperial powers declared, at least on the face of it, some interest of self-determination. Black colonials were involved in

the war effort. So this helped them to become more aggressive for their freedom after the war.

The fifth African Congress, from 1945 to the end of World War II, was an important watershed in which freedom and liberation were being articulated by African peoples worldwide. But there is another angle to World War II, which became very important in Pan-African consciousness - the way in which racism was part of Hitler's expansionist philosophy. This proved to have very much an impact on Pan-African actors in the Third World, not least on the Caribbean. [Consciousness arose regarding] the seeming inconsistencies, or perhaps consistencies, in European racist thought in the colonies vis-à-vis Hitler and racist behavior in Europe.

Let's remember that it was geo-political excesses, not his racist excesses, which eventually brought the Western world to move against him. Let us remember, when Neville Chamberlain preached his doctrine of appeasement, he offered Hitler the return of the German colonies that had been taken from Germany. Remember, many of [the colonies] were in Africa, and some were in Asia, at the end of World War I. I call that reparations or reparations appeasement. He was prepared to cede them in order to keep the peace, but Hitler wanted more than that.

Let me quote from three important Pan African figures: one African-American, the famous W.E.B. Dubois who became known as the father of Pan-Africanism. In 1940s and 1930s Dubois saw Hitler as a late crude but logical exponent of white world philosophy since the Congress of Berlin in 1884. As you know, that was when Africa was carved up. He further maintained that Nazi type racial atrocities had long been practiced by the "Christian civilization of Europe against colored folk" in all parts of the world, in the name of - in the defense of - a superior race born to rule over the world.

Then there is Nehru who became India's first independent Prime Minister. Writing in 1946, he reminded his readers about racism, and that Nazi [unintelligible] had long been a concern of Indians quote "have known racialism in all its forms ever since the commencement of British rule."

A decade later Frantz Fanon Martinique, one of the founders of the cultural world doctrine of negritude had this to say: "The very distinguished, the very humanistic, the very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century has, without his being aware of it, a Hitler inside him, a Hitler which inhabits him, a Hitler which is his demon. When he rails against Hitler he is being inconsistent." What he cannot forgive Hitler for is not only the crime itself, but the crime against man. It is not de-humanization of man as such. It is the crime against the white man - the fact that Hitler applied to Europe colonialist procedures, which had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs in Algeria, the Coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.

The very distinguished late philosopher Hannah Arendt, of German Jewish origin - a sensitive, an intellectual writer - in her extraordinary *Origins of Totalitarianism* - made it extremely clear when she pointed out that Nazi racist thought and practice on all can be traced to the experiences of the late nineteenth century colonial frontier. She goes on to discuss the forced extermination of African tribes, the wild murdering by Karl Peters in German Southeast Africa, the decimation of the peaceful Congo population, under King Leopold from twenty

to forty million reduced to eight million, and we can go on and on. I'm even reminded in Australia of indigenous inhabitants of Tasmania, who were totally exterminated by the Europeans.

Beyond the colonial experience, the transatlantic slave trade was a watershed in the black experience. Let me just mention three things. First, I mentioned before it was the most massive forced population transfer in human history. What distinguished the Atlantic slave trade was this internationalization and racialization. The latter half has profound consequences up to this day.

When I was flying back from Jamaica, I picked up *USA Today*. One page covered the bomber of the church in Alabama being retried, racial profiling in Cincinnati, and so forth. Therefore, these are some of the consequences of racism as an ideology and public policy. Again, it's important to know that pre-slavery and pre-transatlantic slave Europe was far less racist in its reorientation, which it came to be. Medieval Europe was not part of the European fabric at that time. Paradoxically, the more developed and civilized Europe, the more racist it became. It is not surprising in the Caribbean that people like Eric Williams spoke about the way in which slavery gave rights to racism globally, and also the extent to which African labor had to be in Europe. "The wealth of Europe is our wealth because Europe is literally a creation of the Third World." That is a very strong reparationist argument – not begging for reparations but claiming what people justly believe is rightfully theirs.

One final thing about reparations and slavery: You know, we've had examples of reparations and slavery. Do you know that? I have before me from 20 August, 1833 from the British Parliament, "an act for the abolition of slavery throughout the British colonies, for the promotion of the industry of the former slaves and for compensating the persons hitherto and entitled to the services of such slaves." So, while freeing the slaves on paper, they have built in compensation to the slave owner. "Freed" slaves had to work for another five years to ease the burdens for their former owners. We have been paying reparations for our exploitation. Therefore, one must be very clear where moral and political judgments lie.

Now I move to my final point. This is the age of reparation sensitivity and controversy. Pope John Paul II has apologized for a number of things, such as the Holocaust as well as slavery. Right now, in Australia, the government has been pressured to apologize to the Aborigines, and they are refusing to apologize. Japanese-Americans were recently given reparations, which spurred demands from the African-American community for reparations. On the other hand, Jewish reparations have been the most prominent, the most legitimated in principle even though controversy has surrounded the aspects of it. In the context of black reparations, not least African-Americans, this is an emerging area of concern and sensitivity, and quite often of misunderstanding.

There is a United Nations conference being held in South Africa in August. It is a conference on global racism. It is interesting to note the concept for the conference: "strategies, [compensation], provisional reflective remedies, recourse and redress." Note compensation was in square brackets because there was no general agreement for including this concept. In other words, some people believe that when you think about race you should think about compensation, but certain countries like the United States are purely against it.

The United States government and many other local governments are very supportive in principle and in practice of Jewish reparations claims but are not so for black claims. For logical reasons. Part of it relies on the fact that they would be the targets. There is also a difficulty in the black case because you have a state of Israel - one state - which can help legitimize its claim versus, in the Pan-African context, a multiplicity of states. There is a difference in that there are many existing Jewish survivors. The Holocaust is much closer in time than slavery, but when you add colonialism it is something very recent and crucial to the reparations agenda.

Finally, I want to say there are two things we ought to be sensitive to. One is this. Any analysis that raises ethical dimensions of society - such as where it came from and where it is going - can, in the long run, only be better for the health of that society. One of the worst things is to sweep under the rug things that ought not to be swept. One of the most beautiful consequences of the reparations tone in this country and elsewhere is that information is coming out that many of us know did not exist. Insuring slave owners for slaves. Chase Manhattan, who has been on the forefront in Jewish reparation claims, has been brought into the arena of black reparation claims through slavery. So I think it is important to use these issues to test the health of society, and not to sweep it under the rug. It is also important to see the extent to which there are certain common interests, even though the ways in fulfilling them may not be always identical.

DISCUSSION

Panelists

Nadim Rouhana: This was a most inspiring talk, a contribution in the direction of universalizing the human experience. I would ask perhaps something he wanted to present, but did not have the time. What are the mechanisms connecting the Holocaust to black reparations not only in this country, but perhaps elsewhere? How is that to be done?

Gerald Gahima: I would just want to clarify something in respect to what Professor Edmondson said about the Rwandan genocide. He said that the Tutsis in Rwanda were not targeted as one ethnic group. He said the killings in Rwanda were not targeted at one specific group. That is not actually true. The killings in 1994 targeted one ethnic group, the Tutsis, and there is a lot of evidence to show it. The radios, which incited people to kill, called on the population to go to kill Tutsis. The militia was given a set of instructions to go on and kill a certain part of the community. All the evidence shows that a certain community was targeted. It does not mean that these were the only victims, you also have to look at moderate Hutus. They were seen as accomplices of the Tutsis. For the record, the Rwandan genocide was targeted against one group, the Tutsis. The moderate Hutus were seen as accomplices to the Tutsis.

Kinue Tokudome: This is not a question, but a comment. You mentioned black persons not receiving support of the U.S Government for reparations; you also mentioned that the U.S. Government is very supportive of the reparation movement with regards to Nazi Holocaust, including the recent settlement over the slave labor issues. I would like to say the U.S. Government is not supportive of their former veterans who are victims of equally

reprehensible slave labor used by former Japanese corporations during the war. I must wonder if the support is not really based on humanitarian reasons, but based on political considerations.

Xin Xin: Holocaust studies in China make Chinese aware to try to force Japanese Government to compensate the Chinese. In this regard, do you think African countries, South America countries, or other countries use the Jewish experience as an example, or as evidence, to support their request for compensation?

Audience

The question that I have was brought up in the introduction to the Symposium - that there has been a question in the Jewish community about this focus on the Holocaust, saying there are too limited resources being placed on the study of the Holocaust versus Jewish contemporary life, assimilation, or other issues that deal with Jewish life in America. Does the Pan-African movement or community have the same debate about reparations? Is too much of the limited resource being placed on a single issue? How does the comparison work?

Eliana Heidaman: The question I have is with regard to the obsession with the financial aspect to reparations, as opposed to the greater impact that reparations can have. With reparations being so money-oriented. Do you feel that reparations can be implemented in different societies in a different way, such as compensation by financial support for education? What impact does that have on the future? The money does not last forever, but education does. Do you feel in multicultural settings that reparations can be re-worked through society in order to focus on the future, whether it is focussed on the Jewish Holocaust or any other event in history?

Patrick Manning: The question of reparations deals broadly with addressing justice of the past, justice for the present, for inequities, and injustices in the past. With the passage of time comes questions of who represents the victims and who represents the perpetrators. There are an immense number of complexities one could come up with. One is the case of the African slave trade. Who would receive the benefits, and who would pay the price of it? What particular mechanisms can be proposed to make it possible to keep one's eyes on the overall, long-run, injustice that has been created or re-enforced, and yet come up with some specific devices for reparations?

Adam Strom: In the beginning, you talked about slavery as a precedent for the Holocaust. I am curious if you could elaborate on that?

Professor Edmondson Responds

What I did say is that organized racism was the ideology of racism as public policy. I did not say that there was no genocide before. In fact, I mentioned there was slavery before, but not the racialized component. I don't remember saying that outside the colonial arena there was genocide before that. Using the colonial context, remember, I used the great German Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, whose work I've always respected. She drew a connection between the things that later went on in Hitler's Germany, and what was being done before by Europeans in Africa. I think that was being made in this particular context. I was also

trying to point out that we did not need Arendt to point this out because that was something sensitive to Pan-African discourse. It was always trying to be consistent. It was telling the West, how could you be more democratic at home, but less democratic abroad? Because colonialism, by definition is anti-democratic.

I was trying again to use Arendt to link aspects of the colonial experience to the Holocaust and genocidal practices, which took place in many parts of the expanded colonial world. What I did not say in my presentation, but I want to say it now, is that racism became formalized through transatlantic slavery. I am fond of using the conversation of Cicero to Atticus: "Do not obtain your slaves from Britain because they are too stupid and they are incapable of learning, and they are not fit to form part of the great household of Athens." Think of it, that they were "too stupid" to be enslaved! Compare this to the dynamics of slavery later on. Stupid people are enslaved or slave people are stupid.

So a whole discourse took place, and it is interesting to note that the more that it took place, the more the Jews were being redefined from an ethno-religious category to a racial category. You begin to find far more racial notions of Jews. So in that sense there is definitely a link between rising and expanding anti-Semitism, and rising black racism in the context of transatlantic slavery. So that is one connection I just wanted to make.

There are a number of scholars, who are floating the idea that blacks experienced a holocaust. They are not saying it is identical to the Jewish Holocaust. They think the term has some applicability to the traumas, marginalization, and the destruction peoples that took place over centuries. It is a controversial notion to be sure, but it is important to know thyself. It is an important way to analyze the question of oppression, and alternatively freedom.

What are some of the mechanisms connecting the Holocaust to black reparations? I would say there are three areas.

One deals with the issue of slave labor, which by now is still very active and alive. In fact, they are expanding Jewish reparations claims. Many are coming out of Eastern Europe with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, re-unification of Germany, and so forth. Even now new information is coming out that they found a Polish individual who was more responsible for atrocities than previously claimed. With questions of labor, and the assets of slave labor, being raised, there seems to be at least some intellectual connection with slavery of blacks. The issue of restitution was raised. Many goods and belongings of many Jewish survivors were taken. Now, in the colonial experience, one of the main things the OAU [Organization of African Unity] is asking for is the return of many artifacts that were taken by the colonial powers. They want them returned back to their respective African countries. They also want a recognition for misdeeds. They want moral recognition and moral repair. It's fundamental, at the heart of this organization.

Is there too much focus on reparations? There has been too little. This really is fairly recent. The notion of black reparations has begun to gain currency. It was always an underlying element in black America for years, and in some segments of the Caribbean. Only fairly recently, in 1993, did the OAU pass a declaration of Pan-African reparations, which was a first in history. In fact, it was a milestone. Right now, TRANSAFRICA in Washington is planning

certain legal strategies. So it is a fairly recent thing. So I don't think there is too much focus on reparations.

Not all blacks agree on reparations. In fact, I read an article that not all Jews in Israel accepted reparations from Germany, after World War II. There were enormous differences and cleavages within the Jewish community, as to whether or not they wanted reparations from Germany. It became a very serious political issue. It was not easy for the Jewish community to accept reparations, but they ultimately did.

Finally, is the issue of methods of compensation. Somebody raised a valid point. If you look on reparations only in terms of money, then you are missing the point. Even within the Jewish community, there have been active debates about the monetary fact. Some feel that focusing on the monetary factor will marginalize the larger sense of moral claim. Now, in the Pan-African situation it is not easy to find the direct survivors. The direct survivors of colonialism are easier to find, because colonialism ended in the 1950s and 1960s.

Reparations are not simply a monetary transaction, although the Pan-African declarations do mention some monetary relief for debt payments. It is something larger. In the Pan-African declarations, all they are asking from the U.N. Security Council is that Africa should at least have one seat. This could be a statement to better position Africans as players, rather than pawns. It goes beyond pure finance. Above all, the Pan-African movement states that reparations in the African world are an important self-fulfilling and learning experience.

Reparations actually have a profound effect on the way Africans from the continent, Africans from the Caribbean, Africans from America, and from Brazil try to see what inter-connection we have despite our differences. On this issue we can meet. When the African countries say part of this should be the right of citizenship for Africans in Africa, that is a statement in self-learning, self-discovering. It is a psychological thing. In the black world, because of the enormous damage done, the black psychic through centuries of racism, the repair is more important. When they ask for more recognition of African contribution to civilization, this is part of repayment. So you can see it has a much broader message, in terms of bringing African peoples and their diasporas to the table of human equality.