

Reparations to Africa

by Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann with Anthony P. Lombardo, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, 264 pp.

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Of all the challenges facing civilisation in the aftermath of colonialism, African development is one of the greatest. This populous continent, with its great cultural richness and variety remains grossly underdeveloped, beset by corrupt and authoritarian regimes, and ravaged by disease. Its people have shown admirable courage and resilience in the face of numerous challenges, both external and internal. Most of these challenges relate to three major categories, in historical order: slavery, colonialism, and corrupt and authoritarian post-colonial states. We are long overdue in the search for an effective and just remedial strategy that will allow Africa to move from a tragic past and present to a better future.

It is against this background that Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann and Anthony Lombardo challenge us to take up the gauntlet, in their generally well-written and cogently argued book. More immediately, Nigerian Chief M.K.O. Abiola's 1991 call for reparations to Africa and the similar claims made at the controversial 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (henceforth Durban) have provided food for thought. The authors draw heavily upon a survey of attitudes they conducted by interviewing seventy-one members of Africa's current elite between 2002 and 2004. This was in keeping with the method known as 'purposeful sampling,' which they acknowledge is not statistically representative of an entire region, but rather seeks the opinions of key figures linked to an area of research. In this case, they have succeeded in putting together a cross-section of opinion among some of Africa's best-educated and most dynamic inhabitants, drawn from twenty-six countries. This book is part of the Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights series, another volume of which, *The Age of Apology: Facing up to the Past* was co-edited by Howard-Hassmann and was the subject of an earlier review of mine in *Democratija* [Autumn 2008]. The two volumes dovetail nicely in that *Reparations to Africa* might be seen as an important regional application of some of the ideas and proposals contained in its companion volume in the series.

In my review of *The Age of Apology*, I argued that apologies for historic wrongs must satisfy three conditions in order to be just and productive: they must be accurate, constructive, and proportionate. In other words, setting the historical and ethical record straight should involve respect for historical truth and causation, it must be directly and genuinely helpful to the aggrieved populations, and it must be within reasonable boundaries in order to promote reconciliation rather than resentment. All three conditions present particular challenges that are duly noted by Howard-Hassmann and Lombardo in their thought-provoking book, and they must be addressed by all observers of African affairs.

With reference to the first condition, namely accuracy, there is a major and legitimate controversy concerning both the truth of ascribing primary (or even exclusive) responsibility for Africa's woes to the West. The authors devote considerable space to underlining the complexity and multiple causal factors of Africa's ongoing crisis, and this is one of the strengths of the book. With reference to slavery, the existence of three distinct forms of African slavery is appropriately underlined as a matter of historical truth: European, Arab, and intra-African. All three led to the enslavement of many millions of Africans over centuries, and it is by no means clear that the European or trans-Atlantic trade was the largest. It may, however, have been the cruellest, because of the nature of chattel slavery and the horrors of the Middle Passage, as they indicate correctly.

On the subject of colonialism, the variations in colonial rule are stressed. These range from the generally least oppressive cases such as British rule in Ghana, to the worst atrocities, such as Germany's genocide of the Herero people of Namibia between 1904 and 1908, and Belgium's horrific forced labour practices in Congo under King Leopold II (1884-1909). The existence of this range is indeed important in establishing both the particulars and the extent of historical responsibility. Furthermore, as the authors point out, the contribution of a modern infrastructure and the training and enrichment of local elites might have facilitated African countries' advancement in the post-colonial period. That this has often not been the case is no doubt due to a balance of the most damaging aspects of colonial rule, coupled with local corruption and gross violations of international law.

It is on the subject of these latter crimes that the book is forthright in its combination of genuine sympathy for the peoples of Africa with a condemnation of local tyrannies, corruption, and human rights abuses. Howard-Hassmann and Lombardo are right to claim that to ignore such massive problems is to deny maturity and

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autonomy to Africans. To do so in favour of an endorsement of the thesis of unique Western guilt, without any reference to political and social developments in Africa since the 1950s, benefits no one. However, historical support for authoritarian regimes in Africa by a wide range of regimes and institutions must be considered in the balance. These indict not just the West since the early Cold War, but its long-time rival, the USSR. Furthermore, mention must be made of China, notably for its support of contemporary Sudan, which is responsible for ongoing massive atrocities in Darfur. These crimes of state, combined with globalisation at its worst in the form of blood diamonds and the selling of arms to tyrannies, are in some cases indictable offences under international law, as the authors stress.

The authors are also frank in reporting the ambivalence and at times resentment that surfaced in their interviews when dealing with the question of the merits of seeing Germany's reparations to Israel and Holocaust survivors as an appropriate analogy for African reparations. Some of the respondents appeared to respect the ability of Jewish organisations to secure reparations payments to survivors, and sometimes to their immediate descendents as well. Others focussed on what they took to be a colour bias in the securing of these reparations for Europeans without a parallel programme for Africans.

On this topic, the authors point out several genuine differences between the two cases. These include the complexity of the causal chain of responsibility for slavery in particular, and the fact that for many centuries it was virtually universal. It is a tragic fact that no basis existed in international law for condemning this outrage to human decency at the time of its institutionalisation. This, added to the great variation in European colonial practices, the grossly disproportionate claims made by advocates of reparations, and the morally messy causes of bad post-colonial African governance leads Howard-Hassmann and Leopold to a sceptical conclusion on the advisability of Western reparations to Africa. They clearly prefer measures to promote distributive justice, good governance and human rights, especially debt relief tied to expenditures that will benefit local populations, and they endorse Amartya Sen's notion of 'development as freedom.' Thus, the book's conclusion states in summary:

...the call for reparative economic justice to Africa for long-past historical events, or for international policies that some activists and many of our respondents believed harmed Africa, should not take precedence over other

policies or activities that might ameliorate the violations of their human rights that so many Africans now endure. (p. 184)

In keeping with my three conditions of accuracy, constructiveness and proportionality, the case for massive African reparations from the entire West is by no means conclusive, as this book attempts to establish. However, it remains true that slavery, colonialism and support for post-colonial authoritarianism are in no small measure linked to the West's history of racism, the colonial exploitation of indigenous peoples and what might be termed the more ruthless aspect of the cultivation of client states during the Cold War. As such, they are certainly correct to stress the need for both Westerners and Africans to develop a significant new strategy for African development.

Such a strategy would promote foreign investment and economic growth, good local governance and respect for democracy and human rights. As such it is curious that Howard-Hassmann and Lombardo do not devote some attention to the OAU's 2001 New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), which mirrors their recommendations for trade liberalisation and greater respect for democracy and human rights over reparations. NEPAD adds the important value of women's rights, which would undoubtedly facilitate improvements in human welfare and regional standards. Although its advocacy of greater African integration today is likely more problematic, given the economic and political range and variation between African states, it is an example of a constructive alternative for partnership with the West. This would certainly be preferable to massive lump-sum reparations from the West alone, as advocated by some of the key participants at Durban.

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