Reply to the Commentaries

Rhoda E. Howard-Hassman

Victor Le Vine asks whether, in our interviews, we prompted reference to Holocaust reparations. We asked an open-ended question: namely, whether our respondents knew of any precedents for reparations to Africa. The answer most frequently offered was reparations to Jews, followed by reparations to African Americans and Japanese Americans. Occasionally, when respondents could not think of any precedent, we asked if they knew of the Jewish one. Our sample was what sociologists call "purposive"; it comprised people we assumed might be aware of the reparations debate. Such a sample is not statistically representative, but neither is it biased.

Nor was reference to the Jewish precedent confined to people we interviewed. A search of statements about reparations by representatives of African countries at the World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001 revealed that many made the same reference.[1] And Ali Mazrui asks in his *Black Reparations*: "How do twelve years of Jewish hell, seven years of injustice toward Japanese-Americans, decades of Korean colonization, four years of female exploitation [Japanese sex slaves] and seven months of Kuwaiti indignity compare to several centuries of Black enslavement?"[2] Although Mazrui refers to several other cases, in the discussions we heard at sessions on reparations at the African Studies Association that he led in 2002, 2003, and 2004, participants most often referred to the Jewish precedent.

Le Vine also suggests that comparison of the Holocaust and the slave trade is motivated by anti-Semitism. It may be that some of the people whom we interviewed, or whose work we read, harbored anti-Semitic attitudes. But others with whom we spoke made the comparison innocently: they were genuinely puzzled by the question of why Jews had received reparations but Africans had not. In any case, one cannot dismiss the question simply because some who pose it might be anti-Semitic.

Nor is it our business to point out the cruelty of the Arab slave trade, as we are not discussing the legitimacy, or lack thereof, of the movement for reparations from Western powers. One could argue, nevertheless, that whether or not Arab nations ought to pay reparations to Africa, Western nations still bear their own moral obligation. Arab slave-trading does not cancel out Western.

Henry Wambuii complains that our reference to symbolic politics is "political tokenism." It is not: we explain how accumulated symbolic capital can help a social movement succeed. Wambuii also claims that requiring a direct connection between past crimes and present victims is a "ploy," but such a connection makes both the legal and the moral case stronger.

Wambuii's major concern is to make a moral case for reparations to

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Africa. He quotes Rodney Coates, whose article arguing for reparations to African Americans is a response to my own article explaining why the Japanese American reparations movement was more successful than the African American.[3] In both that article and the one currently under discussion, I used social movement theory to help explain when the moral imperative works in practice.

The claim for reparations by the British for mistreatment of the Mau Mau is a good example. Caroline Elkins's Pulitzer Prize–winning book is a condensation point for the Western imagination.[4] In the case of the Mau Mau, there was a clear perpetrator and a finite number of victims; the crimes committed were illegal at the time; and many of the victims are still alive. Thus the social movement for reparations to Mau Mau might anticipate some success. Unfortunately, however, success is not automatic. President Chirac has refused even to apologize for French tortures of Algerians during that country's war of independence, even though in this case, there was also a clear perpetrator and a finite number of victims, the crimes committed were illegal at the time, and many of the victims are still alive.

Wambuii also mentions the need for a process of healing and the "glaring hostilities," for example, in the land issue in Zimbabwe. But in any rhetorical contest about moral responsibility, Africans must also take responsibility for harms they cause. Robert Mugabe has caused untold damage to Zimbabwe by his exploitation of antiwhite, anticolonial rhetoric. He has changed Zimbabwe from a food-surplus to a food-deficit nation. He confines distribution of state food supplies to supporters of his own political party, and he has deprived hundreds of thousands of urban residents of their homes and livelihoods in his "Operation Drive Out Trash." Not only history, but also present politics, explains African suffering today.

By contrast to Le Vine, Martin Klein argues that the Holocaust/slave trade comparison is legitimate. He points out that more people died in the slave trade, which took place over a much longer period of time, than died in the Holocaust. It is always dangerous to engage in comparative suffering contests. No matter what numbers one uses, the annual death rate from the transatlantic slave trade was far smaller than the annual death rate from the Holocaust. Both Africans and Jews suffered horribly; no one should denigrate the suffering of either group. I agree, however, with Klein's other claim that in North America racism against African Americans (not, again, the topic of our article) has been deeper and more systemic than racism against Jews.

Klein's most important point is that Africans ought to enjoy all their human rights. I agree. International human rights law mandates universal enjoyment of human rights by all human beings, regardless of who or what deprived them of their rights in the first place. International law also recognizes economic rights, such as rights to health care, education, and housing. Under this law, everyone is obliged to ensure everyone else's rights. Thus, although Klein claims that "whether we call it reparations or not" is

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unimportant, it is important. International human rights law provides a stronger legal and moral case for massive investment in Africa than does the call for reparations. And human rights law requires African political leaders to own up to their responsibilities, as much as it requires Western (or Arab) states to do so.

Notes

1. Several such examples in work in progress, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann (with Anthony P. Lombardo), *Reparations to Africa* (2007), chapter 4.
2. Ali A. Mazrui, with Alamin M. Mazrui, *Black Reparations in the Era of Globalization* (Binghampton, N.Y., Institute of Global Cultural Studies, 2002), 87.
3. Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, "Getting to Reparations: Japanese Americans and African Americans," *Social Forces* 83, no. 2 (2004): 823–40.
4. Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).

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