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Réparations et esclavages

Editorial

Myriam Cottias and Céline Flory

Translator: Nicholas Mann



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- 1 As Magali Bessone and Ary Gordien point out in their introduction to this fifth number of the journal *Esclavages & post-esclavages/Slaveries & Post-Slaveries*, claims for reparations on behalf of formerly enslaved people are substantial and long-standing. For instance, since slavery was abolished in the French West Indies, the claims have been expressed as a demand for land: the very land that had been cultivated by generations of slaves. In the past, claims have also adopted a radical form, as was the case in 1802 with the Revolution of Saint-Domingue, which can be viewed as a form of self-reparation, that is to say a reversal of colonial power to counter the injustice of the former system of slavery and to install a new social order – which came about earlier than originally foreseen by the first abolitionists. Claims have also been part of a philosophical, moral and political debate about human equality, which led to the abolition of slavery in Europe and the Americas being considered inevitable. Demands for equality and justice continue to this very day to be the drivers of the transnational demands for reparations which require analysis at different levels: it is both a global question, and one which is situated and deeply rooted in particular contexts. ‘Thus’, as the coordinating editors of this issue remark, ‘if we are to understand the topic of “reparations” in its full diversity of forms and concerns, but also in its dynamic unity, it is essential to adopt a two-way movement between local, national or regional and international contexts, and to bring together the diverse disciplines of law, history, anthropology, sociology, political science and philosophy’.
- 2 The texts gathered in this issue offer ample evidence of this approach. It is clear from the range of articles published here, but also from the research programs which have been underway for the past few years, and particularly the REPAIRS program (*Réparations, compensations et indemnités au titre de l’esclavage (Europe-Amériques-Afrique) (XIX^e-XXI^e siècles)*)¹, that ‘reparation’ is a heuristic tool which enables one to re-examine both slave societies and post-slavery ones. Employing the diverse methods of the human and social sciences to consider both the *notion* of reparation and the *fact* of indemnities allows a different approach to questions regarding the organization of

societies, in all their complexity: relations of inequality and oppression, socio-racial categories, strategies of actors... In that sense, reparation/repair should not only be thought of as a mere object of inquiry but rather as a new paradigm that enables us to address a vast array of interwoven phenomena, such as race relations, geopolitics, belonging and citizenship. ‘Reparations’² is thus an effective and disruptive tool, all things considered not unlike that of ‘gender’, which has made it possible to question in novel ways the power-structures and the violence underlying society, and to work on representations as a means of maintaining gendered inequalities of positionality, thereby establishing new analytical networks of social variables while taking account of their historicity. The paradigm of ‘reparations’ is thereby gaining full scientific legitimacy.

- 3 Envisaging the persistence of slavery is part of a wider reflection on reparations, developed on multiple media platforms such as Marie Rodet’s research videos on slavery in the Kayes region of Mali. Artistic creation captures the full symbolic value of the paradigm of reparations. The final article in this issue is a discussion of the works of Laura Facey relating to the violence of social relations in Jamaica. The cathartic purpose is best expressed by the title of Bob Marley’s ‘Redemption Song’:

Won’t you help to sing
These songs of freedom?

NOTES

1. ANR-15-CE33-0007 : <https://esclavages.cnrs.fr/vie%20scientifique/repairs%20/>.
2. ‘Reparation’ as a heuristic tool as distinct from ‘reparations’ as the enumeration of substantive claims and demands.

AUTHORS

MYRIAM COTTIAS

CNRS (LC2S, CIRESC), France

CÉLINE FLORY

CNRS (Mondes Américains, CIRESC), France