

Repairing the Past, Imagining the Future: Reparations and Beyond...

The “Repairing the Past, Imagining the Future: Reparations and Beyond...” International, Interdisciplinary conference at the University of Edinburgh in the UK in collaboration with the Wheelock College in Boston in the U.S. in association with the Scottish Centre for Diaspora Studies, the Centre for African Studies, the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (Glasgow), the Association of Modern & Contemporary France, and the African Studies Association in the UK held November, 5-7, 2015 was historic, thus it is worth retrospectively reviewing its initial ‘Call for Papers’ statement and its call for papers, presentations and workshops from scholars, activists and other practitioners who consider the topic of reparations important.

Hence, the conference statement:

Reparations — or repairing for harm done — is an ancient concept, which has recently surfaced in public debates, most notably in the demands for reparations led by African American and Afro-Caribbean communities for centuries of enslavement. Within the last year, the Caricom Reparations Committee has issued a call upon Europe’s former colonial powers (the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark) to commit to their ten-point plan, or justice programme, which seeks reparative justice for the indigenous and African communities descended from slavery and the slave trade. Caricom’s demands have coincided with the sudden increase in public awareness concerning the slave past. This has notably been the case following the recent spate of high-profile films, such as Steve McQueen’s Oscar-winning *12 Years a Slave*, which A. D. McKenzie credits with ‘Breaking Silence on the Slave Trade’ and opening many people’s eyes to the barbarity of slavery and other exigencies of that period in world history. The interest in slavery and reparations will no doubt continue unabated into the year 2015. Following in the footsteps of France and Britain, which in 1998 and 2007, respectively, commemorated the slavery abolition bills, the year 2015 will see the US commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment through which slavery was formally abolished. This major anniversary will not only generate an upsurge in public interest into the brutal history of slavery and the slave trade, but it will also give renewed impetus to the reparations debate in both the US and internationally. It may well see pressure mounting on the US government to redress the harms inflicted on African Americans living today and to take seriously Congressman John Conyers’s repeated introduction of bill HR40 ‘Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act’ (first introduced in 1989 and every year since).

It will also provide a context in which to explore reparations from other national and transnational perspectives as demands rise not simply to recognize the harms committed in the historical past, but additionally to understand, and ultimately counterbalance, the persistent harms that the history of slavery has had, and continues to have, on the social, economic, political and cultural development of those areas of the world with historical links to the Transatlantic slave trade.

This commemoration coincides with the two hundred year anniversary of the first international agreement to abolish slavery during the Congress of Vienna of 1815. These two anniversaries thus provide an important socio-political context in which to discuss the subject of reparations from multiple disciplinary and international backgrounds. While this topic can be easily approached from the vantage point of history, it has a less well known, but equally significant presence in other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, law, economics, political science, psychology, philosophy, literature and the arts. All of this suggests the importance of approaching reparations from a broad disciplinary base that will not only enable us to define reparations from different positions, but also to bring into dialogue the different national contexts (and challenges) in which reparations movements are emerging. The aim of the conference was to create a network in which to explore the wealth of established and nascent activism and creativity-centred on reparations. As such, its intention is not simply to focus on the legal and financial questions that underpin reparations, but additionally on alternative conceptions of what is needed to repair the past from museological, pedagogic and cultural perspectives. In addition to the thematic headings listed below, a central theme of the conference will be ‘reparations and beyond’; that is a desire to explore the potential of reparations in overcoming the legacies of racial discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage rooted in the slave and colonial pasts. While the focus remains predominantly on reparations for slavery, we also encourage papers, presentations and workshops from scholars, activists and other practitioners who consider the subject of reparations as related to other traumatic histories.

Invited Proposals

The conference invited proposals from across the disciplines and from across the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone worlds that may concern historical and/or contemporary theories and arguments for reparations and address a variety of representational forms. The conference also welcomed proposals for single papers, panels or for plenary discussions, and particularly welcomed and encouraged proposals for workshops with activists, practitioners, artists, curators, teachers and journalists.

Hence, the conference was interested in proposals that address the following issues:

- Reparations and the legacy of slavery, for example: the economic, cultural, social and environmental chains of implication of enslavement and genocide on past and contemporary societies and communities; the psychological and spiritual 'price' of slavery; under-development and the legacy of slavery
- Reparations and the law, for example: the legal arguments for reparations from different national perspectives; the relationship between national and international law; reparations as restorative/reparative justice
- Reparations and ethics, for example: the ethical and philosophical issues raised by reparations in terms of community/social healing and/or restitution etc.; questions about the nature and scope of our legal and moral responsibility; issues of responsibility towards one's history and how that responsibility shapes our identity as a people, a nation and a world.
- Reparations and history, for example: different forms of reparations that have succeeded in the past; reparations that have been rejected or failed and why
- Reparations and politics, for example: government responses to reparations; comparisons of different national/transnational political contexts
- Reparations and culture, for example: alternative conceptions of what is needed for repair outside of financial and legalistic arguments
- Reparation and the arts, for example: how art, literature, music and theatre represents and engages with reparations and reparative narratives
- Reparations and activism, for example: social movements and activist networks; links between activists and politics; connections between activism and identity
- Reparations and society, for example: what future visions of society do reparations offer