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Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann / Anthony P. Lombardo: Reparations to Africa

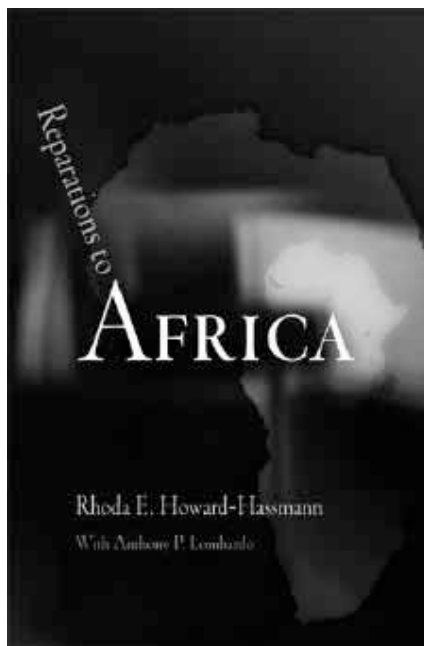
Reviewed by Daniel Weyermann

In terms of economic development, the rule of law or political stability, Africa is one of the weakest continents on the globe. Many African countries have experienced severe humanitarian crises, a considerable part of the continent's population is struggling with poverty and insecure political conditions. Considering the history of slavery and slave trade, colonial rule and postcolonial influence, many are tempted to blame the West for the evils that haunt the African continent—and demand reparations for the time of exploitation and submission.

Howard-Hassmann's comprehensive investigation of this issue considers African opinions, institutional backgrounds and argumentative strategies regarding Western reparations to Africa. In doing so, she delivers a splendid introduction to the debate on African reparations that is relevant in philosophical, sociological, historical and political respect as well as in terms of international relations and law. The more abstract considerations from these fields of investigation are balanced with a wide range of concrete case studies and examples.

In chapter I, the book gives a brief but valuable overview on “reparations in international law” (p. 4), on philosophical arguments regarding “transgenerational justice” (p. 9) and the range of reparative measures. Howard-Hassmann, holding the Canada Research Chair in International Human Rights at Wilfrid Laurier University, engages in a human rights approach to reparations that is based on the principle of human dignity—thus favouring reparative measures like acknowledgement, apology and truth telling. The calls for financial reparations, so she argues, are often “actually calls for the West to remedy the unequal distribution of world's wealth” (p. 12). Thus, they might better be considered in another framework of social justice, namely the one of distributive justice.

Conceived mainly as a work in political sociology (p. 1), another important aim of the book is to have a closer look at the social movement for reparations to Africa. In chapter II, Howard-Hassmann thus introduces “African voices” (p. 19), i.e. 74 interviews conducted with members of the intellectual and political elite of several sub-Saharan African countries (academics, diplomats, activists). Even though the



opinions gathered are not representative at all, they give an interesting qualitative account of widespread views that many Africans might hold on questions regarding reparations.

Still concerned with the social movement for reparations in Africa, chapter III delivers an overview on relevant institutions and recent conferences where the issue of reparations to Africa has been addressed. One of the most eminent events in this context was the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban (“Durban conference”). Scrutinising the reparatationist positions, Hassmann frequently draws on statements uttered at the Durban conference.

Chapter IV compares African reparations claims with precedent cases, such as the reparations to survivors of the Holocaust. In doing so, Howard-Hassmann puts the African claims in context and investigates more generally the “possibility of reparations from the point of view of social movements theory” (p. 52). Through this comparative approach, she identifies several “criteria of success” (p. 47) that reparations movements should fulfil in order to have some prospect of success in the political debate. The most important criteria to succeed in the “symbolic politics” (p. 48) of reparations is probably to persuasively frame demands, claimants and respondents. This seems to be the only way to mobilise the “rather large sen-

timent pool of supporters of reparations” (p. 50) and to acquire enough “symbolic capital” (p. 50) to get heard in the international political sphere. Until now, though, the social movement for African reparations is a fairly small community that “consists of disparate groups that promote incongruent ideas” (p. 50).

Claims for reparations to Africa usually refer to three striking topics of African history that strongly concern the relation of the African continent with the West. The first one is slavery and slave trade, in front of all the transatlantic slave trade, the second one is colonialism and the third one is postcolonial relations or what some might call “neocolonialism” (p. 106). Chapters 5 through 9—undoubtedly the core of this book—consider the arguments for reparations to Africa based on these appalling events of African history. Though sympathetic to certain claims for reparations, Howard-Hassmann basically stresses “the difficulty of attributing responsibility for and calculating the costs of the historical and contemporary events that have harmed Africa” (p. 167)—in front of all regarding postcolonial relations, but not only.

As a first concern regarding reparations for slave trade, colonialism or neocolonialism in Africa, the situation in international law is investigated. Furthermore, the rhetoric regarding these injustices is scrutinised, mainly drawing on statements at the Durban conference uttered by various participants or commentators. In the case of slavery, a brief overview on the historical debate—as a necessary balance to rhetoric inadequacies—is given to get a clearer picture of its dimension, participants and consequences.

An interesting feature in Howard-Hassmann's discussion of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism are the opinions of the interviewed, i.e. the African voices. They get space to express their opinions and mirror presumably wide held opinions on the African continent. Thus, the African voices give a lively image of the reparations debate and illustrate widely shared concerns, narratives and argumentative strategies. They render the discussion on reparations more vivid and down-to-earth, since they represent the people in the name of which, after all, reparations are claimed. Therefore, the African voices are the most precious part of this book and an interesting contribution to the

academic and political debate on reparations to Africa.

Howard-Hassmann thus drafts arguments and counter-arguments for reparations to Africa regarding its history of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism. She introduces legal and moral perspectives, considers international relations and the opinions of African citizens—an interesting and cogent, if not encompassing approach to the problem of African reparations. This general quality has the downside that some parts might seem overly cursory—at least for informed readers or specialists of the several fields of investigation involved. Acknowledging that the book intends to be “an introduction to the debate about reparations to Africa” (p. 2), though, this fact can scarcely be held against it.

In the last part of the book, Howard-Hassmann introduces possible remedies for ills in the African past. She builds on the findings of the previous chapters and investigates “symbolic reparations to Africa” (p. 167) in the form of acknowledgement, apologies (chapter 10) and a truth commission (chapter 11). Howard-Hassmann investigates these forms of remedy in some depth—be it philosophically, historically or in terms of political viability. One of the basic problems with symbolic reparations seems to be that these “measures might seem insincere (...) without subsequent material compensation” (p. 139).

Regarding the reparative tools of acknowledgement and apologies, she and many African voices thus conclude that, in any case, “it is not enough to issue apologies, however sincere, as long as [the conditions causing Africans’ offence and violating their dignity] continue and the West does not try to ameliorate them.” (p. 153). As to the truth commissions, “to be treated with dignity requires acknowledgement of one’s suffering and access to the truth about why that suffering occurs” (p. 166). But truth commissions should be handled with care, since “too much memory can be a disease” and “foster bitterness, fear and resentment” (p. 166). Nevertheless, “[s]ymbolic reparative justice can have positive effects” (p. 181). Basically, “African’s sense of human dignity might improve if the West acknowledges and apologises for the harm it caused” (p. 181) and if the truth about historical wrongs is honestly sought for in truth commissions.

As one can see—focusing on a human rights approach to the issue of reparations—Howard-Hassmann takes the principle of human dignity as a crucial standard for the evaluation of reparative measures and arguments. The same applies for financial measures of reparation such as compensatory payments or debt relief. They often are at the core of African reparative claims and thus are, of course, also discussed

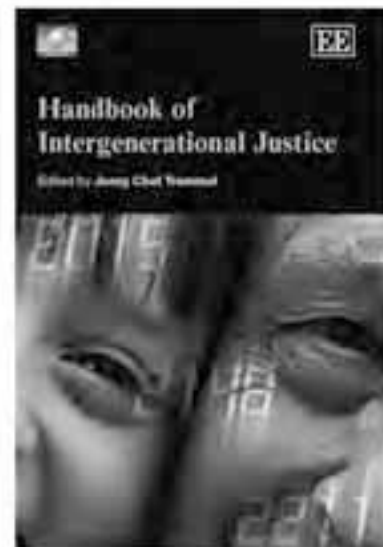
in the book. Regarding these measures, she concludes that there clearly are cases of historical injustice (in the recent past) that demand financial compensation. Death or physical injury, discriminatory policies or violations of the law of the day are strong reasons to financially compensate the victims or their children (p. 182).

Nevertheless, Howard-Hassmann basically takes a critical stance towards financial reparative measures for Africa. This is so, amongst others, because sometimes “Africans, desperate for any ideological tool they might find to assist their cause [financial aid, economic development etc, D. W.], frame their claims for justice as reparative” (p. 179). Howard-Hassmann thus indicates that what is often at stake in reparative debates in Africa are immediate problems and needs—such as poverty, hunger and underdevelopment etc—and not so much the actual injustice of historical events. Therefore, often a “focus on distributive rather than reparative justice” (p. 176) and on basic economic rights might be more adequate. Economic rights can be invoked independently of the past. “Human dignity demands respect for everyone’s basic economic rights” (p. 176), here and now. Making this point, Howard-Hassmann also gives an account on how these economic rights might be promoted, considering political and other contextual constraints (p. 176-178).

Howard-Hassmann concludes that there is “a strong case for Westerners to ensure distributive justice for Africa” (p. 181). Regarding reparative justice the “case (...) is weaker, although not entirely unpersuasive” (p. 181). She also adds that “[p]olitical action that calls for reparations for acts that occurred in the distant past while ignoring the causes or current African suffering is irresponsible” (p. 184). Furthermore, “reparative economic justice to Africa (...) should not take precedence over other policies or activities that might ameliorate the violation of the human rights that so many Africans now endure” (p. 184). Howard-Hassmann thus concludes that, regarding basic human rights, we ought to approach social justice in Africa in terms of distributive rather than reparative justice.

Howard-Hassmann draws a differentiated and rich picture of the reparations debate in Africa—regarding arguments and institutions as well as in terms of international law, history or sociology. Her book is a splendid introduction to and a great overview of the debate on reparations to the African continent. No proper theory of reparations concerning such reparations is delivered, but since the book is conceived as an introduction to the reparations debate, this is no flaw. A concern that has not thoroughly been addressed, though, is the problem that it seems strange to consider re-

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parations for a whole continent (even restricted to Sub-Saharan Africa, as it is the case). Regarding its vastness and all the cultural, political and historical differences, it seems to be almost impossible to achieve a reasonable discussion on reparations that allows for all these differences and particular contexts. The same may be true regarding the grossly generalising term "the West" that homogenises vast differences in history, culture, experience, and thought (see p. 2 for a comment on this).

Nevertheless, this book is highly recommendable to everyone interested in problems regarding reparations to Africa.

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