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"The mark of the modern world is the imagination of its profiteers and the counter-assertiveness of the oppressed. Exploitation and the refusal to accept exploitation as either inevitable or just constitute the continuing antinomy of the modern era, joined together in a dialectic which has far from reached its climax in the twentieth century."

—Immanuel Wallerstein

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The Past as Political Project



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Surely it is one of the more remarkable aspects of contemporary international affairs that many states held to have been oppressors and conquerors are being called to account for their past actions and compelled to recompense various victim groups (or their successors) for those actions. The spread and growing recognition of claims for reparations calls sharply into question the age-old idea that “the standard of justice depends on the... power to compel[,] and... the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (Thucydides). The past has increasingly become a political project, a terrain on which states and various groups battle over the conjoined stakes of ‘recognition’ and ‘redistribution.’ These developments suggest that we have moved in important respects into a novel political landscape—a landscape that comparative and historical sociologists can contribute much to understanding.

The various claims for reparations for historical injustices now being raised constitute major challenges to numerous states around the world. The shift in the ‘liability’ of states for past actions that is inherent in the spread of reparations claims may confront government officials with demands for substantial monetary compensation, far-reaching rehabilitative policies, and even the cession of certain aspects of sovereignty over parts of their territories. Broadly stated, the various movements for reparations for past injustices bespeak the dawning of a new phase in relations between states and the groups that they have victimized historically, and the outcome of these movements may well influence the future willingness of statesmen to oppress other groups. The stakes involved in the proliferation of reparations claims are very significant indeed.

Claims for reparations for historical injustices come in three basic varieties. (I leave aside demands for restitution of various properties and artifacts, although these demands constitute an important element of the overall picture of ‘the past as a political project.’) First are those cases arising from acts of injustice perpetrated during World War II. These include claims arising from state-sponsored mass killing, forced labor, and sexual exploitation on the part of the Axis powers (Germany and Japan), as well as from the unjust wartime incarceration of those of Japanese descent in Allied countries (the United States and Canada) and from economic or other kinds of collaboration in Nazi crimes by putatively neutral countries (Switzerland).

Next are those claims arising, in the aftermath of a ‘transition to democracy,’ from ‘state terrorism’ and other authoritarian practices. Such cases have been notable aspects of political life in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and South Africa in the recent past. Finally, in contrast to the

claims related to fairly recent abuses, demands for reparations may extend to alleged injustices dating far back into the past. Most prominently in this respect, we witness claims for reparations by a variety of 'indigenous' groups against states dominated by the descendants of their European conquerors. Despite their differences, the various kinds of reparations claims frequently share the common characteristic that the Holocaust is regarded as a standard for judging the seriousness of —and as a template for claiming compensation for— past injustices.

The reparations paid by the Germans to the Jews after World War II thus unsurprisingly constitute the 'paradigm case' of reparations for historical injustices. Because the Nazis targeted specific population groups as well as other states, the kinds of groups to whom 'reparations' could be paid has expanded since the war to include a variety of non-state entities. Over the years, the (West) German government has paid out large sums to individual Jews and to the state of Israel in atonement for its predecessor's actions. But not all groups persecuted by the Nazis have been as successful in having their claims for compensation recognized. This has been particularly true of gypsies and homosexuals (Pross 1998).

In the United States, the watershed case has been that of the Japanese-Americans interned as 'enemy aliens' during World War II. In 1948, the U. S. Congress had adopted the Japanese-American Evacuation Claims Act, which compensated —for concrete property losses only— those Japanese-Americans who had been interned during the war. The Civil Rights Act of 1988, in contrast, attempted a more comprehensive approach to repairing the wrongs done to those who had been incarcerated. Each survivor of the internments was to receive a symbolic settlement of \$20,000 (see Maki et. al. 1999). In a parallel process, a smaller group of previously interned Japanese Canadians received compensation on roughly similar terms. More recently, a number of South American Japanese who had been transported —in effect, kidnapped— from Latin America (mainly Peru) during the war and interned on the same 'national security' grounds were awarded \$5,000 based on the 1988 law that compensated the Japanese-Americans. These highly publicized cases have helped to promote the notion that one can receive compensation for past injustices, as well as to reinforce the drift toward compensation for more 'psychological' kinds of damages that had also taken place in the German case (see Danieli 1992).

In contrast to the German and American reparations payments, Japan has generally been less forthcoming with respect to compensating those it victimized during World War II. Perhaps the most prominent case here concerns the Korean (and other) 'comfort women,' who have been pressing for compensation from the Japanese for some time. Some of these women have been compensated by the Japanese through the creation of the 'Asian Women's Fund,' which was to collect funds from private sources to compensate comfort women, but has been relatively unsuccessful in doing so. Although Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto in 1996 extended his 'sincere apologies and remorse' to the comfort women, and the Japanese government in 1998 paid three women \$2,300 each in compensation for their suffering, the difficulties encountered by the comfort women in gaining monetary redress is consistent with the general recalcitrance of the Japanese to admit their liability for wartime atrocities, particularly in comparison to the Germans (Buruma 1994).

Alongside the comfort women's ongoing pursuit of compensation, the 1997 publication of Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* imparted renewed energy to the quest for reparations arising from that massacre (indeed, the book is in part framed as a demand for reparations). The Japanese have thus found themselves under intensified pressure in recent years to make amends for their actions during World War II. In view of the reluctance of the Chinese government to exert this sort of pressure (or to allow others to do so), these developments probably derive in part from the substantial growth in the numbers of overseas Chinese and their descendants in North America, some of whom have taken up the human rights agenda. Chang notes that her interest in the Rape of Nanking was sparked by her attendance at a conference on the massacre organized by the Global Alliance for Preserving the History of World War II in Asia that was held in the heart of Silicon Valley in 1994.

Claims for reparations arising out of transitions from authoritarian to democratic rule comprise the second major category of such claims. For example, Argentina is faced with numerous demands to pay compensation to those who suffered from the 'dirty war' of the 1970s and early 1980s, or their relatives. But the governmental repression of leftists in Latin America during that period was a regional matter, organized in part under the rubric of the 'Condor Plan,' a pact coordinating efforts among Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, and Paraguay. Recently, Argentina agreed to indemnify the wife of former Bolivian president Juan Jose Torres for his death in Argentina at the hands of government agents. The list of such victims is long, and efforts to gain compensation for the misdeeds of that era will remain an element of Latin-American politics for years to come.

Against this background, South Africa represents a mixed case: what had been colonial oppression of an indigenous group became, over time, a case of authoritarian rule over a subordinate class of racially defined non-citizen subjects. Demands for reparations for injustices suffered under the apartheid regime follow from a transition to democracy, but they involve claims of what are arguably 'indigenous' groups against European-descended invader-oppressors. The situation in parts of Latin America is similarly mixed; Mayan Indians in Guatemala, for example, suffered at the hands of the government as a result of both their 'indigenesness' and the fact that they were at various times subjects of terroristic regimes. To the extent that these and other groups raise claims on the basis of their 'indigenesness,' they are building their political projects on efforts to gain compensation for past abuses. In contrast, the Chiapas rebellion, while carried out by (and on behalf of) 'indigenous' groups, has been distinctively forward-looking in character—noting past discriminatory treatment, and raising claims for autonomy, but more concerned with policies to improve the Chiapas peasants' situation in the future.

These cases bring us to the third major variety of claims for reparations: attempts to compensate for the injustices committed in the course of various forms of colonization. The classic, 'external' version of colonialism was largely resolved during the second trimester of the twentieth century as the process of decolonization swept through Asia and Africa, and claims for reparations as such have not been prominent in these countries. In contrast, colonization-related claims for reparations arising in recent years stem from the conquests carried out by European 'fragment' settler

societies in Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Latin America, as well as in the United States (on the concept of 'fragment' societies, see Hartz 1964; Lipset 1990 properly rejects Hartz's view of the United States as a European 'fragment' society). These conquests led to the subjugation and dispossession of aboriginal groups and their reduction to alien subjects of the invading power. Some thirty years ago, Robert Blauner expanded the notion of colonization to include groups forcibly imported into many of those same territories, such as African slaves and 'coolies' from China and elsewhere (Blauner 1972).

As a political matter, Blauner's conception of 'internal colonialism' along racial lines has been much more significant as a basis for reparations claims-making than that developed by Michael Hechter (1975). Yet the central dynamic identified by Hechter in his analysis of internal colonialism as state-formation—the creation of distinctions between 'citizens' and 'subjects' resident in the same territory—lies at the root of claims for reparations today. Understood in this way, claims for reparations comprise part of the long twentieth-century history of decolonization; reparations in these cases are a kind of substitute for decolonization under circumstances in which the invaders came to constitute the vast majority of the population of the country in question, and are not now likely to pull up stakes and return to the 'mother' country.

Such claims only gain serious attention, however, in cases of the colonization of non-whites by whites (or at least those who are today so regarded). Decolonization in northern Ireland has not been marked by claims for reparations against the British, nor is it likely to be, even if the Irish only 'became white' relatively recently. Nor am I aware of any cases of indigenous or otherwise subordinated groups seeking reparations from dominant groups who are not of predominantly European origin. At the close of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Dubois' prediction at its dawn—"The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea"—deserves a new lease on life for the twenty-first.

In Canada and Australia, the reparations claims of indigenous groups have sometimes involved compensation to aboriginal groups for their forcible integration into the dominant society through residential schools. These cases reflect the emergence of what one might call an 'ecological' attitude toward human groups: like animal species in the environmentalist's view, all human groups have an equal right to life, and deserve protection in the interest of their preservation. Efforts to integrate them into the dominant, European-derived culture, however well-meaning, are now condemned and may even be equated with genocide (on the basis of the clause in the 1948 Genocide Convention barring forcible transfer of the children of one group to another, as has been argued in the Australian case).

In Canada, Australia, and the United States, there are also major land claims at issue. Canada has recently given limited self-government over enormous territories to the Inuit of the Arctic Circle, and a treaty granting to the Nisga'a band both monetary compensation and similar control over a sizeable chunk of northwestern British Columbia has been wending its way through parliament. One of the most publicized land claims cases in the United States of late has been that of the Oneida in New York State.

The Oneida contend that they were deprived of most of their land in contravention of a federal law of 1790, which prohibited individual states from acquiring Indian lands without federal approval. The Oneida's lawsuit had been limping along with little progress for some 30 years until it was kick-started recently when lawyers for the tribe named as co-defendants a number of the current property-holders. The differing attitudes toward the claims of indigenous peoples in Canada and the U.S. are rooted in the divergent historical origins and consequent institutional arrangements of the two countries, as a result of which Canada is considerably more sympathetic to group-based rights than the more individualistic United States.

The case of reparations for black Americans —arguably a strong one, given the persistence of inequalities rooted in the history of racial slavery and Jim Crow— has been pressed intermittently, yet these efforts to gain monetary compensation have been largely unavailing. As Blauner's account of 'internal colonialism' recognized, the situation of black Americans is different from that of 'indigenous' groups. Aside from the lack of overwhelming support for reparations from the black population itself (see Brooks 1999), the relative weakness of the black American case for reparations can be explained as follows: Blacks are not 'indigenous' to the United States; they therefore cannot claim that their territory has been invaded and that they have suffered under alien domination. At the same time, they have not been the victims of a systematic campaign of genocide, despite the sustained patterns of oppression and inequality to which blacks have been subjected. Having been taken from their places of origin and enslaved on their oppressors' home ground, their case for monetary reparations on the model of the Jews or of indigenous groups is relatively weak, although affirmative action is clearly an attempt to compensate through more individualistic means for this legacy of injustice.

The foregoing represents only the beginning of an attempt to make sense of the worldwide impact of the human rights discourse that has become so pervasive after World War II and, in particular, the ways in which that discourse has helped make a political project of the past. Part of what intrigues me about this line of research is the opportunity it offers to link up the findings of work in comparative-historical sociology with urgent contemporary political developments. Keeping in mind the connection between analysis and policy-making enlivens and disciplines the research task, focusing our attention on the (potentially) very real consequences of what we do.

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