
Debate

Global Reparations within Capitalism: Aspirations and Tensions in Contemporary Movements for Reparatory Justice

Ndongo Samba Sylla , **Andrew M. Fischer** ,
Annina Kaltenbrunner  and **Sreerekha Sathi** 

ABSTRACT

The idea of global reparations has received increasing attention in recent years, not only with respect to legacies of slavery and colonialism, but also to interrelated issues such as climate change, debt crisis, or ongoing financial transfers from the Global South to the Global North. This article, which introduces and sets the Debate for the 2024 Forum issue on the political economy of 21st century global reparations, offers a critical perspective on contemporary global reparations agendas, including their macroeconomic and development implications for the Global South. It highlights the contentious, unresolved questions about how reparations movements should interact with the highly unequal structures of global capitalism. To what degree should they seek large redistributive gains within these structures, or else aim for more revolutionary standpoints which reject these structures? If the former, would this compromise any hope for reparations to be truly transformative and able to address the challenges presented by global white supremacy? The hope of reparations movements is to make progressive gains that could become the catalyst for more transformative changes on a global scale. At the same time, sympathetic critics question whether reparations are feasible or should be a primary focus of advocacy for achieving racial and climate justice on national as well as global levels. In outlining these points of debate, the article also considers the questions of how to make global reparations work for recipients, and how to finance them. It concludes by elaborating on the challenge of moving towards a more developmentalist emphasis of 'systemic reparations'.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of global reparations — demands for acknowledgement and redress regarding past or ongoing alleged injustices or inequalities — has received increasing attention in recent years. Reparations are proposed not only with respect to legacies of slavery and colonialism, but also to interrelated issues such as climate change or ongoing illicit financial flows from the Global South to North. Such claims are burgeoning in a context of multifaceted crises that spare no part of a global economic system characterized by significant socio-economic inequalities between and within nations, and vastly unequal power relations between groups and countries. The developments triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, such as the Global South debt crisis (Fischer and Storm, 2023), and the recurrence of various extreme and disastrous climate events have made reparations claims ever more salient. As a result, there is a growing synergy between the reparations agenda and the resistance worldwide against ‘climate apartheid’ (Long, 2024), inhumane migration policies, right-wing fundamentalism and, more generally, the legacies of global white supremacy, as made visible by movements such as Black Lives Matter or Rhodes Must Fall.

While it would not be an exaggeration to speak of a new ‘age’ or ‘wave’ of reparations claims today (although not actual reparations), it must be stressed that the more recent association of global reparations with compensation for victimized groups represents an inversion of historical experience. Past claims for reparations were typically made by the powerful and victorious as compensation for their losses, such as the reparations imposed on Haiti by France in the 19th century or, as noted by Otele (2023), reparations made to slave owners in the US or UK following emancipation in both countries. It is also notable that one of the first economic debates that explicitly referred to reparations in the 20th century was concerned with reparations within Europe, and the terms and economic consequences of the financial compensation that Germany was forced to pay to the victorious Allied countries following World War I.

The association of reparations with victimized groups and nations rather than victors only really emerged in the wake of World War II, most iconically for the Jewish Holocaust (Zweig, 2001). However, even in these cases, reparations claims were being made against defeated powers, not against incumbent victors. Moreover, they were politically supported by the victors — those making the claims found themselves on the winning side of the global and economic power relations that emerged from World War II, which were centred in the US but still rooted in histories of colonialism. Indeed, reparations for the Holocaust even became tied up with advancing new projects of settler colonialism, as pointed out by Sundar (this issue) in the case of Israel.

The reparations claims that emerged in the wake of anti-colonial struggles in the Global South and civil rights movements in the United States, and

their association with struggles for social justice by oppressed and exploited peoples, have been different from these earlier war-related ones. They have fundamentally reversed the direction of claims for restorative justice, from victors demanding compensation from the vanquished to victims demanding reparatory justice from victors, even whilst those victors (or the descendants of slave owners and colonialists) are still at the centre of global power. Intellectuals and social movements, often inspired by Pan-Africanism and the Black political economy tradition, have argued that the African continent and the Black diaspora should be compensated for having endured the Atlantic slave trade, slavery and European colonization, as well as the legacies of racism and racial segregation (Balfour, 2003; Beckles, 2018; Howard-Hassmann, 2008). A legal and economic literature has since flourished, particularly in the US, to make the case for reparations and, sometimes, to provide estimates of the financial amounts that should be involved (e.g., Darity and Mullen, 2023a). In the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and Southern Africa, similar demands for reparations have been made by Indigenous Peoples, on behalf of those killed, displaced, or forcibly assimilated in the context of settler colonialism.¹ As one indication of the strength and vigour of these movements, today people generally only think of reparations in this latter sense. Climate activists have followed suit by pushing for the idea of reparations to be extended beyond slavery and/or colonialism, and into the realm of compensation for loss and damage within ongoing climate change negotiations.

Tensions admittedly exist within these movements, such as regarding questions of who should receive reparations. The highest profile of these has been between the American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) movement in the US versus the globally oriented Pan-African movement (as discussed below). Yet even this tension, which at times appears politically and intellectually unsurmountable, itself mostly refers to Africans and Afro-descendants, with the risk of erasing or downplaying claims by other colonized peoples, especially Indigenous Peoples.

Nonetheless, as the surest sign that various reparations movements are gaining traction, many recent campaigns for reparations have been met with strong resistance from incumbent, erstwhile colonial and slaving powers in the centres of global capitalism. Prominent examples include the US, French and Canadian coordination of a coup d'état in Haiti in 2004 that ousted democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide after his government campaigned for US\$ 21 billion in reparations from France, among other progressive policy positions (Hallward, 2010).² Another example is

1. See, for example, Atilés-Osoria (2018), Brown (2018), Klein (this issue), Laurence (1999), Marzia (2008), Pheko (this issue) and Shelton (2012).

2. It is unlikely that reparations themselves would have been the motivating trigger for organizing the coup, although they are reflective of a broader progressive agenda that was perceived as adverse to US imperial interests in the region.

Italy's repudiation in 2011 of its treaty agreed with Libya in 2008 to pay reparations, following its support for the destructive NATO intervention in Libya in that year which resulted in the fall and assassination of Gaddafi (Campbell, 2013; Forte, 2012).³ Internal resistance within settler colonial states to Indigenous claims for reparatory justice has similarly occurred in the US, Canada and Australia (on Australia, see Klein, this issue).

Despite such imperial and internal resistance, reparations have remained on the agenda of multilateral institutions like CARICOM and the African Union.⁴ Calls for reparations are also increasingly made by the United Nations (Enyia, this issue). These calls have achieved enough prominence that world leaders feel the need to respond to demands they simply could have ignored only a decade or two ago. For instance, John Kerry, the then US Climate Envoy, insisted just before attending COP28 in 2023 that the US would not 'under any circumstances' pay reparations to developing countries hit by climate change-fuelled disasters (Slow, 2023). Some European states have started small-scale recognitions of their slaver past and colonial violence, although mostly omitting the term 'reparations' or anything that would imply a legally binding obligation for compensation, as best represented by Germany's agreement in 2021 to pay a 'reconciliation fund' to Namibia of US\$ 1.3 billion (Melber, this issue). These attempts at 'reconciliation' have also been minimalist, falling far below a value required to produce significant let alone fundamental transformative change, and are often tied up with interests in the recipient country in question, as with Germany's ambitions to turn Namibia into a green hydrogen hub (e.g., see Gabor and Sylla, 2023).

To date, many scholars have provided arguments for the desirability of global reparations,⁵ including the legal arrangements required for their implementation.⁶ However, with a few exceptions, such as Darity et al. (2010) or Segovia (2006), the challenges facing this agenda and its implications for recipient groups or nations have not been systematically addressed. This collection aims to fill this gap, by focusing on debates around the political economy of global reparations in the 21st century. For this purpose, we convened a group of leading scholars and scholar-activists on global reparations to discuss and debate issues around the political meanings, feasibility, costs, and potential sources of financing for hypothetical global reparations,

3. In 2008, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi signed an agreement with Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi under which Italy would pay US\$ 5 billion with an annual instalment of US\$ 250 million to Libya over the next 20 years as reparations for the harm done to Libya by Italy (Gazzini, 2009). Again, it is unlikely that this was the primary reason for Italy's support for the NATO intervention, although it surely added to the motivation, especially given Italy's own financial problems over these years.

4. See <https://caricomreparations.org> and <https://archives.au.int/handle/123456789/10540>

5. For example, Beckles (2013), Enyia (this issue), Hamilton (2020), Klein and Fouksman (2022), Obeng-Odoom (2023a), Táiwò (2022).

6. See, for example, Sarkin (2009) and Wittmann (2013).

as well as the possible political and economic consequences for the Global South. In terms of consequences, we highlighted the problematic characteristics of the current global economic and financial system within which reparations would be inserted, and the domestic power inequalities that often work to the detriment of the groups that are supposed to be the beneficiaries of reparations. In this vein, how could a reparations agenda be made to work for development in the Global South? How could it be made into something transformational, as a power shift in favour of economic justice, rather than being subverted into yet another tangent of neoliberal paradigm maintenance, such as through a financialization of reparations claims or else by subsuming reparations as a new form of development assistance? And what institutional prerequisites are required at the international and national levels that would allow a comprehensive reparations programme to achieve the goals of global justice and socio-ecological transformation? Would this even be possible without radical changes to the global economic and monetary system, or without complementary strategies such as industrial policy? In the absence of these radical changes, would reparations simply add to the dominant trend of resources flowing from South to North, as documented by UNCTAD (2020)?

More fundamentally, to what degree can (or should) reparations address deeper issues within capitalist production and accumulation, and what is the relation between current reparations movements and neoliberalism? What are the class relations that inform the reparations agenda, both among advocates and in terms of how class relations would play out in a context of global reparations? How is the role of China, as a global power and creditor country, to be conceived within this agenda, or else how would other South–South reparations claims fit into such an agenda, such as Armenian reparations claims on the Turkish state? And what lessons regarding these questions can be learned from past or ongoing reparations projects and experiences of restitution of looted cultural objects?

Although it has not been possible to do justice to all these questions with the necessary depth, the contributions gathered for this Debate offer valuable insights owing to their empirical wealth, diversity of analytical perspectives, and experience of reparations movements on which they draw. Among those invited to discuss various aspects of these issues, some are clearly strong advocates of reparations and politically active in the movement, although with differing opinions about questions of eligibility or strategy and goals. Others represent more critical or radical positions, with the aim of strengthening the agenda with the injection of scholarly scrutiny.⁷ From our vantage point as convenors and editors of this Forum Debate, we synthesize and discuss some of the insights from the various

7. Indeed, not all of those who participated in a workshop organized in September 2023 submitted articles for this issue, because of their discomfort with other attendees' intellectual or political stance on reparations. This made us keenly aware of the highly sensitive internal

contributions, and provide some background to the political economy of reparations.

One issue that emerges strongly from the collection of articles is the contentious, unresolved question within reparations movements and their broader circle of sympathetic but critical allies of how reparations movements interact (or should interact) with the highly unequal structures of global capitalism. To what degree should they work within these structures to seek large redistributive gains that might be impossible to achieve from a more revolutionary standpoint that rejects these structures? To what degree would this compromise any hope for reparations to be truly transformative and to be able to address the challenges raised by global white supremacy and the racialization of humanity? Similarly, would the co-optation of reparatory struggles into a capitalist political economy logic undermine these struggles, for instance by treating social justice as just another cash transfer, with the risk of financializing such efforts at seeking reparatory justice? On the one hand, reparations claims are embedded in these global structures and are constrained by them, and it might appear to be an impossible utopia to refuse to work within these structures as a strategy to achieve the goals of reparatory justice, many of which might well be attainable in the present context. The hope of reparations movements in this sense is to make progressive gains that could become the catalyst for more transformative changes on a global scale, and also to make these structures visible and, through greater awareness, to challenge them. Yet at the same time, given the fundamental nature of the issues being addressed by reparations movements, does acquiescence to working within the status quo, particularly the current global financial system, then render their demands as futile or toothless for achieving their ultimate goals, which is to contest the ongoing exploitation and abuse of subordinated peoples, whether African, Indigenous, or others? To a certain extent, such tensions are unresolvable, even while they divide scholars and activists on the question of whether reparations should be a primary focus of advocacy for achieving racial justice on national as well as global scales.

This introductory article outlines these contentions and points of debate, while also weaving in and discussing various insights from the individual Debate contributions. The article starts with a discussion of the historical background of reparations as referring to and deployed in the interests of victors rather than victims. This is followed by an examination of contemporary global reparations movements, and the inversion of focus to victims of slavery, colonialism and even climate change as the beneficiaries of reparations, as well as the regrets and apologies issued by various Western governments and institutions with regards to their slavery and colonial past. Next, some legal objections often used against global reparations

conflicts that the global reparations movement must overcome if it is to become a more consolidated political force.

movements are surveyed, as well as the ideological and political tensions that exist within these movements. Various claims regarding how to account for reparations and how much should be owed as monetary payments are also discussed. In the penultimate section, questions about how to make monetary reparations work for recipients and how to finance them are assessed. The article concludes with a reflection on the challenge of moving towards an idea of ‘systemic reparations’.

REPARATIONS FOR VICTORS: SLAVERY, COLONIALISM AND WAR-RELATED CLAIMS

Understanding the global reparations movement today requires an appreciation for the centrality of slavery and colonialism in the emergence and evolution of the capitalist world order during the last five centuries. Modern slavery and colonialism, from the end of the 15th century, created a ‘globalized’ world, an unprecedented interconnection between Europe, Africa, the Americas and Asia, which for several centuries involved a redistribution of global power along geographical and racial lines. Against dominant Eurocentric and white-centric accounts that tend to downplay the centrality of slavery and colonialism, a number of theoretical perspectives have gradually emerged that analyse the modern world using the lenses of ‘critical race theory’, ‘racial(ized) capitalism’ (Hudson, 2016, 2018), ‘decoloniality’ (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Quijano, 2000) and ‘colonial global economy’ (Bhambra, 2021), among other approaches. While there is open debate about the degree to which slavery and colonialism were the primary factors causing the development of capitalism in Europe, they were undoubtedly, at the very least, an important catalyst for this development, turbocharging it into the full-scale imperialist venture that it became.⁸

From 1492, when Cristóbal Colón, aka Christopher Columbus, landed in the island currently covering Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which the Spanish named Hispaniola, a place he mistakenly believed to be ‘India’, he set in motion ‘the worst series of human disease disasters, combined with the most extensive and most violent programs of human eradication, that this world has ever seen’ (Stannard, 1992: 45). Estimates of the extermination or near-extirmination of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas from initial Spanish conquest through to other colonization efforts depend on estimates of pre-Columbian population numbers. For instance, a recent

8. For instance, slavery and the Atlantic slave trade enriched many families, bankers, companies, cities, ports, academic and religious institutions, and others in the Western world that came to be prominent actors in the emergence of capitalism, and also stimulated new technological innovations (Inikori, 2002), including in modern accounting (Rosenthal, 2018) and central banking (Sissoko, 2018).

study by Koch et al. (2019) estimates 56 million deaths from European arrival in 1492 to 1600, although as they themselves note, some earlier estimates have gone as high as over 100 million. Wherever strong estimates do exist (such as in Central Mexico), it is clear that Indigenous populations fell by well over 90–95 per cent of their pre-contact level by the early 17th century (e.g., Livi-Bacci, 2017: 50). Moreover, as noted by Livi-Bacci, this outcome was not simply due to the spread of pathogens in an epidemically ‘virgin’ population. Rather, the brutality of the Conquest ‘had an impact stronger than that of disease’. Together with extensive forced labour, uprooting of communities, enslavement and diffused violence, the sum ‘paralyzed the forces that [would have] ensured demographic recovery’ (ibid.: 52). Many Indigenous Peoples who remained — in the Americas as well as in other settler colonial settings such as Australia (Klein, this issue) or South Africa (Pheko, this issue) — were subsequently killed, displaced, or forcefully assimilated through, among other practices, the appropriation of land (the *terra nullius* doctrine), wars associated with territorial expansion (such as in the US), welfare programmes to enforce assimilation, mass incarceration, or the forced adoption of children.

Given the huge labour demand from the booming plantation economy, such as in Hispaniola and other Caribbean islands, an estimated 12.5 million enslaved Africans were shipped to this hemisphere between 1500 and 1875, with an estimated death toll of 1.8 million people during the ‘middle passage’.⁹ This ‘forced migration’ and the deaths from slave-hunter raids accounted for a demographic squeeze of the African continent — Manning (1990: 85) estimated that the continent lost half of its potential population between 1700 and 1850 — and for its subsequent economic weakening.¹⁰ Moreover, the brutality of slavery, especially in the Caribbean and Brazil, but also the USA, was such that between one-fifth and one-third of slaves are estimated to have died within three years of arrival (Livi-Bacci, 2017: 55). While the slaver countries started to prohibit the Atlantic slave trade from the first decade of the 19th century, slavery itself was only banned in 1833 in England, in 1848 in France, in 1865 in the US, and in 1888 in Brazil.

The post-slavery era still implied close to a century of racial segregation and oppression, such as the Jim Crow laws in the US, and new and draconian forms of labour mobilization, such as indentured labour from Asia throughout the Caribbean. In Europe, the end of slavery cascaded into a new era of imperial expansion in Africa and Asia. By the time of World War I,

9. Livi-Bacci (2017: 53) cites reliable estimates that between 1500 and 1870 (when the trade was finally abolished), 9.5 million Africans were deported to the Americas as slaves, although these were the survivors of a much larger number of at least several million more who were originally abducted but who died on the journey. ‘Of the survivors, about 1.5 million were taken to the Americas before 1700, 5.5 million between 1700 and 1800, and 2.5 million after that date’ (ibid.).

10. See Diene (2001), Frankema (2019), Inikori (1982), Inikori and Engerman (1992), Lovejoy (1989), Manning (1981, 1990).

85 per cent of the earth had been or was under formal European domination (Magdoff, 1979: 35). In the name of their ‘civilizing mission’, European colonial powers perpetrated large-scale massacres and genocides. They imposed very harsh labour, fiscal, monetary and external trade regimes that facilitated the colonial drain of wealth to the metropolises.¹¹

The prohibition of slavery resulted in what could be framed as the ‘first wave’ of global reparations. Slave owners demanded to be financially compensated for the loss of their ‘property’ — the enslaved people who until then had the legal status of ‘moveable assets’ that could also serve as bank collateral (Martin, 2016). The British government borrowed £ 20 million from banks (equivalent to around £ 16–17 billion by the mid-2010s), representing 40 per cent of its national budget in 1833, to financially compensate 46,000 slave owners (Drescher, 2009: Ch. 9; Hall et al., 2014; Olusoga, 2016: Ch. 6; 2018). Britain continued to service these loans until 2015 (Olusoga, 2018). Reparation payments to slave owners were also made by the French government, part of which implied the creation of colonial banks (Lydon, 1997; Pigeaud and Sylla, 2021). A similar privileging of slave owning or investing interests took place in other slaver countries, including The Netherlands, which prohibited slavery in its Caribbean colonies only from 1863 (Brandon and Lurvink, 2017), or the US (see Craemer, 2021).

The most shocking case of what can be called ‘regressive’ reparations occurred in the Caribbean, in the island of Hispaniola. France took control over one part of the island at the end of the 17th century, which became the most prosperous colony of its empire. One century later, the enslaved Africans revolted and defeated the army of Napoleon, and proclaimed national independence in 1804, renaming their country as Haiti. While France felt humiliated by this defeat, the US feared that Haiti’s revolution might spark domestic revolts among its own enslaved people. In 1825, in a display of ‘gunboat diplomacy’, France asked the Haitian government to pay a debt that would compensate the former slave owners plus preferential trade agreements for French products. The 150 million gold francs initially demanded as compensation represented an estimated 280 per cent of the Haitian GDP (Henochsberg, 2016; Oosterlinck et al., 2022). It either had to pay the ‘debt’ or be invaded and re-colonized. The Haitian authorities accepted the payment of reparations to their former masters by borrowing from French banks. They would thus incur a double debt — the

11. There is an established literature on the ‘colonial drain’ or ‘colonial surplus’ (which are slightly different terms, given that the latter includes reinvested earnings), which we do not have space to delve into here. However, for reference, studies on India include Bagchi (1976), Habib (2006/2017), Iyer (2023), Mukherjee (2010), Patnaik (1984, 2017, 2019), and Patnaik and Patnaik (2021). Gordon (2010, 2018) has offered estimates for Dutch colonial surpluses in Indonesia, as an update to estimates by Maddison (1989). On the contribution of the slave trade to the Dutch Empire, see Allen et al. (2023) and Brandon and Bosma (2021).

ransom plus the interest payments on loans. Although the final reparatory instalment was paid in 1883, the country continued to service the debts owed to French banks until 1947 (Schmidt, 1971: 229). Even amid such debt servicing, Haiti was militarily occupied by the US from 1915 until 1934, and the National City Bank of New York (now known as Citibank) expropriated the entire gold reserves of the country and asserted control over its public finances (Hudson, 2017). This long history of genocide, slavery, colonialism, military occupation and financial imperialism locked Haiti in a vicious dynamic of violence, political instability, environmental disasters and economic impoverishment, with consequences that have been felt into the present.

The second wave of global reparations came in the wake of the 20th-century world wars. As noted in the introduction, these were still claims made by victors over the defeated for war-related financial compensations. The experience of Germany following World War I represents the classic way that victorious powers have extracted tributes or financial and economic benefits from the nations and peoples they have defeated. The Treaty of Versailles signed in June 1919 required Germany to pay war reparations, which the Allies initially determined to be 50 billion gold marks (Gomes, 2010: 68; Roselli, 2014). Subsequent years were marked by numerous German defaults, military occupation of the coal-rich Ruhr by France and Belgium, hyperinflation, and attempts to organize an orderly payment of reparations. These experiences do not necessarily repudiate the possibility of implementing reparations, but they do highlight the punitive and chaotic manner in which reparations were imposed on Germany. Indeed, the origins of the Bank of International Settlements itself emerged out of efforts to organize and facilitate German reparations payments. As detailed by Eichengreen (1992), the decade after World War I also witnessed important debates on the economic consequences of the financial compensation that Germany was forced to pay — the issue that John Maynard Keynes (1929a, 1929b) referred to as the ‘transfer problem’ remains especially relevant for the macroeconomics of global reparations, as discussed below.

Following World War II, reparations claims came to be more associated with groups and nations that had been the war victims of the defeated Axis powers. This came closer to the contemporary understanding of reparations as compensation to victims rather than victors, although the victims in this case were allied with, or under the protection of, victors. In the flagship case, in 1952, the Federal Republic of Germany agreed to compensate the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, their survivors, and Israel (Zweig, 2001). According to a conservative estimate by Craemer (2019), these reparations payments by Germany up to 1976 amounted to approximately 30 billion in 2016 US dollars. Other sources place the amount as exceeding US\$ 86 billion in restitution and compensation to Holocaust victims and their heirs

up to 2018.¹² These reparations to Jewish Holocaust survivors and their descendants have set the stage for contemporary claims related to slavery and colonialism by showing that redress for other past injustices, including ‘multi-generational reparations’ claims, could be legally and politically envisaged. As Howard-Hassmann (2008: 42) put it: ‘Holocaust reparations are the gold standard of reparations claims’.

The Japanese government also provided reparations to some of its Asian counterparts — the Philippines, Burma, Indonesia, South Vietnam — and ‘quasi reparations’ to others like Malaysia, Singapore, Laos and Cambodia (Hoshiro, 2023). Depending on the country, the resource transfers took various forms, such as financial compensation for widows and orphans, delivery of free goods and technical services, debt cancellation, grants, and loans with low interest rates, among others.

However, not all post-World War II claims for reparatory justice were successful, and success depended largely on how victims were positioned relative to the geopolitical interests of the US and of European nations, many of which were still colonial powers in the early post-war period. West Germany, for instance, did not show the same remorse regarding the genocide of the Nama and Ovaherero in Namibia (Melber, this issue), or the genocide of Romani people in Europe. It also dismissed reparations claims from Poland and Greece (Roth et al., 2022). Moreover, in contrast to World War I and in a context made salient by Cold War geopolitics, West Germany itself benefited from significant debt cancellation following the London Agreement on German External Debts in 1953, including from Third World countries, as well as improved debt payment conditions (Debt Justice, 2015; de la Villa, 2021). Few of these old colonial powers acknowledged — never mind compensated — the harms of their colonial exploitations, and many were still engaged in vicious counterinsurgency struggles against national liberation movements, such as France in Algeria or Indochina, or Portugal in Mozambique, or else were involved in destabilizing newly independent decolonized nations. Nonetheless, even though reparations in these early post-war decades were used for buttressing or legitimating the interests of a new post-war US hegemony — as with aid for that matter, such as in East Asia (see Fischer, 2018) — the few experiences that materialized demonstrated that reparations were possible on a very large scale if aligned with geopolitical will.

12. See ‘Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act Report: Germany’, US Department of State (n.d.); www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/germany/ (accessed 15 July 2024). Note that current or constant value is not identified in this source.

THIRD-WAVE CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL REPARATIONS MOVEMENTS

In contrast to these previous waves of global reparations, those for the benefit of slaveowners and those at the behest of war victors, whether punitive or reparative, the current third wave represents demands from victims against dominant incumbent powers for past and present harms — slavery, colonialism, or mass discrimination — caused by these same powers or their direct ancestors. Hence, to some extent, they have reversed the geography as well as the direction of claims for reparative justice. Barbados-born historian Sir Hilary Beckles (2019: 11), one of the leading intellectuals behind the reparations movement in the Caribbean, claims that it will be the ‘greatest political tide of the twenty-first century’. For the first time, victimized groups, communities and states, long marginalized and subjugated by the evolution of the capitalist world order, have been organizing and mobilizing to demand redress, repair and healing for historical and ongoing wrongdoings.

The current reparations movements are global in specific ways: not only do they concern different types of harms or wrongdoings, but they also tend to coalesce together, to transcend national and continental boundaries, and to target governments as well as private entities ‘liable’ for reparations payments. In contrast to unrelated and event-specific reparations claims, such as those advocated by slave owners and war victims, current global reparations movements usually link slavery, colonialism and climate injustice as different manifestations of an historically unequal and unfair world order. They articulate grievances that, depending on the case, refer to past, present and ongoing events. While some of the reparations claims (like those related to slavery, slave trade, colonization) might appear backward-looking, according to their proponents, their main characteristic is the historical continuity between past wrongs and current socio-economic outcomes. For reparations advocates, past and present are inextricably linked by enduring racialized and imperialist structures that sustain the devaluation, domination and oppression of non-white lives, as well as their ongoing structural disadvantage within national and global frameworks of opportunity.

Unlike 20th century revolutionary movements, current global reparations movements do not seek to conquer state power, although they can be posited as ‘anti-systemic’ (to borrow from Arrighi et al., 1989), to the extent that they demand large-scale and qualitative changes to a capitalist world order marked by stark inequalities across nations, class, gender, race and other dimensions. Whether challenging this order — where global dominance is still centred in the descendants of slaving and colonial powers — requires challenging or overturning the capitalist system itself is open to debate. Reparations movements tend to work within the system, seeking redress from the centres of power rather than calling for their downfall, whereas more radical critiques (e.g., Andrews, this issue, or Watson, this issue) question whether reparations can in fact bring about any significant transformative change without more revolutionary challenges to the capitalist

system. This tension between more reformist versus revolutionary positions runs through current emancipatory struggles, as it has throughout the post-war era of decolonization.

These multidimensional, interconnected and anti-systemic features of current reparations movements also mirror a context of multifaceted crises. Environmental justice claims are a paradigmatic example: they have become global in scope and often articulate the concerns of groups that usually mobilize for social justice, such as racial minorities, Indigenous communities, dispossessed peasants, and other groups victimized by various extractivist and discriminatory practices. As argued by Perry (2021b) and Papadopoulos et al. (2023), the main victims of environmental injustice often overlap with those who have become the most subordinated and economically marginalized by the evolution of capitalism over the last centuries. Even within developed countries, authors such as Táíwò (2022: 147) have argued that because climate impacts are not racially neutral and tend to disproportionately affect non-whites, the ‘transformations we succeed or fail to make in the face of the climate crisis will be decisive for the project of racial justice, and vice-versa’.

Monetary reparations are therefore seen by their proponents as necessary for achieving both global social justice as well as climate justice (e.g., Schmelzer, 2022). The former corrects the legacies of racism, slavery, colonialism and imperialism, while the latter compensates the countries of the South for the ‘ecological debt’ (or ‘climate debt’) owed by the Global North, helping them achieve a smooth energy transition through transfers of real and financial resources.¹³ Claims that rich countries should pay such ‘climate debts’ have been strengthened by the findings of the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (e.g., IPCC, 2023: 5). Due to their high vulnerability to climate change, small island developing states like Barbados have been pushing hard at the multilateral level for a comprehensive programme of reparations linking the legacies of slavery and colonialism to the ongoing debt and climate crisis.¹⁴

The momentum for this third wave nonetheless emerged in part from within the US itself. In 1987, with the celebration of the bicentenary of the US Federal Constitution, the US House of Representatives passed a bill to compensate the Japanese American World War II internee survivors and their relatives, while the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America held its founding meeting (Aiyetoro and Davis, 2010). In 1989,

13. Warlenius (2018) argues there has been a shift within the environmental justice movement during the 2000s from the ecological debt claim (see Martinez-Alier, 2002: Ch. 10), and its focus on economic exploitation through trade, towards an idea of ‘climate debt’ and ‘climate justice’ (see Roberts and Parks, 2009; Tokar, 2013) and ‘climate reparations’ (see Burkett, 2009). This latter perspective focuses rather on the differentiated impacts and responsibilities regarding climate change and deploys the idea of global commons being expropriated by the Global North. On ‘reparation ecology’, see Moore and Patel (2021).

14. See, for instance, Ross (2023).

John Conyers, representative from Michigan, introduced HR 40, a bill to study the impact of slavery and the possibility of providing reparations to US African Americans. In 1993, the US Congress issued a formal apology for the conquest of Hawaii. One year later, the state of Florida agreed to offer compensation to the survivors of the Rosewood massacre, an event named after the 1923 racist destruction of the Afro-American community living in the rural town of Rosewood (Biondi, 2003: 259).

The US-centricity of many reparations movements (as noted, for instance, by Enyia, this issue) raises questions about efforts to co-opt and leverage the idea of reparations — especially from global Pan-African initiatives — to potentially bolster the legitimacy of US hegemony. This is much like early post-war attempts by the US government to capture the narrative of development from the leadership and initiative of Third World national liberation leaders and movements.¹⁵

As a counterweight to this US-centricity, Pan-African initiatives were being made in the Organization of African Union (OAU), which spear-headed the conversation on reparations with the establishment of a Group of Eminent Persons (GEP) during a meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, in June 1992. This gathering intervened in a context where most African countries were experiencing a severe debt and economic crisis. The cancellation of the foreign debt was seen as a partial compensation to the historical ‘debts’ owed by richer countries on account of slavery, the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. Less than one year later, the GEP and the Commission for Reparations of the OAU hosted the Pan-African Conference on Reparations in April 1993, also in Abuja, which was to be followed by the Truth Commission Conference held in Accra, Ghana, in 1999 (Howard-Hassman, 2004).

For these global reparations movements, an important event and symbolic marker has been the UN-sponsored World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in September 2001 in Durban, South Africa (Achieme and McDougall, 2023; Campbell, 2009). The event brought together 16 heads of state, 2,300 official delegates from 163 countries, 4,000 NGO representatives, and more than 1,000 ‘media people’ (Alvez, 2003: 383). The topics discussed included ‘the issues of environmental racism, reparations, the Dalits, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the protection of indigenous peoples across the world, the protection of migrant workers, peoples with disabilities and peoples living with HIV/AIDS’ (Campbell, 2009: 150). The resulting Durban Declaration and Programme of Action asserted that slavery and the

15. Notably, post-development scholarship has often been confused about this point, attributing Truman as the originator of the discourse of development, rather than seeing this as a belated attempt to shore up US legitimacy in a rapidly decolonizing world where the idea of development was already being led by Third World leaders. See some discussion of this in Helleiner (2014) and Fischer (2015).

slave trade are a ‘crime against humanity’ and ‘should have always been so’ (see Beckles, 2018 for a critique of the ‘should politics’).¹⁶ It has been signed by 168 nations, the US being a notable exception (Biondi, 2023). It did not provide a blueprint for global reparations, as this issue proved contentious, although it led to the creation of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent in 2002.

In more recent years, the issue of racism and racial discrimination in its articulation with reparations demands for slavery and colonialism has been made salient by numerous media-related examples of police brutality in the US against Afro-Americans and the concomitant rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, which started in 2013 (Enyia, this issue; Ransby, 2018). The murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 created a worldwide awareness about the pervasiveness of white supremacy, as a global system, and the need to tackle it at its roots. This context motivated activist groups in various places across the world to campaign to remove statues magnifying former slavers and colonialists and/or to reform or ‘decolonize’ the educational curricula (e.g., Friedell and Liao, 2022; Frowe, 2019; Kearns, 2020; Sunnemark and Thörn, 2021). Two other related developments were the establishment in 2022 of the UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent, an advisory body which advocates and holds discussions on reparations for Afro-descendants,¹⁷ and the increased number of ‘diplomatic’ declarations from ‘liable’ states and private entities with regards to the Atlantic slave trade, slavery and colonialism.

REGRETS, APOLOGIES AND COMPENSATION VERSUS TRANSFORMATIVE REPARATIONS

According to Engerman (2009), regrets are the least demanding form of acknowledging past wrongdoings as they do not imply the acceptance of guilt and responsibility. In contrast, he argues that apologies suppose the recognition of the harm done and the responsibility of the perpetrator. However, reparations entail more than apologies for their advocates. Moreover, one could probably make the conceptual distinction between reparations — as debts that could be extinguished in principle through monetary payments and other provisions — versus social reforms, which come with an ongoing responsibility until equity is achieved.

Following the murder of George Floyd, the list of European leaders or monarchs that have lined up to evoke the past wrongs of their country has

16. See ‘Durban Declaration and Programme of Action’, UN (n.d.); www.un.org/en/fight-racism/background/durban-declaration-and-programme-of-action (accessed 13 August 2024).

17. See ‘Permanent Forum on People of African Descent’, UNOCHR (n.d.); www.ohchr.org/en/permanent-forum-people-african-descent (accessed 13 August 2024).

grown. In line with previous apologies, in June 2020, the King of Belgium wrote to the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) to express his ‘deepest regrets’ for the atrocities committed during the period of the ‘Congo Free State’ — then the personal colonial property of King Leopold II (Rankin and Burke, 2020), under whose reign millions of native people were killed and massive wealth was accumulated (Hoschild, 1999). In May 2021, the German government formally apologized for the genocide of the Nama and Ovaherero that they committed between 1904 and 1908. However, as Melber (this issue) argues, it was a state-to-state apology rather than an apology to the survivors of the genocide, who felt excluded. In December 2022, the Dutch prime minister apologized for the colonial and slavery past of his country, and then in June 2023, the Dutch King asked ‘forgiveness’ for slavery (*Al Jazeera*, 2023b). In April 2023, the Portuguese president urged his country to face its colonial and slavery past (*Al Jazeera*, 2023a). In November 2023, the German president asked for ‘forgiveness’ from Tanzanians for the colonial massacre by German troops of 200,000–300,000 of Tanzania’s Indigenous population during the Maji Maji Rebellion uprisings from 1905 to 1907 (*Deutsche Welle*, 2023). One day later, during a visit to Kenya, the king of the United Kingdom expressed his sorrow and regret with regards to Britain’s colonial atrocities in the East African colony (Kimeu, 2023), although the British government has persisted in its refusal to apologize for the country’s slavery and colonial past (Adu, 2023) despite numerous calls to do so, even by the descendants of the country’s wealthiest slave owners (Gentleman, 2023).

Various Northern institutions have followed their governments’ lead. Universities like Yale, central banks like the Bank of England, transnational commercial banks such as Citibank, newspapers like *The Guardian*, museums, the Catholic Church, and others have also apologized and sometimes funded research to document their historical connections with slavery and colonialism, but mostly without commitments to repair the harms done. This also applies within states, such as on the issue of reparations for Indigenous Peoples, as Klein (this issue) discusses in the case of Australia.

Some authors, such as Kamminga (2024), have controversially argued that apologies from Western governments with regards to slavery and the slave trade are not ‘morally appropriate’ and that descendants of enslaved people cannot be recipient of apologies. Others have noted, such as Umubyeyi (2023), that it has become fashionable for Western governments and various organizations to issue ‘hollow’ statements while distancing themselves from any commitment to genuine reparations. Andrews (this issue) calls this ‘reparations washing’, giving the examples of two corporations that enriched themselves from slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade (the brewery Greene King and the insurance company Lloyd’s of London), which despite promoting ‘diversity schemes’ and ‘philanthropic’ activities, have had no plans for compensation.

As most of the authors of this Debate emphasize, apologies are an important element of a reparations programme but saying sorry is not enough, as once stressed by Brooks (1999). All of them stress the importance of what Klein (this issue) calls ‘worldmaking transformative reparations’.¹⁸ This is, in fact, also recognized in international fora. For example, Enyia (this issue) elaborates on the UN approach to reparations which includes five components: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition, and notes that the UN has recommended the provision of financial compensations by liable countries as just one means to address the enduring legacies of enslavement and colonialism (e.g., see UN, 2023: 2). At the same time, she underscores that the UN itself is a platform that mirrors international power asymmetries and, to that extent, is simultaneously part of the problem and part of the solution.¹⁹ As such, she welcomes the availability of such an encompassing international reference, even if it is non-normative, that is, non-enforceable.

A similar holistic approach informs the CARICOM Reparations Commission. In 2014, one year after its creation, it launched its ‘Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice’ articulated around: full formal apology; repatriation; Indigenous peoples’ development programmes; cultural institutions; addressing the public health crisis; illiteracy eradication; African knowledge programme; psychological rehabilitation; technological transfer; and debt cancellation. According to CARICOM, this approach inspired the formation of similar commissions in the US, Europe, Canada and the UK (CARICOM Reparations Commission, 2024).

Despite their promise, the recommendations of these commissions remain unimplemented. In the case of CARICOM, Watson (this issue) argues that its reparations claims reflect the position of weak states which have no other expedient in the face of what he considers the ‘unresolvable contradictions’ of capitalism. Due to the structural problems CARICOM member states experience in terms of competing with transnational capital, in the absence of a viable and competitive regional market, they have been maintaining close ties with the EU and its corporations. However, for Watson, this economic dependence of Caribbean countries on those from whom they expect reparations, in addition to their embrace of neoliberalism, make their approach to reparatory justice inconsistent and objectionable. As one of the more radical critiques mentioned earlier, Watson contends that reparations, as conceived by CARICOM or the UN, can at best offer only short-term adjustments aligned with the priorities of neoliberal transnational capitalism. While acknowledging that mobilization around reparations can serve useful educational purposes and that eventual monetary payments might be beneficial to recipients, he insists that reparatory justice cannot be delivered under global capitalism. The increasing labour exploitation, precarity and

18. On the concept of ‘worldmaking’, see Getachew (2019).

19. For a similar argument, see Achiume and McDougall (2023).

insecurity that this order instills, and which is not challenged by Caribbean countries, is the more fundamental problem at stake, for all labour, not simply racialized labour.

LEGAL CHALLENGES AND INTERNAL DISSENT

As Watson's criticism demonstrates, reparations claims do not command consensus regarding the historicity of claims, who should pay, who should receive, etc. When critics do not dismiss them as being 'divisive', they tend to focus on legal arguments about their rationale and feasibility. Indeed, one practical difficulty and objection often faced by reparations advocates, especially with regards to historical harms such as enslavement and colonialism, is the issue of 'intertemporality', referring to which laws can be applied at which particular periods of time (see Melber, this issue). If slavery was legal some centuries ago, can a case for reparations be made retroactively based on today's laws?

Reparations advocates have sought to address this issue. First, they argue that international law itself is not an overarching and unassailable fortress. As underscored by Anghie (2004: 2), it should also be repaired to the extent that it 'not only legitimized colonial exploitation' but also 'developed many mechanisms to prevent any claims for colonial reparations'. Second, Wittmann (2013, 2016) argues that if 'international law' is understood broadly, it should consider local norms and legal practices that applied when the harm was done. In this respect, slaver countries prohibited slavery on their soil, but they nonetheless imposed it on Africans by force and fraud (also see a version of this argument in Obeng-Odoom, 2023b). Third, some reparations demands are actually based on a historical normative reference. For example, the US government did not fulfil the promise of 'forty acres and a mule' it made to the formerly enslaved with the Proclamation of Emancipation (Clay, 2022; Foner, 2002). Fourth, some reparations claims consist of cases for restitution from perpetrators who violated the existing legal norms when they committed their wrongdoings. The theft of colonial artefacts and the imposition of debts under the threat of invasion, as in Haiti, fall into this category. To make the case for reparations, legal scholars have mobilized or elaborated on doctrines such as 'unjust enrichment' or 'odious debts' (e.g., Beckles, 2013; Boltax et al., 2021; Kurzban, 2023; Oosterlinck et al., 2022).

The question of who should be held liable for past harms is also related to the issue of intertemporality. Should current generations who have no responsibility for slavery and colonialism be held accountable for the crimes perpetrated by their ancestors? For example, according to some accounts, 70 per cent of non-Black Americans in the US are descendants of immigrants who arrived in the country after the Civil War (Lehman, 2023). Is it fair that these groups would contribute, through tax payments, to monetary

reparations for which they have no direct connection or responsibility with regards to slavery and the slave trade?

Similarly, the question is often raised: who should eventually be entitled to reparations payments? For example, if reparations were to be made for slavery and the Atlantic slave trade in Africa, who should be the recipients? In the US, one section of the reparations movement for Afro-Americans insists on limiting eligibility for eventual monetary payments to the so-called ADOS — American Descendants of Slavery. That is, for example, the perspective of William Darity Jr. and Kirsten Mullen, two leading scholars and voices of this movement. According to them, there is a significant difference between Blacks who cannot demonstrate that their ancestors were enslaved on US soil and the ADOS: the former ‘migrated to a racist country voluntarily, unlike the ancestors of the community that merits reparations from the US government’ (Darity and Mullen, 2023b: 17–18). In policy terms, this distinction implies that ‘all black people across the African diaspora have a legitimate claim for reparations — but not on the US government’. Blacks present in the US who do not belong to the ADOS and Blacks across the diaspora should make reparations claims to their former enslavers or colonizers: ‘Jamaica has a claim on the United Kingdom Colombia’s claim is on Spain. The Congo has a claim on Belgium’ (ibid.).

This very controversial view is opposed by Pan-Africanist authors and movements. Born in 2016, the ADOS movement is reflective of a long tradition of Black nativism in the US (Breitzer, 2011; Hellwig, 1982). Its founding leaders like attorney Antonio Moore and social media commentator Yvette Carnell are known for their uncompromising opposition to Pan-Africanism and their attempts to weaken solidarities between the various Afro-descendant communities.²⁰ According to Aiwuyor (2021: 54), the ADOS movement is premised on ‘a Black isolationist ideology that uses the reparations issue to promote anti-immigrant policies, nativism and birtherism, and disconnect African Americans from the global African world’. Next to their alliance with right-wing groups and their occasional recourse to Nazi-like slogans (such as ‘blood and soil’), the movement, according to its critics, has been waging campaigns on social media against older reparations platforms and activists (Stockman, 2019). Likewise, its eligibility criteria are rejected by platforms such as the National African American Reparations Commission (NAARC, 2022).

Kehinde Andrews (this issue) discusses the ADOS claims by pointing out the shaky historical foundations of any reparations strategy for the Black World or ‘Global Africa’²¹ based on the existing geography of nation states rather than on the acknowledgement of the transcontinental character of

20. See ‘ADOS Founder Yvette Carnell SLAMS Pan-Africanism’; www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nnOjkj7Y1E (accessed 12 June 2024).

21. See Campbell (2021), Howard-Hassman (2008: Ch. 3) and West (2005). For a different view, see Beckles (2018).

slavery and the slave trade, and the global economy they created. According to Andrews, the idea of a US ‘American slavery’ evades some of the following facts: Britain should be liable vis-à-vis slavery in the US as the US was a former British colony for more than a century and a half before its independence; Afro-descendants circulated within the Americas, including enslaved people in the US migrating to other places; and the profits and wealth realized in specific plantation economies were not bound by borders but irradiated through the Western economies. Given these legacies, some authors make the case for international migration rights for the citizens from formerly colonized countries — their free circulation with substantive rights — as a form of reparation next to monetary payments. According to them, international migration rights would be a redistributive mechanism as well as an instrument of decolonization (Achieme, 2019; Goldstone, 2024).

Interestingly, the nativist position of the ADOS movement in the US finds similar expressions among right-wing ethno-nationalist movements in other parts of the world. For instance, Nadini Sundar (this issue) warns about powerful groups co-opting the language of reparations and decolonization as part of supremacist or fascist projects. She draws on the examples of Hindutva in India and Zionism in Israel to demonstrate how the subversion of reparations claims and demands for the ‘restoration’ of sacred sites have been weaponized to legitimize their oppression of minorities. In the case of India, victimhood is claimed based on a history of colonialism dating 800 years, back to the Muslim invasions in the early second millennium. In the case of Israel, reparations have been wrapped up in the Zionist ideological justification for the very existence of Israel as an apartheid-like state. The genocide that has been inflicted upon the population in Gaza violates all international laws against war crimes and is actively supported by funding and arms supplies by the US, Germany and other powerful countries — the same countries that would be responsible for making any eventual reparations to the Global South. However, beyond these double standards, Sundar also highlights the importance of considering who the drivers and recipients of a reparations agenda are, and questions whether reparations claims must treat all durable injustices or should be principally about the past, rather than about the present and future.

Pheko (this issue) also illustrates the case of reparations demands being subtly hijacked by domestic elites anxious to maintain the status quo. Reflecting on South Africa, she argues that, because of the ANC’s ‘capitulation’ to market forces, the demands for justice against perpetrators and for land restitution by victims of settler colonialism and apartheid were to no avail. In that context, ‘rainbowism’ acted as a politico-ideological device that further silenced these reparations claims under the pretext of a reconciliation process that was state-led rather than victims-led. In South Africa, as for Namibia (Melber, this issue), one can clearly see the limitations of demands for reparative justice and restitution when these are led by domestic elites with distinct political agendas.

ACCOUNTING FOR REPARATIONS: HOW MUCH IS OWED AS MONETARY PAYMENTS?

Reparations demands generally go beyond monetary compensation alone. However, one politically astute way to advance and render more visible various reparations agendas has been to put US dollar figures on them. This is what President Bertrand Aristide did in 2004, in the context of celebrations of the 200th anniversary of the Haitian declaration of independence. According to Aristide, France ‘owed’ his country as compensation for its ‘national independence debt’ the exact amount of US\$ 21,685,135,571.48 in 2004 dollars (Porter et al., 2022).

Such accounting for the monetary payments is not a straightforward exercise and is riddled with ethical and political assumptions. The US\$ 21.7 billion figure put forward by Aristide was obtained by computing the present value of the debt payments made by Haiti over a period of 122 years (1825–1947), accrued using an annual interest rate of 5 per cent (De Cordoba, 2004). However, this did not take into account the cumulated effects of the debt payments to France on the long-term economic development of Haiti, nor did it include an eventual compensation for slavery before independence.²²

In the case of the US, various indicators have been used to compute financial amounts ‘owed’ as reparations for slavery. These start with recourse to historical precedents such as the estimated present value of the promise of ‘forty acres and a mule’ mentioned above, which was a reference point that the Black Panther Party mobilized in their ‘Ten-point Program’ (Bloom and Martin, 2016; also see Doyle, 2020). Other indicators include the prices of slaves and the unpaid wages for their labour. Thomas Craemer, a leading contributor to this literature, opposes the use of the prices of slaves as this omits ‘the substantial time spent by slaves on forced activities other than cash crop production’ (Craemer, 2015: 640). He proposes instead to use ‘the number of unremunerated work hours multiplied by historical hourly free labour compensation to estimate the value that slaves contributed to the US economy’ (ibid.). Estimates of this kind have depended on data availability, the interest rates chosen to obtain present values, and the computed work hours. Applying an interest rate of 3 per cent, Craemer used his method to estimate a value ranging from US\$ 5.9 trillion to US\$ 14.2 trillion in 2009 dollars (ibid.: 649; see also Craemer et al., 2023). For the Americas as a whole — the Caribbean, Latin America and North America — Bazelon et al. (2023) argue that the enslavement of 19 million people over four centuries and the resulting theft or undue appropriation of 802 million years of life necessitate compensations for the harms done during the period of enslavement and afterwards at around US\$ 100–131 trillion.

22. For further discussion of these dimensions, see Craemer (2015) and Porter et al. (2022); see also Oosterlinck et al. (2022).

Slavery, as a form of theft of labour, a deprivation of basic freedom and an imposition of pain and suffering, was not the only harm suffered by African Americans in the US given that the formal abolition of slavery in 1865 resulted in newer patterns of racial oppression and discrimination. For this reason, Darity et al. (2022) propose instead to rely on a synthetic indicator that would capture the cumulated impacts of the various harms suffered by Black people, especially those whose ancestors were enslaved in the US. In their joint works, Darity and Mullen articulate a programme of reparations based on the elimination of the mean 'racial wealth gap' between white and black households adjusted for their respective size. According to their estimates, 'a national expenditure of no less than \$14 trillion (in 2019 dollars) ... sets the minimum size of the monetary account for reparative justice', that is, to close the racial wealth gap at the mean (Darity and Mullen, 2023b: 19; also see Darity and Mullen, 2023a).

Outside the Americas, one also finds financial estimates accounting for the cumulated economic impacts of slavery, the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism in Africa or elsewhere. In 1999, during its First International Conference held in Accra, Ghana, the African World Reparations and Repatriation Truth Commission asked Europe and America to pay US\$ 777 trillion by 2004. The method behind the estimate — which represented around 24 times world GDP in 1999²³ — was not made explicit (Howard-Hassmann, 2008: 28). Another estimate was provided by Osabu-Kle (2000), based on the idea that slavery and the Atlantic slave trade depopulated Africa and deprived it of its vibrant youth. Using Asia's demographic growth as a benchmark, Osabu-Kle (*ibid.*: 344) estimated at one billion the human lives lost 'arising from the enslavement of Africans'. For each life 'lost' he assigned a value of US\$ 75,000 (a figure recommended by the Warsaw Convention to compensate people who died during aircraft crashes), resulting in an amount of US\$ 75 trillion. He added a compensation of US\$ 25 trillion, a third of the previous figure, for the African diaspora, resulting in a figure of US\$ 100 trillion, three times larger than the size of the world economy at the time. Building on Osabu-Kle (2000) and various other sources, Craemer (2018) arrived at US\$ 44 trillion in 2016 dollars as a compensation due to Africa for the Atlantic slave trade. Portugal and Britain would be 'liable' for around US\$ 17 trillion and US\$ 12 trillion respectively. Here again, estimates are sensitive to the number of victims, the compensation rate and the compound interest rate used (Craemer, 2019: 313). In more recent work, Craemer (2023: 258) suggests to also consider 'colonial exploitation', 'land theft in settler colonies', 'instances of genocide' and 'theft of cultural artifacts'. Including these, he estimates a measure of 'colonial exploitation' for the period from 1889 to

23. See databank.worldbank.org (accessed 16 May 2024).

1902 at US\$ 3.4 trillion for Nigeria and US\$ 545.6 billion for Ghana, at 2020 dollars and using an interest rate of 6 per cent (*ibid.*: 274–75).

Similar accounting exercises have also been applied more generally. Although her work is not clothed in the language of reparations, Utsa Patnaik estimated the wealth drained by Britain from colonial India between 1765 and 1938 at £ 9.2 trillion, or US\$ 45 trillion in current value (Patnaik, 2017). Scholars working on ‘unequal exchange’ and ‘unequal ecological exchange’ claim that the draining of wealth from South to North is still ongoing in tandem with global climate injustices (e.g., Dorninger et al., 2021; Hickel et al., 2021, 2022). For example, Fanning and Hickel (2023: 1077) argue that Global South countries have generally under-consumed their ‘fair’ share of the world ‘carbon budget’ while the core countries in the Global North have been net appropriators of others’ ‘atmospheric fair share’. In a scenario projected to achieve net zero CO₂ emissions by 2050 and limit global warming to 1.5°C, they extrapolate that by 2050 the core countries should disburse US\$ 192 trillion to compensate the ‘undershooting’ countries of the Global South. Marco Grasso (this issue) similarly proposes in an original way to estimate climate reparations by arguing that the fossil fuel industry should share the burden of these reparations payments, in contrast to the usual focus on states as the main payors. While relying on existing estimates of the likely economic costs of the climate crisis by Howard and Sylvan (2021), he conservatively assigns one third of this financial burden to fossil fuel companies. Based on the respective cumulated CO₂ emissions of the top 21 major fossil fuel companies for the period 1988–2022, he arrives at monetary payments estimates for each of them totalling US\$ 6 trillion over the period 2025–2050, or US\$ 223 billion annually on average.

As noted above, these very sizable estimates entail a range of important assumptions and creative accounting, which serve as much for political messaging as for establishing the sums required to meet the standards of reparatory justice. The sums involved — in some cases many times the size of present world GDP and wealth — puts into question the practicalities of such payments, if ever they would become a political possibility.

MAKING MONETARY REPARATIONS WORK FOR RECIPIENTS

Advocates of monetary reparations tend to assume their economic desirability both for the eligible recipients and for the cause of equality and justice. Although an individual recipient would definitely benefit from, say, a monetary transfer, it is less obvious at more aggregate levels given the range of issues that could be involved, particularly at the level and scale of global reparations being proposed, and the potential for unforeseen consequences. Questions of eligibility constitute one practical issue, as discussed above regarding the ADOS position, as well as questions about

whether payments and other benefits should be allocated to nation states, to victimized communities or groups, to grassroots movements, or directly to individuals. However, even beyond this, large-scale cross-border monetary reparations would involve considerable macroeconomic effects, which also need to be considered.

In a seminal paper, Darity et al. (2010) frame these questions, specifically regarding reparations for African Americans in the US (and hence no cross-border dimension), as a 'transfer problem', drawing from Keynes' (1929a, 1929b) analysis of German reparations in the 1920s. They argue that if the heavily racialized economic structure of the US remains unaltered, reparations payments might be mostly oriented towards purchases of goods and services in sectors controlled by non-Blacks, which could sustain or aggravate the racial income gap. A similar scenario could be observed if reparations payments happen without an increase of the productive capacity of Blacks. This insight is not an argument against reparations but rather an invitation to embed them in a larger perspective. The main point is that monetary payments alone, however generous, cannot be truly transformational without deeper structural changes. One might also add that they cannot be transformational without rigorous and meticulous preparations ahead of the disbursement of eventual payments.

Robinson (this issue) takes up the baton passed by Darity et al. and discusses why 'pre-reparations preparation' is crucial to the success of a reparations programme for Blacks in the US and what this could look like. In his view, repairing centuries of racial injustice will necessitate the rehabilitation of individual Black recipients and the strengthening of their own communities, through organizing, sensitizing and intellectually equipping them to elaborate 'Black community economic development planning'. This would be designed to reduce 'leaks' in the 'bucket' — a popular education analogy for the spending and income and wealth transfers outside the community. Robinson mainly addresses wealth transfers through the notion of financial fraud, making it clear that a 'pre-reparations preparation' should also happen at the federal level with reforms and legislation to address such financial fraud. However, these wealth transfers could be considered more generally as part of the regular and legal functioning of financial systems, as noted below with respect to international income or wealth transfers from developing countries.

While most of the literature on these questions has so far been focused on the US domestic economy, with reference to domestic reparations payments, these macroeconomic questions become more complex at the international level. One question concerns what should or should not be considered as 'reparations' in the realm of North to South transfers. According to Lahiri and Darity (this issue), development assistance in areas such as health, education and infrastructure, technology transfers, and market access and preferential trade schemes are better thought of as forms of international

economic support rather than ‘reparations’. This is because they are not meant to systematically address the historic injustices at the root of global inequality, but instead some of their visible consequences. They nonetheless argue that the above supply-side measures offer better outcomes and a ‘win-win’ situation compared to pure monetary payments that would be oriented towards consumption and would be offset by substitution and price effects. However, they acknowledge that this result would not necessarily hold in a dynamic context factoring in the current and enduring global asymmetries in trade, finance and investment. Hence, they recommend a ‘more comprehensive outlook’ whereby Global South countries will have an increased ability to pursue industrial policies unburdened by policy conditionalities and strong support from the Global North in sectors such as manufacturing, infrastructure and R&D.

Sissoko (this issue) similarly argues that the impacts of cash payments from North to South would depend on their size, the terms and conditions of their disbursement, their allocation, the degree of coordination between both parties, and the degree to which payments are offset by substitution and price effects. She argues that any programme of monetary transfers from North to South can potentially face undesirable effects regarding the external trade of recipients. To address these and other related issues and to make monetary reparations work for the recipient countries, Sissoko proposes the establishment of a Global South-controlled Bank of International Reparations, modelled on the Bank of International Settlements. She also qualifies this by emphasizing the importance of internal factors, such as the adoption of a ‘developmental state’ approach by recipient countries.

In both these contributions, it is notable that the authors caution against large-scale international monetary transfers based on a static and fairly mainstream theoretical economic analysis. This is in stark contrast to the sizable amounts advocated by reparations movements, including by Darity et al. (2022) for the US, as discussed above, who do not extend their domestic ambition to cross-border, global redistribution. Lahiri and Darity (this issue) also justify this caution based on political economy realities in the world order, hence their proposals for a more development cooperation mode of supply-side aid.

Sissoko similarly argues for the mobilization of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) as a means to avoid the contentious politics of financing reparations through fiscal means in the Global North and also to help mitigate possible complications arising from currency conversions. Indeed, this has been a favourite proposal by reparations advocates (e.g., Franczak and Táíwò, 2022) and sceptics alike,²⁴ and was in fact already proposed 20 years ago by Hewitt (2004: 1013–14) as a ‘tender for reparation’ regarding the

24. One of the major authors of the Bridgetown Initiative, while defending a reform of the global financial system, including the SDRs system, avoids the language of reparations (see Worley, 2023).

enslavement and colonization of Africa. However, issuing these SDRs for purposes other than complementing the official foreign reserves of central banks would require the political will of the most powerful countries in the Global North, and recent experience has not been particularly progressive, with little allocated towards low- and middle-income countries (Kharas and Dooley, 2021). Given this gap between the distribution of SDRs and the liquidity needs of developing countries, some suggestions have been made, such as by UNCTAD (2021: 20), to channel the current ‘unused’ SDRs to development and climate goals and to create ‘new ear-marked types of SDRs’ that would be detached from the IMF quota system.²⁵

To the extent that the allocation of SDRs reflects the unfairness of the global system, the use of such an instrument, even for legitimate global purposes, would risk enhancing rather than correcting the current global distribution of economic, financial and institutional power. In a framework of reparatory justice, the issue is therefore not simply the instrument of payment, but more fundamentally, reform of the international financial system, especially the IMF and World Bank. So far, the US has opposed any reform of the Bretton Woods institutions that would give greater weight to the Global South, especially to a country like China (Pandey, 2023).

Another issue that arises with these analyses is the degree to which they integrate a developmentalist view on global imbalances, as elaborated in both the structuralist tradition of development economics and in post-Keynesian economic theory. According to this view, the absorption of large inflows of reparations into the domestic economy of a recipient country — through consumption or investment — would be expressed by an increase in its trade deficit, which is a necessary condition for such transfers to be redistributive (that is, allowing a country to consume more than it earns externally). In this respect, a ‘leaking bucket’ would be desirable, so long as the ‘leak’ is used for developmentalist purposes, particularly as most developing countries are import-dependent and foreign exchange constrained, even within their efforts to industrialize out of these constraints.²⁶ Rather, the problem, particularly since the advent of the neoliberal era, is that such deficits and imbalances are not tolerated and have been aggressively repressed or penalized under the logic of sound finance.²⁷

However, not absorbing reparations would complicate the macroeconomics of reparations considerably and would ultimately serve to bolster the dominance of the US-centred global monetary system. An additional problem is that large ‘leaks’ from many countries of the Global South, especially those that would be the recipients of reparations, occur through

25. See Plant (2024) for a recent update.

26. See Fischer (2018) for a discussion of this.

27. See Kregel (2008) for an excellent discussion of this.

profit and wealth transfers abroad, through either legal or illicit means,²⁸ which is exacerbated by the dominance of transnational capital in these economies and their incorporation into a very unequal global economic system on disadvantaged terms. Hence, whereas the success of large reparations might be predicated on the mobilization and deployment of an effective development strategy by recipient countries, this again needs to be complemented by reforms to the international financial system. Such issues place the realities of the current political economy of the global economic order at the centre of the analysis of global reparations, as discussed by Andrews (this issues) and Watson (this issue), as noted above.

These issues also raise questions about who would determine the preparations for reparations, and with what economic rationale. For instance, crucial for a new institution such as a Bank of International Reparations as proposed by Sissoko (this issue), would be the questions of who would control such an entity and with what economic ideology. As Watson (this issue) warns, in the context of the current global political economy, the risks of this being captured by an orthodox economic ideology in the disguised interests of Northern economies and/or dominant financial actors is one that needs to be taken seriously. The fact that even technical questions of instruments and financing modalities bring us back to fundamental questions of power and ideology similarly highlights points raised by Andrews (this issue) about the subversion of reparations claims by powerful capitalist interests.

Financing Reparations

It is one thing for victimized groups to ask for some form of monetary compensation. It is another for their claims to be accepted by the ‘liable’ countries. One particularity of global reparations demands, however varied they are, is that they are addressed at the same set of countries. With few exceptions, reparations for slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, racial discrimination, genocide, climate injustice, etc., are mostly demanded vis-à-vis the centres of global wealth and power, namely, Western Europe, the US, Canada, Japan, Australia and New Zealand (Japan is generally only included regarding some general claims addressed to the ‘Global North’/‘rich countries’, such as debt cancellation, or climate reparations).

Relative to their size and share of global income and wealth, rich countries certainly have the resources to afford reparations. For instance, in 2022, the G7 countries (the US, Canada, Japan, the UK, Germany, France, Italy) plus Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, Australia and New Zealand collectively represented 11.3 per cent of the world’s population versus 49.5 per cent of world GDP. Their wealth was estimated at US\$

28. For some recent work on this, see AUC/ECA (2021). On the case of Zambia, see Fischer (2020).

262.8 trillion in current dollars, which was 58.9 per cent of estimated global wealth.²⁹ As discussed previously, in the past, when these countries had far less surplus, their governments demonstrated that they could manage to meet the ‘reparations’ demands of slave owners and capitalists.

These rich countries enjoy a global ‘privilege’ visible through their high degree of what some scholars refer to as ‘monetary sovereignty’ — they face real resource constraints rather than financial constraints per se (Tymoigne, 2020). As demonstrated by the recent experiences of quantitative easing in the US and Europe, they can always ‘find the money’ if this is their wish, such as to fight wars, bail out banks, or stimulate their economies, even in hard times. The only concern is whether the extra money spent will eventually have inflationary and other undesirable effects. As noted by Segovia (2006), this is a major difference with peripheral developing countries, where local demands for reparations are constrained by the lower levels of economic development and associated financial constraints.

Rather than objective capacity, financing global reparations depends on political will. As this Debate makes clear, the fate of global reparations campaigns will likely be influenced by a number of factors. These include legal considerations, the state of (global) public opinion, the existence (or not) of politically powerful groups in favour of the reparations agenda, the prevalence of austerity and other orthodox views, reform of the international financial system, the economic context, and the terms and conditions of payments.

Here we might make a distinction between reparations claims by citizens (US Afro-Americans, Indigenous communities, etc.) against their governments, versus cross-border reparations that have a broader scope (slavery, colonialism, climate injustice). The former claims are likely to be more amenable to domestic politics and hence ‘affordable’ to their governments, who might be more responsive to the internal pressure of the coalitions of reparations claimants or movements for economic equality. In countries such as Canada, Australia and the US, where Indigenous populations have a small demographic size, some forms of compensation have been implemented.³⁰ But, as Klein (this issue) argues, for Indigenous communities who are still enduring the consequences of land dispossession, including by universities,³¹ and other facets of colonialism, monetary payments are not enough while land reparations prove very difficult to implement, as also stressed by Pheko (this issue). In the US, while some cities like Chicago have been studying the possibility of implementing a reparations programme, there is a growing policy acceptance of the

29. This was calculated from Credit Suisse (2023: 20–24) for the data on wealth, and from the World Bank Development Indicators for GDP and population data; databank.worldbank.org (accessed 19 May 2024).

30. For example, see *Reuters* (2023) and Victorian State Government (2022).

31. For example, see Hatzipanagos (2023).

'baby bonds' proposal championed by US economist Darrick Hamilton (Hamilton and Darity, 2010). Although Hamilton does not frame this in terms of reparations but rather as a 'birthright to capital' opened for each newborn in the US (Klein, 2023), its proponents such as McMullen (2022) and Zewde (2020) claim that, with an estimated cost of US\$ 100 billion, it would likely reduce the racial wealth gap.

One area of future research would be to speculate the likely global macroeconomic effects on the rest of the world, especially developing countries, that would result from a large domestic stimulus in the US driven by a domestic reparations programme. Whether financed through fiscal means or through monetary policy such as quantitative easing, both can have large impacts on global macroeconomic dynamics. This is similar to studies that examine the potential effects of the domestically oriented US Green New Deal on the rest of the world, such as by Perry (2021a), insofar as any major stimulus programme or its equivalent within the US or other centres of the global economy, that generates large fiscal or monetary increases, is bound to have very large impacts on the global economy through a variety of channels.

Regarding global reparations demands from the Global South, if the past and current behaviours of rich countries can be of any guide for the future, then it appears that prospects for significant repair of historical and ongoing harms are dim. The current context of multifaceted and overlapping crises could have been an opportunity for rich countries to relieve many countries across the Global South from their burden. In 2021, the public and publicly guaranteed (PPG) foreign currency-denominated debt stock of 131 LMICs (excluding China, Russia and India) amounted to US\$ 2.6 trillion, which was less than Germany's public debt stock (Sylla, 2024). Cancelling or delaying the servicing of this debt for most of these countries, such as those in Africa and in the CARICOM, would be affordable given the relatively low figures involved. Instead, austerity policies, as manifested in growth-damaging primary surpluses, have been the main mode of adjustment in face of the consequences induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine War.³²

Moreover, while COP27 in Egypt in 2022 reached an agreement on the creation of a Loss and Damage Fund (see Dehm, 2020), the developed world has not complied with its pledges in terms of climate finance. As noted above, US climate envoy John Kerry argued in 2023, during a Congress hearing, that his country will not 'under any circumstances' provide monetary reparations to developing countries suffering from climate disasters (Slow, 2023). Yet, according to US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, who is opposed to a global tax on billionaires (Duehren, 2024), the US could 'afford' two wars — in Ukraine and in Gaza (Smith, 2023). Given the likely

32. For a discussion of this, see Fischer and Storm (2023).

internal objections and resistance against global reparations for the benefit of the peripheral countries, one possible way forward has been to think of financing mechanisms within the current hierarchical international financial system that would be relatively 'costless' and politically more acceptable for rich countries. Examples include SDR issuance, the limitations of which we already discussed, or market-based schemes that often prove problematic (Development Reimagined, n.d.). One question that arises with all these easier paths of less resistance is whether, if they are not redistributive or challenging, they can really be reparatory along the lines discussed in this Debate.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS 'SYSTEMIC REPARATIONS'

Over the past two centuries, successful global reparations campaigns have been initiated by capitalists, merchants and especially slave owners, and by countries that emerged as war victors. Beyond these, the few groups that have been entitled to financial compensation, such as the victims and survivors of the Holocaust, have been those supported by these same dominant countries. In all these cases, some Western governments ran up debts over several generations and, in some cases, forced weaker or militarily defeated nations into debt to pay the reparations due.

In the late 20th and 21st centuries, movements for global reparations have articulated a conception of restorative justice that is closer to common intuitive sense. Instead of reparations being an instrument at the service of the powerful and an unequal global capitalist order, they are conceived as an entry point for demanding changes to this order in a systemic manner that corrects this inequality. Analysing contemporary socio-economic, racial and climatic inequalities as the culmination of centuries of slavery, colonialism and imperialism, these movements see reparations as the path to a fairer world, although this agenda is not without its challenges, contradictions and obstacles.

While proponents of reparative justice often insist on the desirability and feasibility of various reparations claims, less emphasis has been put on the structural conditions that can make monetary reparations work for recipients, groups and nations in a way that is transformative. For any national reparations programme, the idea evoked by Robinson (this issue) of 'pre-reparations preparations' at community, state and federal levels is an important one. A related insight of this Debate collection is that the macroeconomic and development impacts of eventual cross-border monetary reparations payments are uncertain in the current international economic and financial order. Hence the importance for global reparations demands to be embedded in a broader agenda of what we could call 'systemic reparations', an idea which resonates strongly with the concepts of 'reparations as revolution' (Andrews, this issue) and 'worldmaking transformative reparations' (Klein, this issue).

Indeed, reparations for slavery, colonialism and climate injustice, however generous in monetary terms they might eventually be, would not be transformative if the underlying global economic structures that sustain development and climate inequalities are not reformed or replaced with supportive ones. For example, foreign debt cancellation or development aid-like unilateral transfers will likely fail to serve the purpose of global justice if patterns of unequal ecological exchange and illicit financial flows persist. These exchanges and flows themselves are also expressions of the very high levels of ownership and/or control over the most lucrative sectors of the global economy by Northern corporations, in addition to a rising role of China and several other Global South countries.³³ Under such circumstances, much like with international development assistance (aka ‘aid’) over the last decades, large reparations payments could simply add to the outflow of resources from recipient countries, alongside large increases in non-essential consumption and investments that are mostly oriented towards servicing the needs of Northern economies. Whereas a reparatory justice framework that empowers victims and their survivors cannot materialize without altering power structures towards more equality within and between countries, a necessary part of this entails serious developmentalist strategies from recipient countries, unobstructed and ideally facilitated by rich (and previously colonial and slaver) countries. It has been one of our goals as editors of this Debate section to lay the ground for critical but constructive deliberation along these lines.

Nonetheless, all of this raises the question of whether capitalism can accommodate global reparations demands that are meant to significantly transform it or at least to go against what has been its historical logic so far. The question has even more relevance in the light of the rise of China and other Global South countries, which has shifted the traditional North–South binary that underpins the conception of reparatory justice in the current wave of demands. Climate reparations activists, for instance, would likely not accept that reparations should be paid to China given its remarkable capitalist successes in the last four decades, but then how should a country like China be positioned within the discussion about reparatory justice, with respect to what repair for what justice?

Rampant militarism and the threat of large-scale wars will also likely spawn newer reparations demands. For instance, the International Court of Justice deemed in its advisory opinion of 19 July 2024 that Israel is ‘under an obligation to provide full reparation for the damage caused by its internationally wrongful acts to all natural or legal persons concerned’ and that such reparation ‘includes restitution, compensation and/or satisfaction’ (ICJ, 2024: 17). Yet, as Israel’s genocidal violence against Palestinians in Gaza tragically illustrates, the current international system of governance

33. The latter is a dimension that none of the Debate contributions address, possibly indicating a blind spot in the reparations agenda.

has little or no ability to enforce such obligations, let alone prevent ongoing atrocities before our very eyes or assure guarantees of non-repetition. Reparatory justice continues to be held hostage by global geopolitics.

However, as the case of Gaza also shows, as long as past injustices are not corrected, they will continue to add to the suffering of victims and their survivors and feed new cycles of violence and injustice. Our efforts here to think about reparations in a holistic manner, and to untangle the complex political economy, macroeconomic and development implications that would be involved with large-scale global reparations, if they were to occur, are not meant to question the right of victimized groups to reparatory justice. Rather, our effort here is to encourage thinking about how to make reparations transformative for these groups, their countries, and the world we live in, rather than inadvertently allowing reparations demands to consolidate the global power of those they are meant to render responsible.

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Ndongo Samba Sylla (n.sylla@networkideas.org) is Head of Research and Policy at the International Development Economics Associates (IDEAs), Dakar, Senegal.

Andrew M. Fischer (corresponding author; fischer@iss.nl) is Professor of Inequality, Social Protection and Development at the International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands.

Annina Kaltenbrunner (A.Kaltenbrunner@leeds.ac.uk) is a Professor of Global Economics at Leeds University Business School, UK. Her research focuses on financial processes and relations in emerging capitalist economies.

Sreerekha Sathi (sree.sathi@iss.nl) is Assistant Professor at the International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands.