

REFRAMING CARIBBEAN INFLUENCES ON GLOBAL SPACES: CRITICALLY ENGAGING PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN GEOGRAPHY AND RISKS, POLITICAL ECONOMY AND TECHNOLOGY (30th May – 3rd June 2022)

Plenary Online Session: Reparations and Caribbean Development (3rd June, 2022)

Sponsor: The Centre for Reparation Research & The CARICOM Reparations Commission

Chair: Don Rojas – CARICOM Reparations Commission

Panelists:

Dr. Hilary Brown – CARICOM Secretariat

Eric Phillip – Guyana Reparations Committee

Dorbrene O'Marde – Antigua and Barbuda Reparations

Hans Fässler – Switzerland Reparation Committee

Contribution by Hans Fässler:

The European Response to the Reparation Question

This is a difficult job for a little Swiss historian: to give a European perspective. So much is going on in the UK, in France, Holland, Germany, Belgium, Scandinavia that it is very demanding to keep tracks of all the campaigns, research projects, publications, debates, and grassroots activities.

But let me try my best looking at Europe, before providing some information about the peculiarities of the Swiss positions – and the opportunities for the CARICOM reparations campaign therein.

Reparations for slavery, I am afraid to say, are presently not very high up on the European agendas. But coming to terms with aspects of the colonial past is very much so. I want to mention three fields of ongoing debate (which are sometimes interrelated):

Field 1) the debate about the restitution of colonial objects, human remains, and looted artefacts to their countries of origin: debate was launched by President Macron of France in his Dakar speech of 2017, repercussions in Germany (Humboldt Forum in Berlin), and in Switzerland (a great number of Benin Bronzes)

Field 2) the debate about genocides, massacres, colonial wars: in Germany about the Namibian genocide against the Ovaherero and Nama People (1904–1908) and the Maji Maji War in Tanzania (1905–1907), in Belgium about the murderous and genocidal regime of Leopold II in the Congo (1885–1908), in Britain about the punitive expedition against Benin City (1897).

Field 3) the debate about sites of memory sweeping through most of Europe in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in May 2020. It has resulted in hundreds of monuments in most European countries being destroyed, toppled, removed, daubed or put into question. And in dozens of streets and squares and mountains and buildings being renamed or contextualized.

In all of these three fields, I incidentally notice a tendency to no longer to avoid comparisons and parallels between the horrors of slavery and colonialism and the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust. Comparing, of course, is not equating, but I would argue that the taboo «Never ever put these two in relation!» finally has gone.

Now, how should we judge and interpret the relevance and the impact of the debates I have just sketched? They could be seen as mere distractions from the real thing, from the big one: European reparations for Transatlantic slavery. Or they could be regarded as intellectual training grounds for coming to terms with the crime of slavery, preparing European societies, nations and public opinion for what will be inevitable in the 21st century, the century of reparatory justice. I am carefully and optimistically leaning towards the latter interpretation. I herein draw some hope from the example of the UK, where institutions from the Royal Bank of Scotland and Glasgow University to Lloyds of London and the brewery Greene King are considering slavery reparations.

Having said that, I want to add four caveats, or not pessimistic but rather more realistic assessments of the situation:

1) Although Spain established the first murderous colonial empire (murderous for the indigenous populations of the Americas and for the enslaved Africans that were meant to replace them) and was the number two in the slave trade even before the British, and although Portugal accounted for almost half of all the slaves traded across the Atlantic, the debate on the Iberian Peninsula is strangely lagging behind the rest of Europe, perhaps with the exception of Catalonia.

2) The attack of Putin's Russia on Ukraine and the ongoing war (just a 3 hours' flight from where I am right now) are threatening to overshadow or silence the colonial debate. Eduardo Galeano, journalist from Uruguay (ground-breaking «The Open Veins of Latin America») gave an interview in 1991 (2 years after the falling of the Berlin Wall, one year before the Columbus Year). He said that the Berlin Wall had died a good death without even reaching the age of 30, while that other wall would soon celebrate its 500th birthday.» I think we will have to do all we can (like in the present conference) to prevent the new east-west dimension from eclipsing the north-south one.

3) There was a chance of staggering new alliances in Europe in the summer of 2020: between Black Lives Matter (a very young and diverse movement), the old left (social democratic and socialist parties, ecological parties and movement, postcolonial activists, trade unions) and the youth for climate (a movement which was well aware of the colonial and postcolonial aspect of climate change with the global north's imperial lifestyle). There was window of opportunity for such an alliance, but then came the second wave of Covid-19 and then the third. And then the window was closed. We need to reopen it.

4) The CARICOM Reparation campaign launched in 2013 was in my opinion the most solidly founded, best prepared and best documented of all international campaigns for slavery reparations that I have come across in 20 years of studying and analysing that field. Nevertheless, the traces of the demand to enter into negotiations addressed to Britain, Holland, Spain, Portugal, France, etc. are few and far between in Europe.

And this is where Switzerland comes in.

The Special and Not so Special Case of Switzerland

Switzerland is a newcomer to the colonial debate. Until 2000 hardly anyone in Switzerland would have linked their country to Atlantic slavery, the slave-trade, colonial exploitation and to anti-Black racism. But dozens of studies, books, articles, essays, lectures, colloquiums, conferences and research projects have made it irrefutable over the last twenty years: Swiss individuals, Swiss banks, Swiss merchant families, Swiss mercenaries, Swiss intellectuals, Swiss trading companies were involved, opening up colonies, investing in triangular expeditions, insuring slave-ships, investing in colonial companies, trading and speculating in slavery-produced goods, producing goods for the triangular trade, trading in slaves, owning or directing or administrating plantations with slaves, securing colonies and maintaining slavery by military means, by trivialising or justifying slavery, or by elaborating anti-Black racism.

The focus areas of Swiss involvement in colonial exploitation and slavery were the Guianas (Berbice, Essequibo, Demerara, Suriname, and French Guyana), Saint-Domingue, Martinique, Guadeloupe, British North America and the USA, Cuba, and Brazil. I have estimated the Swiss share of the total transatlantic slavery system at 3%, which, if you look at it per capita, is higher than that of France.

This was my message to the CARICOM Reparations Commission when we met in Antigua in 2019. The CRC was apparently convinced, and so was «The Guardian» in an article published on the subject in November 2020. The CRC put Switzerland on the list of countries to be addressed for slavery reparations and drafted the letter to the Swiss government.

But that letter has not yet arrived, because apparently the consent of the Caribbean Heads of State is still lacking. So, if anyone is listening and watching now who has anything to do with decision making among Caribbean heads of state or among the members of the PMSC, the Prime Ministerial Subcommittee on Reparations headed by PM Mia Motley from Barbados, please hear my call: See to it that this letter is signed and posted as soon as possible! That letter would be a game-changer for us, in the Swiss postcolonial debate. And the relevance of that letter for Switzerland is not even its first and foremost. There is a fair chance that the letter might revitalise CARICOM's reparation cause in European as a whole.

Switzerland is very much embedded in this continent, with a highly developed press and a media system closely linked to the German and the French press and also covered by the British press. If Switzerland is targeted as a colonial profiteer or a free-rider of the European colonial system, there will be a certain European logic of thinking: If even Switzerland is in it, then the whole of Europe must and should be. So, I expect a good press coverage and a good dissemination of the story of that letter in the European media. And I have reasons to believe that Switzerland could be exemplary in dealing with the CARICOM demand fairly, justly and decently, a role model for those European countries who have apparently more or less snubbed the nations of the Caribbean by their responses or non-responses to the slavery reparation demand letters.

And one last argument why Switzerland is so ready and prepared for that letter: In 2020, based on a suggestion made in the press conference in Antigua, I founded SCORES, the Swiss Committee on Reparations for Slavery. So far, 100 *white* Swiss personalities from all walks of life have signed the minimal consensus, which demands spiritual as well as material reparations for slavery and which insists that those reparations must be the negotiated result of a dialogue between the descendants of those who profited from the slavery system and the descendants of the victims. This Committee is for all I know – unique in Europe. Mind you, CARICOM: 100 men and women from academia, politics, literature, the arts, the churches, the media, and the trade unions are waiting in Switzerland for your demand letter. Please do not let them down!

St.Gallen and Fribourg, 3rd June 2022