

**HOWARD-HASSMANN, Rhoda E. (with Anthony P. Lombardo) 2008.**  
**Reparations to Africa. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 257**  
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*reviewed by*

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With the support of two research assistants, one of whom is credited as a sort of co-author, the Canadian political sociologist Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann wrote the book considered here. As a distinguished human rights scholar, whose active career spans more than three decades, Howard-Hassmann can rely on a long time perspective in evaluating the claims for reparations to Africa. This allows for arguing in a distanced manner rarely found in those often heated and highly emotionalized debates. Her very first sentence leads into the topic of the book right away: "This book discusses the claim for reparations to Africa from the West for the slave trade, colonialism, and some postcolonial relations." (p.1)

Put in this way, and relying on common morality, the topic sounds easy enough. For, undoubtedly, the West is economically and by standards of living of the majority of people in a comparatively better condition, and there is ample evidence that these global differences are rooted in historical processes of past times producing the global inequalities of today. Without doubt, the three aspects named by Howard-Hassmann have made their impact on Africa: the Atlantic slave trade (a reality from 1450 to 1860), European colonial rule over almost all of Africa (a reality since at least the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ending in North Africa in course of the 1950s, and in Sub-Saharan Africa only in the years between 1957 [Ghana] and 1994 [South Africa]), and the following phases of nominal political independence without any profound changes in the international political and economic order.

However, what might appear like a clear-cut moral case at first sight raises very intricate and delicate issues related to both juridical negotiations and historical knowledge. What, for example, is exactly meant by reparations? Who is calling for reparations and by what right? Who is representing "Africa" and who the "West"? Or, on a less theoretical and more historical level, who participated in the Atlantic slave trade, in colonial and

postcolonial affairs, and who profited from those different forms of domination? Or, on a more philosophical level, in which ways do Africans and Europeans of the past relate with Africans and Europeans of today, and how are they linked?

These are only few of the questions that must be dealt with if claims for reparations shall have any prospect of success. Howard-Hassmann puts them to the test systematically. Her well-argued results tend to squash the hopes of reparationists but, at the same time, she gives them several hints of how they could work towards their goal more effectively. In essence, her recommendations come down to this: "To experience success [...], claimants for African reparations must present *clear, limited demands for recognizable wrongs caused by recognizable agents and events*. Most likely to succeed are claims for reparation for *actions that were illegal at the time they were committed or at least are illegal now, for violation of the right to life or bodily integrity, for violation of the equality principle, and for violation of property rights*. The *victims must be a finite group of people living in the present*." (p.56, emphasis added) In all cases of reparations that have succeeded so far – for instance, the Jewish reparations of the early 1950s and 1990s, or the French colonial veterans of World War II and the Algerian War in 2002 – this has been the route to juridical success. Throughout her book, Howard-Hassmann emphasizes the needs to fulfill such criteria in order to achieve the results wished for, be it financial compensation or symbolic forms of reparation such as acknowledgements of past wrongs or apologies.

The imperative pre-condition for the success of reparation claims in each above-mentioned case was organized solidarity and close co-operation between those claiming for reparations. With regard to African reparations, no unified movement has developed so far. Instead, the debate is led among a multitude of small, fragmented groupings which often are at odds with each other. Even though Howard-Hassmann writes of the reparations movement in the singular, linking its beginning to the GEP-initiative (*Group of Eminent Persons*) in the early 1990s, her presentation of the reparationists' institutional scene and of the differing arguments put forth at the *Durban Conference Against Racism* in 2001 regarding the matter of reparations (pp.26-41) makes it amply clear that there is not a homogeneous movement calling for reparations to Africa. In parts, Howard-Hassmann's book tries to be a practical guide of how such unification might be achieved.

The book is divided in 12 chapters, plus endnotes, bibliography, and an index. The first four chapters have introductory character, introducing the topic (1. *Reparations to Africa: A New Kind of Justice*), discussing the methods used to establish the interview data corpus analyzed in subsequent chapters (2. *African Voices*), narrating the beginnings of African claims for reparations (3. *Genesis of the Reparations Movement*), and discussing analogies and differences between various reparationist cases, in particular Jewish policies (4. *The Social Movement for Reparations to Africa: Comparison to Holocaust Reparations*). Chapters 5 and 6 are intimately linked. They deal with *Reparations for the Slave Trade*, chapters 5 concentrating on *Law and Rhetoric*, while chapter 6 discusses *Historical Debates* on slavery and the slave trade. Another unit is created by the next three chapters, dedicated to colonialism and its aftermath (7. *Reparations for Colonialism*; 8. *Neocolonialism and Globalization*; 9. *Postcolonial Relations, Postcolonial Crimes*). In the last part of the book, comprising again three distinct chapters, Howard-Hassmann proposes several measures in order to achieve at least some of the goals that African reparationists are targeting. Significantly, they go under the same heading: remedies (10. *Remedies: Acknowledgement and Apologies*; 11. *Remedies: A Truth Commission for Africa?*; *Remedies: Economic Right and Universal Obligations*).

All in all, the book is a mixture of scholarly treatise that informs about ongoing debates and puts them in proper historical perspective, and engaged scholarship eager to provide effective policy measures. Clearly, Howard-Hassmann is sympathetic to the claims for reparations to Africa. This is to be seen not only from her earnest efforts to give the claimants for reparations more effective strategies at hand in dealing with their Western (and African) adversaries, i.e. mainly state and inter-state institutions, and international organizations, but also in the weight she attaches to African agents and African voices. It is worth mentioning that this very interesting book is based on interviews with no less than 74 Africans, whose statements have been frequently interwoven into the book, making it even more lively, and a very good read.