

European Reparation Commission



Demonstration for slavery reparation in Paris (2014)

Context

Reparation is by no means a new issue. The first African people who were enslaved and deported to America always asked for two things : freedom *and* justice. Freedom, they finally got it, justice, they fought for it, sometimes, got it, but rarely - the battle is still going on. It is the battle for reparation.

On december 10th 2013, on the International day for human rights, the Caribbean Community (Caricom) Secretariat issued a press release saying that they decided to create a « Caricom Reparation Commission », in order to « establish the moral, ethical and legal case for the payment of reparations by the former colonial European countries, to the nations and people of the Caribbean Community, for native genocide, the transatlantic slave trade and a racialized system of chattel slavery. »

As a way to reinforce European campaigns on reparation, the idea emerged to create also a European Reparation Commission (ERC), in order to promote reparation in Europe, and to have a mecanism to discuss and cooperate with Caribbean and American counterparts. Though, obviously, no European state is a member of the ERC (contrary to the situation in the Caribbean Commission), this Commission is entitled to discuss with European states and, if necessary, to confront them.

The Goals of the ERC

The ERC will have to the least two goals :

-to provide reflection and information on reparation. Most of the time, people have never heard of reparation, and if not, they have about it more misconceptions than anything else. Moreover, usually, people do not know that several reparation laws were voted for slaveowners after slavery was abolished (UK, France, Netherlands, Sweden, etc.). They do not know that Haïti had to pay reparation to France from 1825 to 1846. Most people do not know that 13 countries in Africa are still paying reparation to France for the the « goods » that they received during colonisation. But before diffusing any piece of information, it is often necessary to produce it, especially in an area where so much remains to be done. That's why academics will be asked to launch research programs and encourage others to do so on that question.

-to advocate for reparation. The ERC will have the capacity to discuss about reparation with political and business leaders or any kind of people who may seem relevant to advance the campaign. The ERC will encourage European organisations to work on reparation, and to form if possible national reparation commissions, as they may be a good format to have national debates on the issue. The ERC will also support or launch campaign for reparation, by all means necessary, such as conferences, petitions, laws, trials, videos, leaflets, etc. Targets may be families enriched by slavery or colonisation, companies, states and also international bodies.

Crime and consequences

Reparation is needed because of the crime, and because of its long-term consequences, which may be :

-demographic : according to most historians, between 12 and 17 millions of people were deported from Africa to America by European states, not to mention all the people, even more numerous, who were killed while trying to protect their brothers and sisters, their families and their own lives. If we consider the whole history of European colonisation in Africa, of course, the figure would be much higher. In Congo only, when it was owned by Leopold, King of Belgium, between 6 and 10 millions of people were killed.

-political : before the 16th century, there were in Africa rich and powerful cities, kingdoms, empires, etc. Because of slave trade and colonisation, all these political structures were jeopardized, destabilized, weakened, destroyed or reorganised into incoherent entities, leading to numerous conflicts, many of them still continuing today.

-economic : many economic structures were then dismantled, economic routes were cut off, crops were looted, bringing about regular famines, impoverishment and economic decline. No wonder if the former colonies are usually poorer than the countries of the former colons. No wonder if the descendants of the slaves are not as rich as the descendants of the slave owners.

-cultural : colonisation and slave trade have destroyed many civilisations, languages, cultures and religions. Millions of people have then lost their gods, their roots, name, identity, and self-esteem. The social image of African people, as it was degraded, favored new theories, justifying stigma, discrimination and violence of all kinds, anti-black racism being a by-product of colonisation and slavery.

The Need for Reparation

To redress all these consequences, reparation is needed. Reparation not only for slavery, which is a crime against humanity, but for colonialism in general : no matter how tragic it was, slavery was a only a part of a whole history of colonialism imposed by Europe on the whole world. People of African Descent are entitled to ask reparation for many other aspects of colonialism, such as genocides, massacres, forced labour, deportation, colonial looting, exploitation, racism, etc.

But also, even after decolonisation happened, new forms of colonisation emerged. These phenomena also need to be adressed, such as post-colonial taxes, military interventions, coups, exploitation, land grabbing, financial imperialism, etc.

That is why the ERC advocates for all kinds of reparation. It is true that people who were killed cannot be brought back to life, but for the rest, many things can and have to be done. For a total damage, we demand a total reparation. It cannot be symbolical only, as the damage was not symbolical only. Moral reparation only would be totally immoral, it would be as a thief saying « I may apologise for the stolen car, but I shall not give it back to you ».

There are many ways to redress the wrongs that were done. Different people may have different views according to their needs. Some would like museums, education, fellowships, cultural projects. Others want agrarian reforms, financial support, restitutions or money. Some people speak of development, while others just want real policies against racism. All these views are perfectly legitimate, and all contribute to a total reparation. The ERC does not want to exclude any form of reparation, and thinks everybody is entitled to choose his or her demand according to his or her need.

All kinds of debate may exist about modalities, but we believe there cannot be any question about the principle of reparation, as reparation equals justice. There can be no peace without justice, and no justice without reparation. This is what the ERC does and will stand for.

Members of the ERC

Members of the European Reparation Commission can be both individuals and organisations.

Individuals may be academics, intellectuals, artists or celebrities, people who want to contribute to any kind of reflection or action about reparation.

Organisations can be associations, unions, think tanks, foundations, companies, any group that also want to contribute to the campaign.

Members of the ERC are not necessarily people who are European citizens, but they are people who have a particular interest in Europe.

Among the first individual are :

- Nathaniel Coleman, philosopher, University College of London (UK)
- Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, philosopher, University of Evry (France)
- Malaak Shabazz, daughter of Malcolm X, co-chair of the United Nations sub-commission for the elimination of racial discrimination (USA)
- Blaise Tchickaya, lawyer, special rapporteur of the African Union on reparation (Congo)
- Kenan Van De Mieroop, historian (Belgium)
- Françoise Vergès, politist, University of London, former president of the French National Committee for the Memory of Slavery (France)

Among the first organisations are :

- Colonialism Reparation (Italy)
- Comité d'organisation du 10 mai (France)
- Le CRAN (France)
- Fight Racism Now (Sweden)
- D'Hero Movement (Netherlands)
- Refioe (Belgium)
- Université populaire Kwame Nkrumah (France) etc.

Current activities

On an international level

-Members of the ERC brought in a resolution in the Social World Forum (Tunisia 2013) for the right to reparation, and for an international day for reparation. The resolution was voted and the day is October 12th. Members of the ERC still push the Forum to continue to work on that issue.

On a European level

-Advocacy to encourage other organisations (NGOs or State organisations) to include reparation in their agenda (Council of Europe, European Parliament, Fundamental Rights Agency, etc.),

-Advocacy for a resolution to have a European day of recognition for the victims of slavery and colonisation,

-Organisation of workshops and lectures on reparation, in several countries.

In France

In France, the ERC supports several initiatives such as :

-a trial against France and the « Banque des dépôts et consignations » that imposed a 21 billion dollar ransom on Haïti, from 1825 to 1946,

-a trial against France and the Spie-Batignolles group for their crime against humanity in Congo, while building the Congo-Océan railway (1921-1934),

-a trial against France and the French army about the Thiaroye massacre in Senegal (1944),

-a proposal of law on slavery reparation.

More information will be provided later about activities in other countries