

Reparations and regrets: Why is the US Senate apologising now?

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On Thursday 18 June 2009, the US Senate approved a resolution formally acknowledging the 'fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow laws' that enshrined racial segregation at the state- and local-level in the United States well into the 1960s.

Congress apologised 'to African-Americans on behalf of the people of the United States, for the wrongs committed against them and their ancestors who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow laws.' The apology also recommitted members of the US Senate 'to the principle that all people are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, call[ing] on all people of the United States to work toward eliminating racial prejudices, injustices, and discrimination from our society.'

The question however is why is the US Senate apologising at this time?

This article argues that the US government is afraid of the recreation of a second Bandung where the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America and African-Americans come together to break the powers of the former slaveholders.

OUTCOMES OF THE STRUGGLES OVER THE 2009 DURBAN REVIEW CONFERENCE

Is the US Senate apologising in 2009 because of the new wave of reparative claims by India (over Gandhi's glasses) and by China (over the bronze head) and the new activism on the part of Brazil? The government of Italy forced museums all over the USA to return looted artefacts. Africans are pressing UNESCO to support the return of looted cultural treasures. These global struggles for reparations should remind readers that the apology should not be read in isolation from a new moment in international politics.

The reparations movement among Africans is as old as the anti-slavery movement, but this movement has been growing in the past 20 years. The reparations movement continues to be a grassroots movement. So many of the present black leaders are compromised by their relationship to the former colonial powers, and so one cannot turn to governments to learn about this global movement. Moreover, as the late Pan-Africanist Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem argued in one of his statements on reparations, it is in the interests of the US government to see that there are no strong connections between the reparations movement in the United States and the reparations movement in Africa and in other parts of the pan-African world.

At the inter-governmental level in Africa, the former Organization of African Unity (OAU) Legal Committee for Reparations had been a vibrant force in exposing the criminal and genocidal actions of the colonial overlords. The OAU had established a group of eminent persons, headed by Chief Abiola of Nigeria. The imprisonment and derailing of the democratic process in Nigeria was linked to the fear of the Nigerian people's throwing their collective energies behind the reparations movement. Following the death of Abiola, the OAU committee of eminent persons on reparations became comatose. The African Union (AU) has not given the same measure of support to the eminent persons. Moreover, many European states have been opposed to the centralisation of reparations within the platform of the African Union.

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Hence within the pan-African world the main supporters for reparations at the state level have been from the states of Latin America and the Caribbean (Barbados, Brazil, Cuba and Venezuela). There are over 150 million African descendants in Latin America and these forces came into international prominence in the formation of the African descendant caucus at the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). These are the forces that provided a lot of pressure for the reconvening of the World Conference Against Racism through the Review Conference in Geneva in April 2009, which the US boycotted.

THE DURBAN MEETING 2001

The third World Conference Against Racism was held in Durban in 2001. This conference had agreed on language reflecting the mass support for the recognition of the transatlantic Slave Trade as a crime against humanity.

This was a great victory insofar as the caucus of Africans and African descendants had agreed on language relating to the three important points:

- The transatlantic Slave Trade, slavery and colonialism are crimes against humanity.
- Reparations due for Africans and African descendants.
- Recognition of the economic basis of racism.

These three points were studied and circulated widely throughout the African world before the meeting, and in the final declaration of the conference the language of the declaration reflected these positions. These points remain the core organising ideas within the pan-African movement for reparations. After September 11 2001, the US government and its propaganda apparatus used the scare of terrorism to close off debate on the question of reparations.

It was in light of the preparations of the peoples of African descent that the US and Britain intensified their cooperation to isolate and marginalise the discussion on reparations. It was also significant that, in the main, the European and North American Left never supported the reparations movement. The US went on a massive campaign to organise internationally to take the issue of reparations out of the agenda of the United Nations. Mary Robinson, the former president of Ireland, was forced out of her position at the UN Human Rights Commission because of her principled position in supporting the follow up to the WCAR.

The issues of Palestine, the Dalit in India, and the reparations question surfaced as major dividing points before the meeting and caused a sharp division between the countries that were formerly colonised and the countries of the EU and the USA. Time and space does not allow for the depth of the issues of Palestine, but it is important to note that the Palestinian question brought out more information on the real strength of the Israeli lobby in the United States.[1] The issue of the nature of the Israeli lobby in the United States again came to the fore in 2009 over the matter of US participation in the Durban Review Conference in Geneva.

THE DURBAN REVIEW CONFERENCE 2009

For every UN conference, whether on women, the environment or development, there had been a review after five years. Three of the five permanent members of the Security Council – the United States, Britain and France – opposed a review of the Durban conference. The supporters of the State of Israel within the US Congress mounted fierce opposition to the participation of the United States in the Review Conference. Regionally, Brazil and Cuba were supporting the Review Conference while in Africa, the South Africans supported this review. China and Russia were the two other firm supporters of the Review Conference. Western Europeans had always sought to set the agenda for the rest of the world and failing to set the anti-racist agenda, the leading members of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) boycotted the conference. In the US the boycott was premised on the basis of the supposed anti-Semitism of the final document of the Durban Review Conference.

The other 8 countries that boycotted could not put up this pretence.

This is what Samir Amin had to say about the reasons for the boycott of the Review Conference by the United States.

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'Durban I was a double failure for the NATO powers because their scheme was blocked both by the majority of countries from the South at the conference of Member States, and by the NGO Forum. At the main conference, most of the governments of the countries of the South defended the principle of international law that prohibits any unilateral foreign intervention, whatever the pretext. History has taught them the real reasons for these interventions, and the hypocrisy of the discourse on a "civilizing mission", now branded as "the defense of human rights". Events that have taken place since Durban I confirm the wisdom of their decision. The United Nations Charter only permits intervention when there is agreement from the Security Council and even then, places severe restrictions on their scope and duration. It has been systematically violated by the NATO powers which have granted themselves the right to decide unilaterally whether to intervene or not. After the invasion of Iraq, on pretexts that we know were completely unfounded, the NATO powers are understandably fearful about another "failure" at Durban II.'

Remarking on the global mobilisation that was manifest in the thousands of activists present in Durban, Amin added:

'The NGO Forum at Durban I was equally strong in its condemnation of foreign interventions in the affairs of countries of the South. In no way did they condone the crimes committed by governments against their own people; nor did they contest the absolute legitimacy of organized campaigns to denounce these crimes, and welcomed the support of people in the North in their shared struggle for democracy. However, the NGO Forum, quite rightly, maintained the distinction between the necessary expression of international solidarity among people and unilateral decisions to intervene taken by governments in the North. This is hardly surprising. The people of the South know from their experience of history that imperialist domination has always been a major obstacle to democracy. They know that the justification used to legitimize intervention – the "defense of democracy" – has only ever been put forward when the proposed intervention served the real objectives of imperialist domination. It is for the people of the South to assume responsibility in their own struggle towards liberation, democracy, and social progress.'

Samir Amin's position reflected the views and confidence of a new force that was rising in the countries that had supported the first Bandung meeting of Afro-Asian peoples. The fact that the Durban Review meeting took place in April and was successful, despite the press blackout by the Western news agencies, provided another diplomatic and propaganda setback for the United States.

On Tuesday 21 April 2009 it was announced that the outcomes document was adopted.

'High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said she was very happy to announce the great news that the outcome document of the Durban Review Conference was adopted by consensus today.

'Among the most valuable additional elements contained in this outcome document were: that it reinvigorated the political commitment to the implementation of the DDPA [Durban Declaration and Programme of Action]; it highlighted the increased suffering, since 2001, of many different sorts of victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and similar forms of intolerance; it identified, shared and disseminated some best practices in the fight against racism; it unequivocally reaffirmed the positive role of freedom of expression in the fight against racism, while also deploring derogatory stereotyping and stigmatization of people based on their religion or belief; and it launched a process that will examine how the prohibition of incitement to hatred, as reflected in Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, has been implemented in various parts of the world.'

The document reaffirmed 'the Durban Declaration Program of Action (DDPA), as it was adopted at the WCAR in 2001'.

This simple affirmation is important given the continuing campaign by Western countries who signed the DDPA in 2001 to revise history and eliminate the tremendous steps which the DDPA represented in setting the concrete framework for resolving racism.

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These steps include: the acknowledgment of the economic basis of racism; the declaration that the transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery were crimes against humanity; and that the descendants of those victims were due compensation (reparations).

Four basic directions emanated from this Review Conference in April 2009:

- A reaffirmation of the basic declaration of the Durban conference
- Strengthening of the units of the UN dedicated to combating racism
- Follow up support for peace and reconstruction in all parts of the world
- Strengthening international institutions that are central to anti-racism and social justice.

THE ISOLATION OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE COURT OF PUBLIC OPINION

After the WCAR in 2001 there had been a clear declaration that:

'Education content must serve to affirm and build people's destroyed dignity ... and there should be a review of the education curriculum so as to eliminate any elements that may promote racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance or reinforce negative stereotypes, including material that refutes such stereotypes.'

This was a tremendous task and the importance of this statement could be gauged from the tensions over the issue of the depiction of the Chinese in the Japanese history books. This challenge also struck at the national symbols of many former colonial states. Every former colonial state, whether Holland, Germany, France, Portugal, Spain and the United States, shudders at the implications of the acknowledgment of past crimes that were celebrated by their societies. In the particular case of Spain, the annual celebration of Christopher Columbus as a national hero on 12 October was called into question.

Throughout Latin America, the indigenous peoples recognised Columbus and the conquistadors as the initiators of the massive genocide in that region. For Britain, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, the colonial heroes and heroines were now being labelled as criminals.

THE DEMANDS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Indigenous peoples continued to make demands and organise to expose the crimes of genocide. Working pedantically over three generations, indigenous peoples have organised and lobbied the United Nations, until in September 2007, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

'The Declaration establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, well-being and rights of the world's indigenous peoples. The Declaration addresses both individual and collective rights; cultural rights and identity; rights to education, health, employment, language, and others. It outlaws discrimination against indigenous peoples and promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them. It also ensures their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own priorities in economic, social and cultural development. The Declaration explicitly encourages harmonious and cooperative relations between States and indigenous peoples.'

Characteristically, the USA voted against the resolution, as did Australia, Canada and New Zealand. These were all countries where the indigenous peoples suffered from acts of genocide and mass slaughter.

One of the troubling questions for the United States was that at the Durban Review Conference the Human Rights Commission in Geneva had agreed to support the African descendants caucus that it would support the call for the establishment of a permanent caucus for African descendants at the United Nations.

It is therefore not by accident that the apology of the US Senate comes in the same week of the meeting of the new global power, as manifest in the Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC) summit. The US government is working to ensure that the reparative claims of black Brazilians and African-

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Americans are not linked in a more serious and rigorous manner in the international arena. The apology by the US Senate is meant to silence the reparative claims of the grassroots reparations movement in the United States.

APOLOGIES ARE NOT ENOUGH

It is now important for the reparations movement to take the struggle to the next step so that the textbooks in the United States are rewritten to reflect this apology by the US Senate. In their short-sightedness, the members of the US Senate could only think about monetary compensation for the crimes of slavery, so attached to the apology was the rider that,

'Nothing in this resolution (a) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or (b) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.'

The one claim that must be made is that Social Studies textbooks in the United States now properly reflect this resolution so that there is a process to reverse the ideas and practices that supported enslavement. The US Senate followed the path of a non-binding apology by the Australian government. In 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a formal apology for the past wrongs caused by successive governments against the indigenous Aboriginal population. He apologised in parliament to all Aborigines for laws and policies that 'inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss'.

Rudd singled out the 'stolen generations' of thousands of children forcibly removed from their families. Yet so far there has been no concrete action to back up the words.

LESSONS FROM PAPAL APOLOGY

In the year of the Jubilee, Pope John Paul II apologised for the crimes of the Catholic Church at Sunday mass, March 2000. This was a solemn apology for the errors of the Roman Catholic Church over 2,000 years, especially for the Inquisition, the forced conversion of native peoples in Africa and Latin America, support for the crusades, and support for enslavement and other crimes. Yet there was nothing that the Catholic Church did to make this apology real in their day-to-day work. In fact, the Catholic Church has continued to stand in the path of the full rights for women, especially in relation to reproductive rights. This Church stands at the centre of a conservative movement to block the knowledge of modern science from being unleashed to support the health and well-being of humans. One lesson from the apology of the Pope is that apologies can be a cover for even more conservative actions and activities.

LESSONS FROM THE BELGIAN APOLOGY

In April 2000 the government of Belgium apologised to the people of Rwanda for the callous attitude of the government of Belgium at the time of the 1994 genocide. This same government has apologised for the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in January 1961. Yet these apologies can only make sense and be meaningful if the Belgian people are able to dismantle the whole economic, military and intellectual infrastructure that supported genocide and continue to provide justification for the criminal actions that were carried out by King Leopold II. Will the Belgian state rewrite the history of Belgian crimes?

The book 'King Leopold's Ghost' has moved the discussion of Belgian genocide in the Congo beyond the benign view that Leopold II was carrying out a Christian and humanitarian mission in Africa.

A NEW MOMENT IN HISTORY

The diminution of US military and economic power in the face of the capitalist depression places great weight on Africa insofar as every sector of the world views the human and natural resources of Africa as a central component in the recovery of the world economy. Far-sighted elements of US ruling circles now understand that the crude and racist tactics of the conservatives must be abandoned and a new benign approach to racism and imperial expansion must be adopted. The apology for slavery is one manifestation of this realisation that there is a new moment in world politics.

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Yet the apology has taken place without any real efforts to dismantle the modern day manifestations of enslavement, especially as they manifest themselves in the United States in the prison industrial complex.

The leaders of the African Union, in the main, have been compromised by their financial entanglements with the West. Others claim reparations but continue to reflect the same racist attitude of the Europeans. Colonel Gaddafi, as current chairperson of the African Union made reparative claims against Italy. The government of Italy has made a payment of US\$5 billion dollars. However, Gaddafi as the chairperson of the African Union refuses to take a clear stand against racism against fellow Africans by the Libyan state and meets in secret with the conservative Italian leadership to deny the free international movement of African workers.

The US Senate has taken a pre-emptive act to seek to curtail a full discussion of the outcomes of the Durban Review Conference. In February, Attorney General Holder called the US a 'nation of cowards' when it comes to discussing race. This cowardice was further demonstrated when the US government boycotted the Review Conference.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, has encouraged all nations to 'find common ground, we need to work together in good faith, with open minds and constructive thinking.'

The progressive forces in the international community must now support this call for common ground so that reparative justice assists humans to move to a new mode of politics out of this depression. In the long term, it will be important for the peoples of Africa, Latin America and China to build a new spirit of Bandung to break the political and military power of the imperial forces that carried out genocide in the name of progress.

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* Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org [3] or comment online at <http://www.pambazuka.org/> [4].

NOTES

[1] John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israeli Lobby and US. Foreign Policy*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2007

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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =
"//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appId=1465091963738031&version=v2.0";
fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));
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Article-Summary:

cc With the US Senate approving a resolution formally acknowledging the historic injustice behind slavery and the country's 'Jim Crow' laws on 18 June, Horace Campbell asks 'Why now?' Coming in the same week as a call for a new, multi-polar world order from the BRIC countries of Brazil, Russia, India and China, the timing of the apology from a US Senate edgy about the internati...[read more](#) [7]

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