

Relational Reparations: On the Promise of Post-National Repair

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Abstract:

In 2019 the European Union Parliament passed a resolution entitled “Fundamental Rights of People of African Descent in Europe,” which urged EU member states to adopt legislation focused on improving the condition of Black Europeans. The Resolution had as its explicit focus the reckoning and atoning for Europe’s involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and its crimes against Africa committed under European colonialism during the 19th and 20th centuries, and the enduring effects these systems have had on Europe’s Black population. In this paper I conclude that the Resolution falls short of achieving its stated objectives, in part due to the nationalistic way in which reparations have largely been defined and construed across Europe. This paper offers a post-nationalist critique of reparations policy in Europe, noting that the EU’s nation-state bounded conceptualization of reparations is limited in its ability to make legible the ways in which former geopolitical structures of power operated historically, making them only attentive to issues at home while failing to connect them to those beyond their borders. I argue that reparations which attempt to redress long-standing injustices between communities must embody three characteristics: (1) historicity, (2) transnationalism, and (3) post-coloniality. This paper proposes an alternative framework for conceptualizing reparations that is relational in nature and suggests that the restitution of cultural antiquities represents one way of constructing and executing a relational approach to reparative justice.

Keywords: Relationalism, reparations, restitution, imperialism, EU Parliament