

Claudia Rauhut, research project “Slavery Reparations in the Caribbean: Transregional Perspectives on Actors, Debates, and the Politics of History”

In this project, I analyse Caribbean claims for reparations for slavery and the dealing with the past in present public advocacy. It is based on ethnographic research and interviews I conducted with Jamaican scholars and professionals from universities, museums, and cultural institutions, as well as lawyers and human rights advocates, all members of the Jamaican National Council on Reparation. I analyse how they trace back the legacies of slavery and reparations, link them to current social conditions, and ultimately set a political agenda for reparations. It is primarily directed at the British government and includes material and symbolic dimensions as well as politics of memory and history.

Jamaican activists have always been at the forefront of reparations demands across the whole Americas in different regions and periods. They are part of the broader political campaign led by the CARICOM Reparations Commission, a transregional organization basically composed of civil society actors from Anglophone Caribbean States. Since 2013, this commission calls upon European governments as successor states of the colonial powers that invested in and profited from the slave trade and slavery. It urges them to recognize slavery as a crime against humanity, to apologize and to engage in measures of reparations for the long-term damages still affecting Caribbean societies, in particular the lives of people of African descent who in many countries represent the great majority of the population. Reparations are sought not as individual compensation, but as collective investments in infrastructure in areas of education, health, culture, or development.

My study highlights the agency of Jamaican scholars and activists in favour of reparations and identifies the economic, cultural, political, and epistemological dimensions of their agenda. As a crucial aspect, I examine how they reassess the compensation paid to British slave owners at the end of slavery in the 1830s and how they transform this archival evidence into a matter of contemporary redress. By analysing activists' deconstruction of the ambivalent relationship between slavery, law, and liberal norms, I focus on their critique of British politics of denial of responsibility for slavery and unwillingness to confront its legacies. This action is part of a broader epistemological challenge to historical narratives and political asymmetries that disconnect European capitalism, Western modernity, and liberalism from slavery and overlook the historical roots of global inequalities. Finally, by exploring transnational networks within the Anglophone Caribbean and beyond, including examples from my research in Cuba, I show how activists situate their agendas in the context of global-historical debates and demands for reparations. My study pursues a transregional approach and adds new empirical, regional, and theoretical insights to research on reparations that is often limited to the case of the United States. By analysing the narratives, arguments, networks, and arenas of action of those actors who advocate for reparations, it expands on an ethnographic basis the literature provided by legal scholarship, political science, and philosophy. It also contributes to the interdisciplinary field of research on restitution and redress of historical wrongs by including slavery and colonial-racial injustices and their long-lasting consequences, finally stimulating public and political debates on it.