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Historical Presents: Reparations for Slavery in the United States and France

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Many countries around the world have witnessed increasing calls for reparations for slavery coming from various groups within their own borders and abroad. Though slavery has existed in many times and places, and has taken several different forms throughout history, from antiquity until today, many of the recent calls for reparations have focused on the particular case of the Atlantic slave trade and slave labor in the new world. Pointing to the historical evidence of the main participants in this trade, they have targeted European countries, the United States and Brazil. The question of reparations raises a number of difficult issues about race and multiculturalism in contemporary democratic societies, the history of slavery, and the relation between temporality and justice. Studying reparations therefore warrants an interdisciplinary approach.

Historical Presents is an interdisciplinary study that attempts to bridge important discussions in three different fields: Atlantic History, the emergent scholarship around the politics of the past and of historical (in)justice and the philosophy of history. It employs methods of historical research drawn from comparative history and intellectual history to construct the first in-depth comparative study of the idea of reparations for slavery in France and the United States. Since in France, the reparations debates have only recently moved to center stage of public attention, little research on this phenomenon has been done

and my thesis is the first scholarly history of the reparations debates there. It then critically engages with the scholarship that has sought to study reparations under the rubric of the “politics of the past” by problematizing normative notions of temporality upon which much of this literature relies. The thesis brings an entirely new perspective to the study of reparations and the “politics of the past” by introducing of a new analytical category : the historical present. The historical present is the narratively configured moment of history in which “we” are said to be living; it is the result of positing oneself as a historical subject living in a particular epoch – it is thus a fundamentally historicist idea. But, I argue, it is also always a political category. Historical Presents play an important role in polities that is more than merely rhetorical : they join citizens together in what Benedict Anderson has called a “civic contemporaneity”, they serve as grounds for political agendas and are often institutionalized and enforced by law. Historical presents can be, and usually are, constructed differently by different individuals and groups and they are often highly ethnocentric – the present is established as a particular moment within the history of one group or nation. Disagreements, therefore, sometimes arise about the status of the historical present, and such debates can become extremely divisive. Nowhere is the contentious political character of historical presents more apparent than in the debate about reparations where one of the main points of contention is the adverse understanding of the current historical moment in which we currently live. In the United States, this debate about the historical present is sometimes referred to as the question of the (non) existence of the so-called “post-racial era”.