

Latin American Inequalities and Reparations

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Whatever our social differences and unequal relationships with each other, we all share a common humanity. We have the same basic six emotions—surprise, fear, disgust, anger, happiness, and sadness (Ekman and Friesen 2003). We all have a primal consciousness of ourselves as living beings (Damasio 2010). We all live on the same planet. We begin our life breathing in the air of the biosphere and our life ends when the breathing stops. We are all contemporaries. We all acquire a story that gives us a place in the world. When inequalities emerge as a result of violations of this common humanity, the only adequate response is to work at restoring everyone's place in the world and at repairing distorted relationships.

Let's remember that inequality, by definition, is a relational term. One cannot be unequal alone. To understand inequality is to understand relationships. This means that one cannot understand Latin America inequalities without understanding the relationships between Latin America and the continents of Africa, Europe, and North America. The reverse is also true: you cannot understand Africa, Europe, or North America without understanding Latin America. Or, to be more concrete: Just as you cannot understand Haiti without understanding France, you cannot understand

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France without understanding Haiti. If that is true, and I assume it is, then the ocean that connects these continents—the Atlantic—can be seen as the original context of Latin American inequalities. The triangular trade among Europe, Africa, and the Americas created this context, and as long as we ignore it, we will never fully grasp the background of our current situation, as well as what is necessary to change it.

As Europeans immigrated to the Americas, of course, unequal relations were transferred to American soil. The appropriation of American land by Euro-Americans was only limited by the lack of labour, a problem they solved by first enslaving native populations and later importing millions of enslaved Africans. Their wealth and their honour—wealth was honour—depended on the enslavement and stigmatizing of others. On the surface, their honour was based on their wealth. Under the surface, their wealth was based on the exploitation of others. We all know this, but many of us also share an economic narrative that omits this truth—the truth about capitalism and slavery.

CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY

The exploitation of labour and the appropriation of land began in Latin America almost two centuries before the publication of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. Many economists today, especially neoliberals who think within Smith's framework, rarely connect capitalism with slavery. And with good reason! Of the many contradictions we witness between fact and fiction, none are more telling than the contradiction between the small-town image commonly used to represent the essence of free enterprise and the real context of early capitalism—the Atlantic trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Here is the fiction:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. (Smith 1994, 15)

Such an image is not so difficult to imagine. Small shop owners provide different goods to each other, and the best way of doing this is for each to be guided by his or her self-interest, since in this intimate setting, it is certainly in one's self-interest to provide a good product at a good price. How nice that when we do what is best for us, it is best for everyone else.

The reality of commerce when Adam Smith was composing *The Wealth of Nations* was something else. The centre of this trade was not the town square, but the Atlantic Ocean, which Europeans used for the trafficking of millions of enslaved Africans to the Americas, who worked the land to produce products for Europeans. To complete the triangle, the Europeans sent other products, such as credit and guns, to Africa to buy more enslaved Africans. The “success” of early capitalism, in other words, depended not on individuals acting in their self-interest but rather a global system of buying and selling human beings as though they were no different than cattle.

Robin Blackburn estimates that of the 21 million Africans enslaved between 1700 and 1850, 9 million slaves were delivered to the Americas, 5 million were lost during the passage, and another 11 million were enslaved in Africa (Blackburn 1998). The numbers are astonishing. In fact, more Africans than Europeans lived in the Americas during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

Indeed, in every year from about the mid-sixteenth century to 1831, more Africans than Europeans quite likely came to the Americas, and not until the second wave of mass migration began in the 1880s did the sum of net European immigration start to match and then excel the cumulative influx from Africa.... In terms of immigration alone, then, America was an extension of Africa rather than Europe until late in the nineteenth century. (Bailey 1990, 377)

True, one finds slavery in earlier historical periods, but Atlantic-based slavery was unique. For the first time, slavery was an integral part of the global economy. Yes, the Romans and Greeks had many slaves, but people were enslaved mostly due to conquest. As Blackburn writes: “One might say that many Roman slaves were sold because they had been captured, while many African slaves entering the Atlantic trade had been captured so that they might be sold” (Blackburn 1998, 11).

In the commercial world of the Atlantic, slavery was an economic institution. As Klein and Vinson say in their book on African slavery in Latin America, “It was without question American labour market conditions that most influenced the growth of the Atlantic slave trade” (2007, 18). This conclusion has been carefully documented in Eric Williams’ book, *Capitalism and Slavery*. He traces the history of the plantations in the British West Indies from first using indigenous slaves and then indentured

servants brought from Europe. As the plantations grew and needed more labour, and as indentured servants heard of the high rate of deaths on the plantations and refused to volunteer to move to the Caribbean, there rose the need for another source of labour, and African slaves were chosen. The motive for enslaving Africans, Williams writes, “was economic, not racial; it had to do not with the colour of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor” (Williams 1994, 19). Only later, as whites became afraid of slave rebellions, did they begin to see Africans as racially inferior. As Williams says. “Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (7).

Although Williams’ work has not been included in the canon of contemporary economics, recent scholarship has confirmed what has become known as the Williams thesis; namely, slavery was essentially economic. Blackburn, for example, supports this thesis by describing how the sugar plantations in the West Indies were not just institutions of agriculture but also commercial institutions:

The plantation evidently belonged to the world of manufacture as much as to that of commercial agriculture. The plantation crops, especially sugar and indigo, required elaborate processing, and both permitted and required the intensive exploitation of labour On the productive side, the plantation required the coordinated and meticulously timed activities of between 10 and 300 workers. Specialist slaves, working long hours but receiving some small privileges, came to work in the responsible positions in the sugar works, as planters discovered that this was cheaper than hiring specialized employees. (Blackburn 1998, 333–334)

Plantations, in other words, were part and parcel of capitalism. They are actually great examples of how the division of labour increased productivity (much better than Smith’s example of the pin factory). Plantations, of course, entailed not only the exploitation of forced labour, but also the appropriation of land for commercial use. The plantations turned a living biotic community into a machine for producing commodities.

If mainstream economists had recognized the plantations as a major source of wealth creation in early capitalism, we might have had many more conversations about how the inequalities in capitalistic economies have their origin in the enslavement of people rather than some sort of “invisible hand.” Such inequalities—inequalities that are the result of violations of

our common humanity—raise questions about reparations. What should we do to bring some sort of commonality to relationships that are so radically out-of-balance? I think this question can direct us toward what we need to talk about not only in terms of repairing the past but also in terms of securing a future. Conversations about reparations in Latin America, of course, belong to the larger narratives about land reform.

LAND REFORM IN LATIN AMERICA

In the occupation and domination of Latin America, the Spanish and Portuguese granted large tracks of land to former Conquistadors and other favourites of the Crown as a reward for their efforts in gaining control over the Americas. In contrast to the policy of the United States, where indigenous people were removed from their homeland and finally forced to live on “reservations,” the policy in Latin America—*encomienda*—was much closer to old world feudalism: indigenous people remained on the land and paid tribute to the “owner.” This created a massive population of landless people and a small powerful elite. Policies of land reform were attempts to improve these unequal conditions.

Most Latin American governments engaged in some form of land reform in the twentieth century. Mexico led the way in the early decades and others followed, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. The reasons were multiple, but perhaps the one that received the most support from the United States was the idea that land reform would prevent revolutions like the one in Cuba. The Alliance for Progress (1961) organized by the Organization of American States persuaded most governments to engage in some kind of land reform. With globalization and the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s, progress in land reform was brought to a standstill (Teubal 2009). With the beginning of the twenty-first century, a majority of Latin American countries shifted to more leftist and populist governments—known as the Pink Tide—and although they improved the welfare of many people, they did not engage in a significant redistribution of land. Although land reform may not occupy Latin American politics now as much as it has in the past, it has led to the development of different principles than those of neoliberalism about the meaning of land and the rights of collectives.

TWO PRINCIPLES OF LAND REFORM

For most countries in Latin America, land is interpreted as having a social function. The French Jurist, Léon Duguit, first articulated this idea in 1919 (Ankersen and Ruppert 2006). He reasoned that since the purpose of the state was to provide for certain social needs, the state had an obligation to ensure that land was being used productively—that it was fulfilling its social function. This view of land, of course, differs from the liberal assumption voiced by John Locke that land belongs to its owner and the state's primary obligation is to protect the owner's right to control his/her property. As Ankersen and Ruppert point out, by the middle of the twentieth century, most Latin American countries had incorporated the Social Function Doctrine in their constitutions (99). This doctrine gave the state the right to confiscate lands that were not serving any social function and distribute it to landless people who would use it. In Brazil, the organized squatter movement—the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or MST—used the Social Function Doctrine to justify their occupation of large landholdings. In the past 30 years, MST has assisted over 350 thousand landless families to take unused land (Stedile 2002). Another group, the Workers Homeless Movement—*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* (MTST)—has carried out similar strategies as MST to fight for housing in urban areas. Both groups have focused on creating a place for landless and homeless people.

While the Social Function Doctrine has supported land reform, it has also had an unintended consequence. Landowners have cut down forests to make sure their land fulfils a social function through ranching. In response, governments are adding to the land's social function an ecological function. Land, in other words, is seen as belonging to both social and ecological systems.

Along with seeing land as having a social and ecological function, Latin American governments have also acknowledged the rights of collectives as well as individuals. In fact, the recognition of collective rights has now been affirmed by the United Nations. In the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, Article 26 states: "Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired."¹ As with the notion of the social function of land, the rights of indigenous peoples have not always been respected. Also, this principle is quite different from

a neoliberal view that only individuals have rights. Bettina Ng'weno's proposal that we think in terms of the rights to a territory highlights the difference between individual and collective control (Ng'weno 2007, 84). Individuals do not own territories, territories belong to groups, and the acknowledgement of collective rights gives them territorial rights.

The idea of reparations has not played a major role in most decisions about land reform, but the two principles of the social function of land and of collective rights provide a useful context for understanding current conversations about reparations.

Conversations About Reparations

Reparations differ somewhat from the task of redistributing land. Reparations involve not only compensating those who deserve it but also changing the relationships among the different parties. At the very least, those who benefited have to acknowledge that their gain depended on others' expense. But it goes deeper. It involves both sides in a process of reflection about how to live together. This means that we can see reparations not only as a process of making payments on past debts but also of transforming social relationships.

In 2001, the United Nations "World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and other Forms of Intolerance" called for the recognition of "the Black Holocausts (Slave trade/Slavery and Colonization) as Crimes Against Humanity" (Marable and Mullings 2001). On the issue of slavery and colonial responsibility, the NGO written document at this conference was direct and unequivocal:

We demand that the United States, Canada, and those European and Arab nations that participated in and benefited from the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade, the Trans-Sahara Slave Trade, the Trans-Indian Ocean Slave Trade, Slavery and the Colonization of Africa ... [as well as] ... the United Nations ... shall ... Ensure that ... all nations, groups and their members who are the victims of crimes against humanity based on race, colour, caste, descent, ethnicity or indigenous or national origin are provided reparations ... [including] ... Restitution ... encompassing the unconditional return of land ... Monetary compensation that will repair the victims, including Africa, Africans and African descendants, by closing the economic gap created by these crimes...²

This is a serious challenge. We now turn to two countries—Brazil and Haiti—that have taken up the question of reparations. In Brazil, the descendants of what are called Quilombo communities—communities founded by escaped slaves—are petitioning for the return of their ancestors’ land. In Haiti, people are demanding compensation for the billions of dollars they paid France since gaining their independence in 1804. As we shall see, both stories demonstrate an intriguing link between freedom and land. First, the story of the Quilombo movement in Brazil.

QUILOMBO COMMUNITIES

The term “Quilombo” refers to communities of runaway slaves in the sixteenth century. Such communities, of various numbers, dotted the Brazilian countryside in the seventeenth century. The most famous, Palmares, in Northern Brazil, grew to more than 15,000 inhabitants before the Portuguese destroyed it in 1694. Palmares survivors are only one of many such communities that continue to exist today. Almost 100 years after the abolition of slavery, in 1986, Benedita da Silva, a member of Congress, convinced the body of lawmakers to pass legislation that recognized the right of the Quilombo communities to a legal title to their ancestors’ land. Rogue Plantas has suggested that carrying out this policy could be the world’s largest slavery reparation programme (Plantas 2014).

In 2003, the government officially defined a Quilombo community as a “self-identified, ethno-racial group with their own historical trajectory, a specific relationship to the land, and the presumption of a black ancestry connected to forms of resistance to historical oppression” (Farfán-Santos 2016).

The government policy was to grant land title to Afro-Brazilian communities that could demonstrate they were a Quilombo community—their memory and experience could match the government’s definition. In her book on the Quilombo communities, Elizabeth Farfán-Santos describes many of the difficulties black communities had in bridging the gap between their everyday experiences of struggling to make a living in extremely adverse conditions and this official description (2016). Also, the process of being recognized as a Quilombo community took years of moving through the government’s bureaucracy. These difficulties were largely due to treating Afro-Brazilian communities as ethnic minorities.

As ethnic minorities, the Quilombo communities enjoyed the same collective rights as Brazil's indigenous groups. They have a right to their own culture and ways of living. At the same time, as Farfán-Santos points out, treating Quilombo communities as ethnic groups also has its drawbacks: it failed to recognize the social structures of anti-black violence and inequality. As she says:

Cultural recognition grants black and indigenous communities the right to difference, even self-identification, without necessarily changing the unequal structural distribution of rights. (Farfán-Santos 2016, 45)

Here we see a separation of land rights and social rights, when in fact they are closely related. Perhaps omitting the question of social relations accounts for the fact that of the more than 2400 communities that identified as Quilombo communities, less than 220 have received land titles (Thomas 2016). Still, we should not discount the meaning of a land title for those communities that now enjoy the right to their land.

Securing the right to land, although not the end of a larger battle, symbolizes more than just a property title; it signifies the recognition of a life that is intimately, emotionally, and physically intertwined with the land, without which quilombolas would be left without a home but, more importantly, without a sense of life security and belonging. (Farfán-Santos 2016, 145)

So the securing of a land title could be seen as the first step toward changing social relations. The prospect for further progress, however, has dimmed considerably since the current Temer government has closed the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), which was responsible for reviewing applications from Quilombo communities. The government placed its titling function under the Ministry of Education, headed by a party leader opposed to recognizing Quilombo rights (Bledsoe 2016). Still, the claim for reparations has been recognized and in time it may once again receive consideration.

If reparations simply meant payment for a debt, one could imagine the Quilombo descendants asking for money instead of land. If land is merely a commodity, as neoliberals assume, then one could use the land market to settle on the payment. We totally miss the point, however, when we take this stance. For the Quilombo communities, land is their habitat—a living place. As Farfán-Santos points out:

Thus quilombolas desire the freedom and legal right to work in the man-groves, plant manioc, and live from the forest; however, they want to do these things within a secure space where they can build a future for their children without the constant fear that it might be taken away. (Farfán-Santos 2016, 50)

These desires match the doctrines of the social and ecological functions of land and even expand them by recognizing that having a title to land can provide a secure place. The failure of the current Brazilian government to respond to the demands for land titles is a form of renegeing on these principles. How significant are these principles? One can see them as expressions of a deeper truth—the close connection between the right to freedom and the right to land. To explore this connection we turn to the story of Haiti.

THE STORY OF HAITI

A number of events are central to the story of how the French colony of St. Domingue became Haiti—the first and only successful worker’s revolution in the Americas. Spain granted France a portion of the island of Hispaniola in 1697, which became the major Caribbean supplier of sugar. In the 1780s, St. Domingue accounted for 30 per cent of the world’s total sugar production (Klein and Vinson 2007). The colony’s mountainous regions were just as fruitful as a source for coffee as the northern plains were for sugar. In stark contrast to our image of Haiti today, during its colonial period, it was extremely productive for the white planters.

Whites, however, were a very small minority of the total population. At the end of the eighteenth century, blacks outnumbered whites 10 to 1. Joan Dayan quotes the figures of Moreau de Saint-Mery, who gives the numbers of 40,000 whites, 28,000 free coloureds, and 452,000 slaves (Dayan 1998, 146). The whites included the descendants of “buccaneers, filibusters, and nobles,” as well as European settlers and American Creoles. The free coloureds included slaves who had bought their freedom, slaves who were freed by their owners, and runaway slaves. The almost 500,000 blacks were primarily from Bight of Benin and West Central Africa, with smaller populations from such places as Senegambia and Sierra Leone (Manning 2009).

Following the French Revolution, the French in Paris debated what rights should be granted to the different groups in the French colonies. The white plantation owners sought the recognition of their rights, but not that of the free coloureds and of course not the slaves. That, after all,

was the model provided by the United States' revolt against the British. In Haiti, however, the slaves also revolted against their masters and eventually against the French. Perhaps the most dramatic event was the meeting in 1791 organized by Dutty Boukman, a voodoo priest.

From the number of slaves involved and the coordination that took place, the August 20 meeting must have been just one of the many such gatherings and only the final session of what was a well-planned movement with a close tie to the secret African cults. On the first night a large number of the island's best sugar plantations were put to the torch and in the next several days the island's richest plantation region, the Northern Plain was destroyed. (Klein and Vinson 2007, 186)

In 1802, Boukman was killed and Toussaint Louverture emerged as the leader of the rebel slaves. Louverture brought together disparate forces—the Spanish forces on the island and pro-royalist Frenchmen—and tried to revive the plantation sugar economy but was not successful in persuading the freed workers to leave the land they had occupied during the revolution and return to the plantation as wage earners. Without workers, of course, the economy was at a standstill. The French government plotted to replace Louverture and reinstitute slavery. Louverture was taken to France. A new revolutionary leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, organized an army of ex-slaves to fight against the French and forced them to leave the island. Haiti became an independent republic in January 1804.

The Haitian successful revolutionary war reverberated throughout the Americas and Europe. There is evidence that the German philosopher, Hegel, had the Haitian revolution in mind when he wrote his famous piece of master and slave relationships in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Buck-Morss 2009). At the time, the United States viewed a free nation of blacks as a threat to its prosperity, which was largely dependent on the labour of its enslaved population. It stopped trading with Haiti after their revolution and did not recognize it as a nation until 1863, following Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that freed the enslaved people of the United States (Wesley 1917).

For the Haitians, however, freedom was not only about the relationships between master and slave but also about the relationship with the land. The Constitution of 1805, declared that “no white, whatever his nation, could set foot on the territory of Haiti as master or owner of property” (Dayan 1998, 24). For Dessalines, it seems that freeing the Haitian

land from foreign ownership was part and parcel of freeing the Haitian people from slavery. No better evidence of the importance of land for Haitians than the following lines from their national anthem:

For Haiti in the name of the Ancestors
 We must toil, we must sow
 It is in the soil, that all our strength seats
 It is it that feeds us
 Let us toil the soil, let us toil the soil
 Joyfully, may the land be fertile
 Mow, water, men like women
 Must we come to live only by our arms' strength.³

At the same time, we should not underestimate how offensive white people must have found Dessalines' position that they could not own land in Haiti. The French plantation owners, in any case, did not ask for compensation for losing their slaves, but for losing the income from the appropriation of Haitian land. In 1825, with gunboats in the Haiti harbour, the French required compensation for the land in exchange for recognition of Haiti as a sovereign republic. The French demanded 150 million francs, which was reduced to 90 million in 1838, comparable to \$40 billion as of 2010. The amount was calculated on the estimated value of the revenues generated by the plantations in 1789, which was determined by taking the Haitian exports in 1823 of 30 million francs over ten years (300 million francs) at 50 per cent profit, which came to 150 million francs (Dupuy 2015). Behind the math, of course, was the political intent to bury Haiti in debt. The response of the French government seems to have been that if whites could not own land, at least they could keep the Haitians so poor they could not prosper from it. The debt was twice what France received from the United States for the Louisiana Purchase, which was ten times the land mass. Haiti made regular payments on the debt plus interest for close to 60 years until 1883 (Popkin 2012). To finally pay off the French, Haiti borrowed from US banks, and only in 1947 were they out from under burdensome loan payments. So Haiti remains poor after paying France and the United States millions of dollars on a loan to compensate French slaveholders for losing their land.

The massive debt was not the only burden Western nations—especially the United States—placed on the people of Haiti. The United States refused to recognize or trade with Haiti until 1863. In 1915, the United States occupied Haiti and stayed until 1934. During that time, they collected

taxes, controlled customs, and ran many government institutions. Also, the US occupation facilitated the transfer of millions of hectares of land from the Haitian people to foreign companies. As Dupuy points out, from the time of the revolution to the US occupation, Haitians had refused to leave the lands they had acquired to become dependent on plantation wages. Even though they remained poor during this period, they were not desperate. Not unlike the enclosure movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe that produced the first population dependent on wages for survival, the US occupation brought about what Dupuy called the “proletarianisation of the peasants” (Dupuy 2015). More recently, this process has been accelerated by the World Bank and other international financial institutions to make Haiti a source for cheap labour in the global market.

In short, though ostensibly designed to alleviate poverty by stimulating sustainable economic growth, the policies of the Bank and the other IFIs in fact maintained Haiti’s position in the international division of labor as a supplier of cheap labor for foreign capital (96).

These neoliberal policies have taken their toll not only on the Haitian people but also on the land. Once land is nothing but a commodity, it no longer functions as a place for security—it has lost its social function.

As Philippe Girard points out in his book on Haiti, blaming foreign powers for Haiti’s problems leaves out its own mistakes and failures, especially the failures of governance and the cycles of violence (Girard 2010). Still, its indebtedness to Western powers for most of its history has certainly played a significant role. In 2003, Haiti demanded reparations, in the form of debt restitution, which was calculated around \$21.7 billion. Although the French parliament did declare that the slave trade was a crime against humanity in 2001, they rejected the lawsuit (Lves 2013).

If we compare the stories of the Quilombo communities’ demand for reparation and Haiti’s call for restitution, they are both about land and recognition, but they are also quite different. The Quilombo communities want title to land, which would give them security in living their own lives. This would improve their situation, but it would not necessarily bring about a more balanced relationship between Afro-Brazilians and White-Brazilians. That would be a second step. Haiti, on the other hand, has not asked for a restoration of its land. It seems to have discarded the early Haitian principle that whites would never again own Haitian land. What if they had demanded that their land be restored so they could achieve food

sovereignty—so they could provide for themselves? That might have been a first step toward a more balanced relationship between Haitians and the International community?

Remember the principle I proposed earlier: If you cannot understand Haiti without understanding France, then you cannot understand France without understanding Haiti? The refusal to make restitution for Haiti's debt seems to violate this principle. So, what would one have to assume to agree with France's refusal to make restitution? The following assumptions come to mind:

- Past actions do not affect future possibilities
- We can divorce our future from the future of others
- Haiti is not part of our global community
- Haiti does not exist

These are my assumptions, of course, but they seem to follow from the refusal to engage in a conversation about reparations. They not only contradict the principle that inequality is always a relationship among different parties—one cannot be unequal alone—but they also fail to recognize the common humanity that the French and Haitian people share. What would happen if we begin the conversation about reparations on the basis for our common humanity instead of our social differences? If we begin with the recognition that we all belong to the earth, then land would not be defined primarily as someone's private property, but as a habitat for human and non-human communities. One terminology that would allow us to think together from such the perspective of a common humanity would be to speak of land as a commons.

LAND AS A COMMONS

Although the idea of land as a commons is not directly linked to the Brazilian notions of the social and ecological functions of land, it is also not that far afield. It is certainly much closer than the neoliberal idea that land is nothing but a commodity. Land as a commons is also close to the views of many Native American and African cultures.

Land was treated as a commons even in Europe before the enclosure movements at the beginning of the modern period. This all changed with the rise of our modern commercial society, and it has changed even more with the rise of modern cities. In cities today, the value of land depends not only on its use but also on its location.

Through analysis of how land values change in cities, the early twentieth-century economist, Henry George, developed a creative link between the more traditional view of land as a commons and the modern view of land as location. He begins with the idea that land is a source of wealth.

Wealth, then, may be defined as natural products that have been secured, moved, combined, separated, or in other ways modified by human exertion to fit them for the gratification of human desires. (George 2010, 42)

The term “natural products” refers to land in the ordinary sense as the ground we walk on. George’s definition may seem rather limited today, when we speak of many different kinds of wealth, but let’s stay with his focus on the production and distribution of natural products. From this perspective, we can easily notice not only that land can be cultivated to produce goods for use and exchange, but also that land itself acquires value as property. The owners of land, in other words, not only receive rent from the land’s productivity but also from its increased value as property. This increase in value depends largely on the land’s location, and as that location increases in value so does the wealth of the owners. At the same time, those who do not own land see their expenses rise. As this trend continues, so does the inequality between those who own land and those who do not. George draws the following conclusion: “The great cause of inequality in the distribution of wealth is inequality in the ownership of land” (2010, 163).

Let’s compare two empty lots in Rio: one in a favela and the other in an affluent neighbourhood. If both were assigned their market value, the two lots would have very different prices. Could there be any other reason for this difference than their different locations? I don’t think so. It was not the owner, in other words, that caused the higher value of the lot in the affluent neighbourhood, but rather the city’s social structures. Since social conditions caused this difference, George argues that the extra rent received from selling the lot in the affluent neighbourhood should be returned to society, probably through taxes (see Costa in this volume for a discussion of the Brazilian tax system).

If rent were taken by the state in taxes, then land would really be common property—no matter in whose name or in what parcels it was held. Every member of the community would participate in the advantages of ownership. (George 2010, 224)

This seems to make sense. As members of a city, we could all enjoy the benefits of the increased value of city properties. Our collective rights would entail rights to share in the city's growth and prosperity. Such a view of a city would certainly oppose the liberal view of private property, but it would not necessarily eliminate the ownership of property. It would simply change its meaning.

THE MEANING OF OWNERSHIP

In a credit-based market economy, owning property is important. As the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto has pointed out, people may have assets, but if they do not have a legal title to them, these assets will not count as “property” (De Soto 2000). De Soto has tried to get governments in South America to give property titles to people living in buildings they have built on the edges of cities so they could use them as collateral for obtaining credit, as well as other benefits. Such a title, however, is not based on possession, but rather on the law.

The crucial point to understand is that property is not a physical thing that can be photographed or mapped. Property is not a primary quality of assets but the legal expression of an economically meaningful consensus about assets. Law is the instrument that fixes and realizes capital. In the West, the law is less concerned with representing the physical reality of buildings or real estate than with providing a process or rules that will allow society to extract potential surplus value from those assets. Property is not the assets themselves but a consensus between people as to how those assets should be held, used, and exchanged. (De Soto 2000, 157)

If we agree with de Soto, then belonging to a civic community—a community of law—is the first step toward owning property. Possession by itself, in other words, is not enough. Legal title is also necessary. This explains the Quilombo movements drive for acquiring a legal title of land they already occupy. Still, we need to remember that property is a legal creation. Land is not. Law is something like a map, which is never the same as the territory. The territory belongs to all inhabitants. This is George's view of land as a commons:

The equal right of all people to the use of land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air—a right proclaimed by the very fact of their existence. (George 2010, 187)

Treating land as a commons does not mean, for George, that we try to give each person his or her share of land, but rather that each person should have a share of the land's wealth. So let owners own their property, but when the land value increases because of social trends, that increase in value should be shared. A person's right to property, in other words, exists within, and is limited by, the collective rights of all city members to share in the prosperity of their city. The city, in other words, should be treated as a territory. We belong to it and it belongs to all of us.

When the Europeans crossed the Atlantic, they approached the "new" land as something they could own and treat as they wanted, much like they believed that they could own people and treat them as they wanted. Neoliberalism has similar assumptions. We know they were wrong on both counts, and we now live with the consequences of these mistakes. The question is whether reparations can correct them.

INEQUALITY AND REPARATIONS

We need to remember that inequality has two sides: some receive less than they deserve and some receive more than they deserve. As long as we focus only on those who deserve more—on the poor—we have limited our options. Henry George reminds us that when people receive more than they deserve—unearned income—they should not be able to keep it. It should be returned to the community that created the increase. In a city, the increase and decrease in land values—real estate—depends mostly on the city's policies on granting titles, establishing taxes, police protection, and so on. Given the role of white privilege in determining such policies, one can understand that cities today not only reflect inequality among citizens but also perpetuate it.

Reparation requires more than increasing the welfare of the poor and homeless. It also requires the repair of human relationships. What this repair will entail remains to be seen. It will depend on who becomes involved in the struggles for justice and equality. What we do know is that the story of economics that we have inherited from Adam Smith prevents us from even recognizing the inequality created and maintained by capitalism. Smithian economics blocks out from view the violations of our common humanity that are the basis of its success. If we want to move our societies toward equality, we will need to first acknowledge our common humanity and from that perspective work on policies that will create more just social relations.

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NOTES

1. <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples-1>.
2. <http://www.africanfilmny.org/2014/a-report-on-the-world-conference-against-racism-racial-discrimination-xenophobia-and-related-intolerance-2/>.
3. <http://www.hougansydney.com/haiti-national-anthem.php>.

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