

# Considering reparations from slavery



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According to Beckles (2013), “ In history it is the influence who have received reparations. The weak merely talks about it” (p. 147). In his book, *Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Slavery and Native Genocide* Hilary Beckles helps us to understand the indigenous genocide, the transatlantic slave trade, the institution of slavery carried out in the Caribbean and the challenge the Caribbean face to achieve reparations. It provides a formidable argument for reparation to the Caribbean. The book is divided into two parts. The first part, Beckles (2013) discusses the brutal and oppressive nature of the institution of slavery in the Caribbean, the wealth created by the system of slavery and the importance of reparation as a “ legal, political and moral right” (p. 2). The second part, examines the advocacy of reparations, based on historical and international human rights law, and creates a succinct argument in favor of reparations. *Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Slavery and Native Genocide* was also written as an anticolonial response to Britain’s government affirmation, during the United Nations 2001 World Conference in Durban, South Africa, that historic crimes, slavery and indigenous genocide, committed were not crimes against humanity at the time they were practiced. This paper aims to summarize the book *Britain’s Black Debt: Reparations for Slavery and Native Genocide* based on circumstances mentioned above.

Beckles (2013) defines “ reparations as justice” (p. 1) that compensates the descendants of enslaved Africans and indigenous natives, for crimes against the humanity of enslaved Africans during slavery and colonization. Chapter one establishes the principles and politics associated to reparations and the significance of reparations. The slave trade and capital accumulation

obtained from African enslavement fueled Europe's economic growth from the 1600s to the mid 1800s, as described in chapter 7 'Criminal Enrichment: Building Britain with Slavery' (p. 82-108). In tabulating wealth accumulation in the Caribbean and British cities, Beckles (2013) revealed that Barbados in the 1600s "was worth more to England than all the American colonies combined," (p. 91). He also showed projected loss of life, one million Africans, to place emphasis on the number of Africans that died, during eighteenth century, while producing the profits that fueled British economic development during the Industrial Revolution.

Crimes committed by Europeans on Africans had permanent "and damaging effects in the psychological, material and social conditions of those victimized and on generations of their progeny" (p. 11). Central to the Caribbean reparation's movement are 'meritorious claims' that must be fulfilled based on three influential, but ambiguous, criteria suggested by Mari Matsuda. These typologies are as follows: the injustice must be documented, the victims must be identifiable as distinct groups, and the current members of the group must continue to suffer harm (p. 14). Beckles (2013) provides several circumstances of experiences that shows request for apology for enslavement in which Britain could adapt as a way forward to repair the damage made by past ancestors. Once such instance was that of former president F. W. de Klerk apologized for the millions of black citizens who died in the South African Apartheid (p. 12). However, the legal difference between issuing an apology and a statement of regret (p. 17) provides a partial answer for the British government's decision to issue a statement of regret for enslavement as opposed to an apology at the Durban Conference.

Politicized racism, another reason for the British government to issue a statement of regret, provided legal grounds for chattel slavery to confine “blacks as the only racial group for lifelong property status” (p. 18). He argues. “First, they globalized the trade so that, by the eighteenth century, they were the largest shippers; second, they produced the most abundant body of writing that established, within the intellectual and social consciousness of the world, the racist philosophy that African people were not entitled to the freedom they cherished” (p. 39). In chapter 1, one can also see where Beckles attempts to justify the demand for reparative justice as a mean to redress ‘historic wrongs’, as defined by the Permanent Court of International Justice (p. 13) and by Britain acknowledging and accounting for those wrongs (p. 23).

Established systems of racism and capitalism provided grounds for Africans to be treated as “sub-human.” In the second chapter – *Exterminate the Savages*, illustrates how the European conquest led to the annihilation of the ‘savage’ indigenous population when British settlers were met with resistance during colonization. The indigenous people naturally had the right to defend themselves and their land. Unfortunately, this resulted in them being branded as savages and the population almost becoming extinct throughout the Caribbean. British settlers used advanced military power to kill the indigenous people and captured their land for use as an economic base for slave plantations. Native genocide led to labor shortage on the plantation and in order to fill the shortage Africans were imported from the continent to work on the plantation (p. 26-7).

Subsequent chapters in part one of the book, demonstrates the various crimes, from the execution of African chiefs to sexual exploitation of women to tossing slaves into the ocean, made during conquest and shipment of Africans through the ' Middle Passage' to the Caribbean. Beckles (2013) also described the inhumane crimes committed on the plantation. These constituted torture, and physical punishment that followed by death. Slaves, for instance, would be " branded with hot iron, have their noses slit and be dismembered" (p. 61) once found guilty by slave owners. British civilizing mission was justified by the Christian church which increased public support of these crime (p. 39). Royal companies were invested in the sale of ' Black Gold' to maintain their status quo as royalty (p. 42). The commodification of Black bodies was a lucrative business that attracted higher cost than other commodities such as machinery, livestock and land (p. 69).

Enslaved Africans were considered " property" to slave owners, and had no any legal right to family life, leisure time or religion because they were considered an inferior specie (p. 65). The British law also denied enslaved women humanity status making her susceptible to sexual abuse, rape, and forced reproduction as sexual objects (76-77) on the plantation. Black women were encouraged to reproduce by engaging in prostitution. High birth rates meant high income for plantation owners and the families who bought the child of the enslaved women (p. 78-79). The British banking system also benefitted from slavery (p. 137-39), in the sense that they were giving loans to slave owners and accepted slaves as guarantee for keeping their profit.

Additionally, chapters like *Chapter 5: The Zong Massacre*, *Chapter 8: Dividends from the Devil* and *Chapter 9: Earls of Harwood* provides details in <https://assignbuster.com/considering-reparations-from-slavery/>

showing the connection between slavery to British imperialist culture. The Zong Massacre in 1781, represents a case where hundreds of Africans were tossed at sea, alive, in order for investors to make a claim and receive monetary compensation on the lives of black bodies. Investors were only able to receive compensation if enslaved Africans died while on board the ships (p. 72-3), like the Zong slave trade ship which was on route to Jamaica. *Dividends from the Devil* assesses the role of the Church of England in buying and selling enslaved Africans and how they acquired wealth from operating, inhumane sugar plantations.

Beckles (2013) argues that the Church plantations “ were places of death without redemption,” (p. 114). and “ had no intentions of allowing Christianity to get in the way of running its sugar plantations at a profit” (p. 114). The Church became “ the official theological voice that Africans were subhuman and not deserving of social recognition within the human family” (p. 119). To this end, Beckles (2013) was condemning the Church who, not only capitalized from the system but facilitated the enslavement of Africans through its teachings of Christianity. *Earls of Harwood* concentrated on the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Harewood, Queen Elizabeth II first cousin, and how the slave trade and the institution of slavery was a vehicle for improving the status quo of the family - from merchant class to royalty. A close examination of this family, links shifting class dynamics and wealth between slavery and present.

In the final *Chapter 11: Twenty Million Pounds* of part one in the book, highlights the reparatory payment, of £20, 000, 000, made by British government in 1838 to slave owners in the Caribbean upon freedom of

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enslaved Africans and ending to the slave trade. This is justified today as the largest compensation made in British history (p. 143-4). The British officials decided who was eligible for compensation (p. 154). Banks that acted as trustees for beneficiaries of family fortunes built on slave labor, collected compensation for slaves lost by their beneficiaries (p. 156-7). As Beckles (2013) posits, "slavery was profitable until the very end" (p. 159). He criticized the racist outlook of the mass media, intellectual classes and political leaders who used payout to slave owners as justification for ending slavery (p. 154). Enslaved Africans freed in the 1830s received no compensation from the British government for the generations slavery although abolitionist laws recognized them as human. For Beckles (2013), this "was the greatest crime committed by the British state against the African people" (159).

The second part of the book shifts from history to advocacy for reparations in the twentieth century and the challenges the Caribbean movement faced. Chapter 12: *The Case for Reparations* presents a case based on the slave system and economic rape of the Caribbean which is "the causal link between the crimes of slavery and the ongoing harm and injury to descendants is everywhere to be found in the Caribbean" (p. 1). Beckles (2013) argues that "These crimes against humanity have not been answered by the British state and its supporting institutions" (p. 166). He maintains that "They all have a reparations case to answer. The British state must take legal, political and moral ownership of these crimes as the body invested with collective, continual responsibility for the wealth of the nation" (p. 166). Some of the cases made for reparatory justice to the British

government were: the 400 years of exploitation of Afro-Caribbean people under the institution of slavery (p. 164-5); Britain's development and the expansion of British colonies – East Indies, Africa and Australia – at the expense of the Caribbean plunder (p. 166); the destruction of African governments as a result of slavery (p. 168). From this, one can see that the main issue with the case of reparation was about morality and politics (p. 170).

Chapter 13, *Sold in Africa: The United Nations and the Reparations in Durban* begins with the 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism, Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa and shows the disunity of Africans in global Africa. Beckles (2013) was the coordinator and spokesman for the Caribbean delegates for the Durban Conference, described how tense the atmosphere at Durban was as countries allied with each other based on their political interest. European and American delegates even threatened to leave the conference unless the idea of reparation was removed from the agenda. Beckles also examined the role of pan-Africanist Chief Moshood Abiola who brought the reparation movement to the global stage at the Abuja summit. This made him unpopular among Western political circles (p. 179). The focus of the conference was to encourage unity in order to repair the damage of the historic injustices presented.

However, there was clear division, particularly among the Africans, at the Durban conference because of the politicization of the reparation. The European and Western blocs presented their own draft agenda that excluded the topic of reparation. The Senegalese President Wade present The Gorée



Initiative, a new African Initiative, which “ called for the establishment of an International Compensation scheme for the victims of the slave trade and Development for Reparation Fund...” (p. 186). However, his language and concepts offended many. (p. 186-8). The chapter also focuses on the Britain’s refusal to recognize the claim for reparations. Given the significant amount of evidence presented by Caribbean delegates, according to Beckles (2013) Britain government refused to acknowledge the historic injustices presented (p. 174-5) and refused to take responsibility for those past injustice. The refusal to recognize the claim to reparations is as a result of the British government not wanting to accept the legal implications for its hand in Caribbean slavery. Like other western European government, the British government argues that slavery at the time was not a violation of international laws.

Beckles further discusses the issue of reparation and apology in Chapter 14 *British Policy: No apology, No reparation*. In this chapter, Beckles demonstrates how the British delegates remained unmoved about reparatory justice for the historic crimes they committed against humanity. The British government’s argument that “ it was a long time ago” was relegated by Beckles outlining how the then British government “ replaced slavery with apartheid and declared its view that blacks should remain subordinate to whites as a model of post slavery colonial reality” (p. 196). Despite this, the British government under Blair issued a ‘ statement of regret’ as opposed to an apology at the Durban conference. Beckles alludes to other instances where Britain apologizes for other injustices committed against other people, for instances the Maori people of New Zealand who were massacred in

1860s. He concludes “ apologies stopped when it came to African people” (p. 199). He further posits that no other race was exposed to such intense racism and inhumanity on a global scale during colonialism and slavery.

In the final chapter, *The Caribbean Reparations Movement*, Beckles (2013) argues that Caribbean countries should be relentless in their argument to the global audience that crimes against humanity was a main contributor to the economic development of the current British government. He also contests the argument on the British side that West African leaders were equal participants in the slave trade. Beckles demonstrates the conspiracy behind reparation and connects reparation to the harassment of people who directly makes the claim. Though Beckles (2013) acknowledged the response from the French government under Jacques Chirac to apologize the Haiti in Durban. He conversely, shows how Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide demands of a US \$21 billion reparations ended with his removal from office. He also mentioned how after winning the election, Chief Moshood Abiola was not able to govern Nigeria because of a military overthrow organized by Britain. Beckles (2013) explains that the responsibilities of the Caribbean Reparation Commission as the regional vehicle for negotiation.

To conclude, as Beckles (2013) states more work needs to be done to make the case for reparations since “ Historical truth counted for very little” for the reparation movement in the twenty-first century (p. 195). Caribbean states should plan for political mobilization to revolutionize the consciousness of the Caribbean people economically, vocationally and educationally. The Caribbean reparations movement has already been mobilized, as clearly outlined in the final chapter p. (211-29). In fact, a recent article published on <https://assignbuster.com/considering-reparations-from-slavery/>

November 25 2018 in the Jamaican Sunday Gleaner entitled *UPDATED: Glasgow University to pay reparations for £200m extracted from the region* speaks to a reparatory victory in the Caribbean. This alludes Beckles (2013) statement that “ In history it is the influence who have received reparations. The weak merely talks about it” (p. 147).

### Bibliography

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