Hilary McD. Beckles

*Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide.*


Hilary Beckles has written a forceful, lucid, and detailed historical argument to support a claim for reparations by the British government to Caribbean nations. The call for reparations is a response to crimes against humanity committed by Britain, specifically the genocide against the indigenous populations of its former Caribbean colonies and the enslavement and trading of millions of Africans over hundreds of years. The work proceeds in two parts, history and advocacy, although the categories often overlap. Beckles first provides a cogent overview of hundreds of years of imperial history, carefully outlining the conquest of various Caribbean islands and the extraordinary enrichment of the British state, the Church of England, banks, merchants, plantation owners, and slave traders from the labor and lives of enslaved Africans, especially in Barbados and Jamaica. He follows with an overview of recent efforts by Caribbean activists and government leaders to put the issue of reparations on the global stage and before British authorities. His focus throughout is on the Caribbean case and Caribbean leadership in the reparations struggle, with gestures to significant developments in reparations claims or settlements in other contexts.

Beckles aims to dispense with enduring myths of British collective memory, notably the emphasis on British support for abolition at the expense of appreciating the deep and foundational connection between African slavery and the British Empire. He also wants to settle an older historiographic debate over the relation of slave profits to the Industrial Revolution, long associated with the caustic reaction to Eric Williams’s pioneering thesis in *Capitalism and Slavery*. Beckles has little patience with efforts to sanitize British complicity in centuries of human suffering and exploitation. But more to the point, his work supports recent scholarship on the inextricable relation between coloniality and modernity. The trade in enslaved Africans was neither a customary nor a primitive affair, but a ruthlessly modern enterprise. “Slave trading was big business; it utilized advanced management, complex financial arrangements, and state-of-the-art investment instruments” (p. 55).

As part of his desire to use history to buttress a legal and moral claim for reparations, Beckles emphasizes the British culpability in chaining and trading Africans and in promoting theories of race and practices of racism. Of all the European powers, the English had the greatest impact, 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...”

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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).

But Beckles is primarily concerned with following the money. Thus he tabulates the spectacular accumulation of wealth in Caribbean plantations and British cities. Barbados in the seventeenth century “was worth more to England than all the American colonies combined,” and by the 1770s, British West Indian plantations were worth the 2010 equivalent of £97.9 billion (p. 91). He also charts the staggering loss of life, reminding readers that in the eighteenth century alone, one million Africans died generating the profits that fueled British industrial development.

Beckles examines in detail the role of the Church of England in buying and selling enslaved people, and deriving great wealth from operating brutal sugar plantations. He reserves particular condemnation for its role in disseminating a brand of Christianity that defended the enslavement of Africans. The Church’s plantations “were places of death without redemption,” as large numbers of Africans perished and were quickly replaced (p. 114). Moreover, “the church had no intentions of allowing Christianity to get in the way of running its sugar plantations at a profit” (p. 114). To this end, it became “the official theological voice that Africans were subhuman and not deserving of social recognition within the human family” (p. 119).

Before turning to an examination of the contemporary struggle to gain reparations, Beckles reminds us of the striking fact that it was not the newly freed people who were compensated after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire but the former slaveholders. Not wanting emancipation to violate sacred notions of property rights, and not wanting to empower the former slaves nor weaken the British merchant class or the Caribbean ruling elite, the British government compensated slaveholders for the loss of their property in human beings. The current push for reparations, while growing in grassroots popularity in the Caribbean and among some government officials, has faced numerous roadblocks and challenges. The British and Americans have been staunch in their opposition and succeeded in neutralizing certain African states at United Nations forums, especially the 2001 World Conference Against Racism. Still, Beckles's searing account is a powerful reminder of the moral and historical justness of the quest for restitution.

If there are weaknesses in Britain's Black Debt, it's perhaps that Beckles's understandable stress on the victimization of the descendants of enslaved Africans leaves little room for appreciating the rich history of their political resistance and cultural resilience. "The spiritual and cultural destructiveness of these actions have damaged the domestic culture of black people to this
day,” he argues, pointing in particular to “negative family values” (p. 120). Still, his resolute focus on the crimes of empire building and the inhumanity of buying and selling people, and in turn, his focus on the extraordinary riches of slave-produced sugar and other commodities produced for European elites, is a sobering summation that serves his purpose well. In many respects, this study stands as a corrective to the popular focus on recuperating cultural and political “agency” in African diaspora historiography.

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