LETTERS on LIBERTY

AGAINST REPARATIONS

James Heartfield

— LETTERS
on LIBERTY

Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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What are Letters on Liberty?

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

Academy of Ideas team

AGAINST REPARATIONS

Some kind of slavery has been around throughout much of human history. But the Atlantic Slave Trade between 1440 and 1863 was easily the most vicious case. More than nine million Africans were enslaved and transported across the Atlantic Ocean by European traders. British captains like Francis Drake and John Hawkins shipped slaves from the 1560s onwards. King Charles I set up the Guinea Company to trade slaves in 1631, and his son Charles II founded the Royal African Company to re-launch the trade in 1672. In the eighteenth century, ships out of Liverpool, Bristol and London made Britain the biggest slave trader in the world. Fully 3,200,000 enslaved Africans were taken across the Atlantic in British ships.

The journey called the Middle Passage across the Atlantic ocean was hellish. Between 1789 and 1805, 14 out of every 100 slaves died from dysentery, tuberculosis and infected wounds, all made worse by being chained in overcrowded holds without sanitation or clean water.

Most of the slaves on British ships were taken to British colonies in the Caribbean. Here, they were sold and forced to work, mostly on sugar or sometimes

tobacco or cotton plantations, until they died. The Caribbean planters' worked the enslaved so harshly that - unlike slaves in the US or Brazil - they had no children. As a result, the workforce had to be replenished by new imports.

The slave trade made ship and plantation owners rich - money that they then brought back home to Britain. They invested it in estates, ports and harbours, warehouses, churches, artworks, banks and in the new factories that were being built in the later eighteenth century. Many long-standing institutions and organisations can trace some link back to the slave trade. Historical investigations into the legacy of slavery at University College London, into the Universities of Glasgow, Cambridge and Oxford, the National Trust, the Bank of England, the *Guardian* and even the British monarchy have shown extensive personal wealth and inheritances drawn from slavery and the slave trade.

How much of Britain's wealth was due to slavery has been argued about ever since. What is clear is that the colonial trade in sugar from the plantations, the sale of manufactured goods to the Caribbean and the slave trade itself made up a large share of overseas trade. As Robin Blackburn estimates, as much as a quarter of British investment in the second half of the eighteenth

century came from the slave trade.[i] The question is, what, if anything, should we do about this history?

The history of reparations

When someone is wronged, they can take legal action and claim compensation in a civil court. When a nation or a group of people is wronged, compensation is called reparations - the wrong is repaired by a payment.

The history of reparations shows that these are, on the whole, correctives intended to repair the system of private-property ownership. Reparations have generally reflected the best interests of the established order overall, albeit at the cost of one part of it. They are meant to repair the most disruptive changes, so that a sense of grievance can be set aside and normal relations and trade re-established. These reparations might be called 'justice' at the time, but looking back it is often easier to see the *realpolitik* than the justice.

There are many examples of this type of arrangement. In 1815, defeated France was made to pay 700million francs to compensate Britain and her allies. After losing the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, France was again made to pay 5 billion francs. When the Greeks

rose up against Turkish rule in Crete in 1897, they were made to pay 4million lira.

The best-known examples of reparations are those made by Germany following the First and Second World Wars. Germany was named the guilty party at the Versailles conference in 1920 and ordered to pay 132 billion gold marks. The debts were onerous, despite being renegotiated downwards, and are considered to be one of the reasons for the rise of fascism in Germany in the years after.

Apologies and reparations were how the West German government clawed its way back to respectability on the international stage.

The initial 'Morgenthau Plan' for punitive reparations against Germany at the end of the Second World War was shelved out of fear that it would collapse the country (though a lot of goods and wealth were taken). When the Federal Republic of Germany's economy recovered after the war, reparations were paid to Israel from 1953 - some of which were met in armaments - to the value of $14 billion by 1987.

Germany was not alone - Japan was made to pay reparations to the Netherlands for the wartime occupation of Indonesia, which had been a Dutch

colony at the time, while China waived its claims. But Germany was allowed to be selective in its commitment to the 'justice' of reparations. It paid reparations to Yugoslavia, Greece and Czechoslovakia, but only compensated Polish citizens who were victims of slave labour, holding Poland to a decision to excuse East German war guilt. (In 2022, the German government dismissed Poland's new claims for reparations against Germany.) Germany's selective compensation to those nations it occupied in the war was as much to do with restoring its reputation as it did with a sense of righting wrongs. Apologies and reparations were how the West German government clawed its way back to respectability on the international stage.

Reparations and slavery

Today, many campaigners have raised the demand for reparations for the descendants of slaves against the British and American authorities that profited from slavery. Many argue that reparations are a relevant tool of anti-racism. Indeed, a 2019 UN report on 'reparation, racial justice and equality' asked whether a state could 'ensure racial justice and equality through reparations'.[ii] After consulting over '300 experts', the report concluded that, in order to achieve racial

justice, countries should 'make amends for centuries of violence and discrimination... including through formal acknowledgment and apologies, truth-telling processes, and reparations in various forms'.[iii]

But before we look at the policy of reparations, let's consider the history. It is often claimed that reparations have not been considered, and that the history of slavery has been avoided in contemporary discussions. Neither is true.

> *As important as slavery was to Britain in the eighteenth century, anti-slavery became important to her power projection in the nineteenth century.*

In the American War of Independence, British authorities undermined the colonists by encouraging slaves to rebel against their masters, join British forces and were even promised their freedom if they did. At the peace negotiations in Paris, American negotiators asked for compensation for the loss of their slaves but were refused.

In the Napoleonic Wars, the British banned the slave trade and used the British Navy to enforce the ban across the Atlantic. They did this for two reasons. The first was that a strong anti-slavery movement had taken the country by storm, gathering millions of

signatures on anti-slave-trade petitions. The second was that enforcing the ban would give the Navy the right to search French and American ships crossing the Atlantic.

The British discovered that enforcing the ban on the slave trade gave them authority over international shipping and a way to dictate terms to their great power rivals. As important as *slavery* was to Britain in the eighteenth century, *anti-slavery* became important to her power projection in the nineteenth century.

> *Every time that the British government offered to make amends for what it had done, the reparations seemed to work in the Empire's interests.*

British liberals were not the only force fighting against slavery - the slaves themselves were in revolt against their conditions. The country where they went furthest was San Domingo, a French colony. Taking advantage of the revolution in France, the enslaved rose up and formed their own government under Toussaint L'Ouverture. They named their country Haiti. In 1825, the French government demanded reparations of 150million francs against Haiti for the loss of property - mostly in slaves. To buy international acceptance from the Great Powers, Haiti

agreed to the reparations - which were not paid off until 1947, coming to $21 billion including interest.

In 1830, the anti-slavery movement had turned its attention from the Middle Passage to the slaves on British-owned plantations in the West Indies, where many had risen up against their condition. By that time, the plantations were making less money and most were in debt. Things were so bad that a pro-slavery pamphlet asked sarcastically why the anti-slavery merchants did not just buy the slaves their freedom.[iv] Anti-slavery leaders William Wilberforce and Thomas Fowell Buxton took these jibes seriously, and proposed a law to buy the slaves their freedom by raising £20million (about one fifth of the annual GDP at the time) in a loan to compensate the slave owners for their loss of property.

The £20million did not even get to the West Indies. Most of it was discounted against the debts planters owed to banks and creditors in England. Planters tended to be absentee owners, spending their money in the 'mother country'. The West Indies - that had been the greatest concentration of wealth in the eighteenth century - became, overnight, the poorest corner of the British Empire.

Looking back, people are amazed that abolition entitled the slave *owners* to compensation, not the

slaves. But that was the parliamentary arithmetic in the Reform Parliament of 1832. There was a majority for emancipation, but this was countered by a strong prejudice against expropriation. That is what reparations looked like - if you had been elected to the Reform Parliament you might well have protested at the clause compensating the owners, but you would still have voted for the bill.

However, this did not settle the question of reparations. It was raised again and again. But every time that the British government offered to make amends for what it had done, the reparations seemed to work in the Empire's interests, at least as much as it did those of the enslaved.

In 1847, the then foreign secretary Lord Palmerston said 'this country does owe a great debt of reparation to Africa'.[v] It is a surprise that Palmerston's admission does not feature in modern-day demands for reparations. But then, perhaps if it did, we would have to acknowledge that Palmerston went on to propose an act of reparation.

Palmerston was speaking in favour of funding the West Africa Squadron of the British Navy. Between 1807 and 1860, the Navy seized 1,600 ships and liberated some 150,000 enslaved Africans. He said:

> *'It will be some atonement to remember that if England was among the first to commit the sin, England also led the way in a noble and generous crusade - that we not only abolished our own slave trade, but we also emancipated our own slaves.'*[vi]

The West Africa Squadron was also very useful to Britain. After the wars with the American colonists and Napoleon were over, the campaign against slavery became part of British power projection in the Atlantic and India Oceans. Britain demanded not just naval superiority, but forced her allies to sign up to anti-slavery treaties and to take part in Mixed Commission Courts to punish the slave traders.

Freeing Africa by colonising it

The West Africa Squadron did not just take on Spanish, French and American slave traders, it waged war against African states that were compromised by the slave trade. Britain invaded the Asante in 1824, 1854 and 1873, bombarding Lagos in 1851. In the 1860s, missionary David Livingstone's reports of the damage done to East Africa by Arab slave traders stirred up a new moral campaign to rid Africa of slavery among those living in Britain.

The campaign against Arab Slavery was therefore a self-conscious attempt to cleanse the stain of European slavery. Cardinal Manning told an Anti-Slavery Society meeting in 1888 that the Mahometan slave trade was 'a thousand times worse than anything in the West'.[vii]

All the European powers were now united on the need to free Africa of slavery - so much so that they decided to colonise it. International Conferences in Berlin (1884-5) and Brussels (1889-90) were called to deal with the 'Arab slave trade'. At the last, a great map of Africa was hanging above the delegates. It was supposed to show the routes of the slave trade caravans. Instead, the European delegates used it to divide the continent between them.

The colonisation of Africa, then, was not simply done in the name of plundering that continent or exploiting its people - however much that was the outcome. What the colonisers insisted was that, no, they were doing it to save the Africans. Britain's prime minister, Lord Cecil, said that 'we are most concerned, strange to say' with 'the interests not of Europe, but of Africa'.[viii]

By 1900, the whole African continent, apart from Liberia and Ethiopia, was governed by Europeans. Though they said they were there to abolish slavery,

they were now in charge of making the peasantry work to create wealth. Often that meant forced labour in work battalions in compounds or native reservations under the colour bar. An East African pamphlet of 1944 titled *Buganda Nyafe* (Buganda, Our Mother) charged that 'the slave trade was abolished in one way and then reintroduced in another'.[ix]

Do me a favour, don't do me any favours

Even when Africans were demanding their freedom, the British decided that they were not yet done with improving their condition. In 1938, Lord Hailey argued, in his *African Survey,* that Britain's obligations to the welfare of colonised peoples meant it would be wrong to allow their independence.[x] This formed the basis of the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945.

Not everyone agreed. The idea that colonialists really only had the best wishes of the colonised at heart didn't wash with many of those subject to their 'welfare'. The British adopting a caretaking role to justify denying independence was seen as demeaning and insulting - the suggestion being that without being colonised, these countries would fail to progress.

Ghanaian Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah was sceptical: 'The less developed world will not become more developed through the goodwill or generosity of the developed powers.'[xi]

Frantz Fanon, intellectual spokesman of Third World revolution, saw the case for change with its eye on the future, not on the injuries of the past. 'I am not a prisoner of history,' he wrote, 'I should not seek there for my destiny'. 'Am I going to ask the contemporary white man to answer for the slave ships of the seventeenth century' Fanon asked? 'I am not the slave of the slavery that dehumanized my ancestors', he answered.[xii]

The argument that Britain is in denial about its slave past does not stand up.

What Fanon and Nkrumah were saying was that asking for compensation or help was a weak position that stopped you from working for what you needed in the here and now. The Trinidadian historian and activist CLR James said something similar. He wrote of West Indians 'determined to discover themselves, but without hatred or malice against the foreigner, even the bitter imperialist past'.[xiii]

It was hope for the future that persuaded these Third World revolutionaries not to dwell on the past. Independence, not dependency upon the West, was their goal.

Reparations today

The modern claim for reparations comes from two sources, and both are coloured by defeatism.

Among black activists the call for reparations is a sign of the way that their horizons have lowered. Instead of fighting for independence and freedom, they are demanding compensation for past wrongs.

Hilary Beckles puts this demand in militant terms. Britain must apologise for its crimes and make reparations to the descendants of slaves in the Caribbean and Africa, he argues in *Britain's Black Debt* (2013).

Some propose more research and education on Britain's slave past as an intermediate goal. Research and education are good, of course, but the argument that Britain is in denial about its slave past does not stand up. On the contrary schools and museums are

falling over themselves to research and educate on slavery.

It is a poor impression of the black community in Britain and the Caribbean that Beckles presents - victims of the past, not authors of their own future. They are not, he insists, asking for a handout, while asking for a handout. The flaw in the argument is that it puts all the onus upon the British government to act and diminishes the agency of Afro-Caribbeans.

Just as craven are the establishment figures who seek moral authority by apologising for the past. They are leaders who doubt their authority to lead and hope that acknowledging guilt will make them seem more human.

From King Charles III to the publishers of the *Guardian*, they fall over themselves to admit to crimes they did not commit. Black impotence and white guilt make a heady mixture.

No act of reparation will ever satisfy the disappointment that its champions feel - because in truth the problem they are trying to deal with is their lack of authority in the present, not the injuries done to their forbears in the past.

In their nature reparations represent the interests of the compensating power, not the compensated. Guilt is a luxury only the very rich can afford.

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