

Slavery reparations and the politics of anger

Calls for compensation to the descendants of slaves simplifies history and misses the point that Africa was complicit in human trafficking

BY JEREMY BLACK

How harsh can you be on Africa? Struggling with a range of problems, notably the consequences of rapid population growth as well as environmental and governmental challenges, somehow it will also apparently have to find lots of money to pay “reparations” to the comparatively wealthier African diaspora. Much of the latter is descended from slaves who were sold and transported from Africa, northwards, eastwards and, in the end, westwards. These slaves were largely the product of warfare, although they also derived from other sources, including as a result of debt. They were sold to non-Africans, who, on the whole, lacked the military strength to seize them.

This narrative scarcely fits the arguments for Western reparations currently being advanced, notably in the United States, Britain and the West Indies. Instead, their case focuses on white people and imperial power. Moreover, as I heard a speaker declare in a seminar in the British Library in January, it is now being claimed that the British invented the slave trade, which scarcely does justice to knowledge of world history.

In practice, as I argued in *Slavery: A New Global History* (2011) and *The Atlantic Slave Trade in World History* (2015), the Atlantic slave trade, in which Britain became the leading participant in the 18th century, was merely a new variant on the long-standing pattern of slavery and slave trading within Africa. The possibilities of the Atlantic trade certainly encouraged new ways of exploiting existing practices and networks, but only that. In fact, the Atlantic slave trade did not create slave-owning monarchies in Africa, which were in evidence in parts of the continent (for example, in what is now modern Mali) from the 11th century, when the kingdom of Ghana was at its height—and perhaps considerably earlier.

Economic issues in Africa, where there were manpower shortages and where land only took on value if it was farmed, encouraged enslavement, rather in the way serfdom developed in Europe. Because manpower was a form of wealth, both its source and its symbol, Africans could readily commodify slaves for use in barter and as money. Aside from holding slaves, African societies developed slave law and had widely acknowledged rules about who could and could not be enslaved.

At that time, rule over much of Africa, especially West Africa, was segmented and most polities were not far-flung. This segmentation helped encourage conflict within the continent that fed the slave trade. Those who were captured in war lost their tribal identity. It is unclear how reparations are supposed to be provided in such cases.

To make matters more complicated, the relationship between foreign

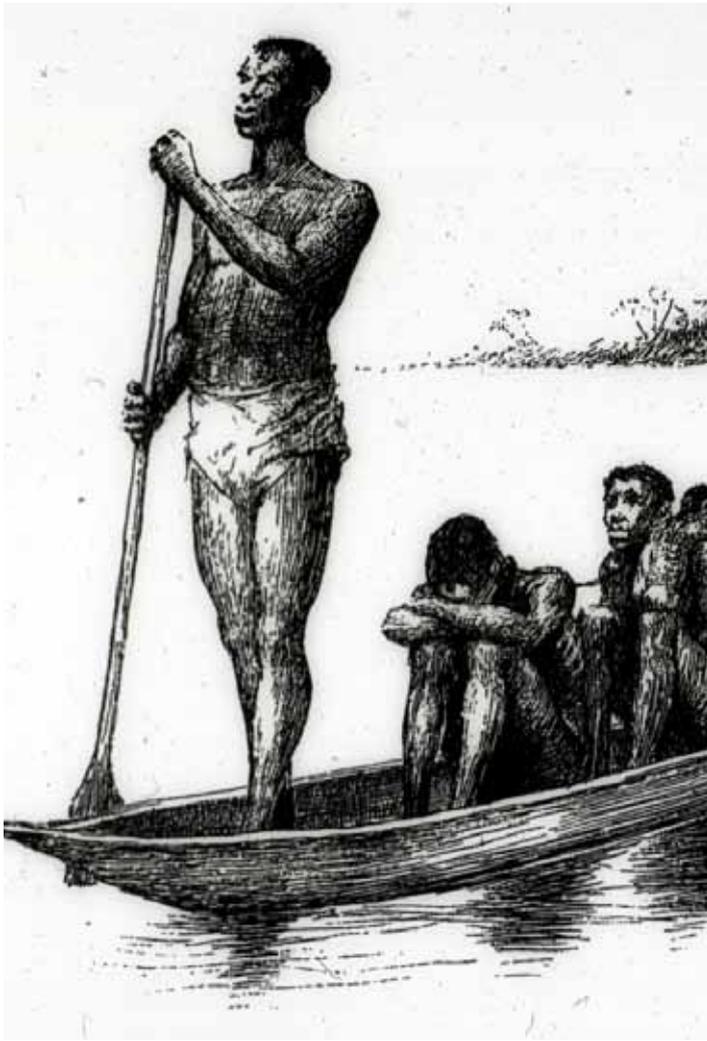
slavers and Africans was often complex. Because European traders were unable to forcibly enslave the Africans, they relied on trade to obtain slaves already coerced within Africa by Africans. The trading network operated on a credit system based on mutual trust.

But the rules were not set by Western traders. Instead, they reflected the ideas of African elites as to what constituted appropriate enslavement and what comprised an acceptable trade in slaves. This care did not extend to the slaves themselves, of course. But their misery did not mean that Africans lacked a key and potent role. Thus, during the 18th century, variations in the Atlantic slave trade reflected African forces—namely shifts in slave supplies within Africa, notably as a result of conflicts caused, for example, by the expansionism of Asante, Dahomey and the Lunda empire. Local trading conditions were also important, notably in terms of the relative availability and pricing of women: in West Africa, high rates of polygamy drove up the prices for female slaves.

While making calls for reparations is easy, it remains unclear who should be paid, and in what ratios. Already by the 1860s, many African Americans would have had a mixture of African, European and Native American ancestry. Is this supposed to be a factor? Is it to be monitored by DNA analysis in a dystopian pursuit of information? What treatment is envisaged for those whose route to the West has been different and for those who have been successful, such as Barack Obama or Diane Abbott? In practice, the emphasis is on the group, not the individual, and the relevant identity politics focuses on an idea of hereditary hardship. In March 2014, Caricom, the 15-strong Caribbean Community of states, demanded reparations from European slaving nations for what it presented as the enduring legacy of the slave trade, including “psychological trauma.” Sir Hilary Beckles, an historian from Barbados who chaired the Caricom Reparations Commission, argued in 2014:

This is about the persistent harm and suffering experienced today by the descendants of slavery and genocide that is the primary cause of development failure in the Caribbean . . . The African-descended population in the Caribbean has the highest incidence in the world of the chronic diseases hypertension and type 2 diabetes, a direct result of the diet, physical and emotional brutality and overall stress associated with slavery, genocide and apartheid . . . The British in particular left the black and indigenous communities in a general state of illiteracy and 70 per cent of blacks in British colonies were functionally illiterate in the 1960s when nation states began to appear.

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“Captive Africans transported by canoe”, from E.J. Glave’s “The Slave-Trade in the Congo Basin”, 1888

This running together of slavery and imperial rule confuses different phenomena. Both Singapore and South Korea (once a Japanese colony) indicate that the latter did not necessarily lead to long-term poverty. However, imperial rule as an issue does have the merit of directing attention to “public slavery”, which tends to attract very little scrutiny today. The focus instead is on “private slavery” in the sense of ownership by individuals or corporations, which in turn forms part of a critique of capitalism. However, as a global account of slavery this is inadequate. Being a slave of the state existed in antiquity as it does in modern times. Again, it raises the problematic nature of compensation. What should be paid—and to whom?

Another problematic issue is the concept of hereditary guilt. The most prominent instance of this pernicious idea was the anti-Semitic practice of blaming the Jews, all Jews, and for ever, for the Roman execution of a Jew. This practice has long been castigated, which makes it ironic to see hereditary guilt so much to the fore in modern identity politics. These politics are about competitive anger and “slavery” provides the entry point, narrative and anger for those of African descent. This is absurd in many respects. The cruelty and misery of conflict in some parts of Africa over the last two decades, notably Sudan, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Congo, Nigeria and Mali, indicate that Western pressure and control were scarcely necessary features.

When warfare in Africa, past or present, is discussed, it is often attributed to the pressures and opportunities of European slave trading (the Arabs, slavers on a massive scale, tend to get a free pass). But foreign slave trading is not necessarily

the reason for conflict. For example, the scale and bitterness of the Mfecane wars in southern Africa, caused by the rise of the Zulu empire in the early 19th century and by competition for resources, cannot be readily linked to the slave trade, nor indeed attributed to exogenous pressure in the shape of European actions. As with the case of the provision of weapons in modern conflicts, Western connections did play a role, but they were incidental, rather than causative.

In addition, there are major problems in comparisons across time. How does the enslavement of Africans in 1600 compare with that of Europeans at the same time by Barbary pirates? How does work in a plantation in 1750 compare with serfdom in 1800, convict labour in 1850, indentured labour in 1900, or with being a woman held against her will and abused for prostitution in 2019? How does work in a plantation in 1830 compare with the situation for former slaves on the same land in the 1890s, and how does this question vary if we are looking at Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica or the US?

Abhorrence of slavery and the slave trade should not be lessened by the large-scale involvement of Africans, Arabs and others, but it certainly complicates any blame game. Surely it would be more fruitful to focus on tacking slavery in the world today, whether public (North Korea), ethnic (Indian caste system), gender (mistreatment of women in many countries), or economic. Estimates of the number of slaves in the world vary, but 20 million is an oft-cited figure. Demanding compensation now for actions 200 years or more ago distracts from this pressing issue, and invites consideration about motives and methods.

Are people being helped if they are encouraged to be angry? And why should ethnicity be the key indicator? In part, the emphasis on reparations is both a continuation of anti-Western and anti-imperial arguments, and a method of destabilisation in states that seek to provide citizenship on the basis of equality before the law and with a stress on individual rights not collective grievances. Not everyone has this political agenda, but it is an important one and is related to the disaggregation of the state in the face of the partisan exploitation of identity politics.

This process can particularly be seen in the Democratic Party in the US. It is related to a struggle for power and influence by the radical wing of the party and offers an ideological “purity test”. The argument that Civil Rights are incomplete without reparations ignores a host of factors, not least the extent of white poverty and the practical problems, institutional and legal, of formulating and implementing any such policy. That, however, is not the point. This is the politics of self-gratification through anger. Its historical and conceptual absurdities will not matter for its advocates.

The politicisation of slavery for partisan ends is a key element here. The emphasis on race and capitalism is part of the major success of the Left in advancing its intellectual agenda in recent years. Indeed, that is an ironic counterpoint to the supposed victory of Conservative ideas in the 1980s and 1990s. In practice, that victory was perfunctory and thin, notably in the educational system, and this has become so more in the last few years.

The increased willingness of the young to define themselves as socialist is part of the equation, but a key element of this “socialism” is its politicisation of ethnic, gender and sexual orientation. With the Left unable to use the Holocaust as a key signifier in historical consciousness, it has focused on the slave trade as an alternative and an equivalent—inaccurately, as the purpose of slavery was not to kill slaves.

Moreover, slavery, as an aspect of coerced labour, was far more widespread prior to the 20th century than the Holocaust, as the quintessential instance of genocide, was in the 20th. Reparations for a distant and very widespread practice is absurd, both practically and philosophically. That the idea is gaining traction is an instance of the strange politics of these times. ■