

Should We Pay Reparations for Slavery?

What are Reparations?

Reparations have traditionally been defined as 'payments made by a defeated nation after a war to pay for damages or expenses it caused to another nation'.¹ However, its meaning has developed and expanded to include the following, 'the action of making amends for a wrong or harm done by providing payment or other assistance to the wronged party'.²

How clear, helpful and accurate do you think these definitions are?

When have reparations been paid before?

One famous case of reparations was when West Germany paid Israel 3 billion Deutsche Marks (roughly \$714 million) from 1952 to 1966 to make amends for the Holocaust.³ Another example would be when the US Government paid compensation of \$37 million to 26,000 survivors of Japanese American Internment

camps for property they had lost.⁴ The US Government went on to make an additional payment of \$20,000 to each survivor in 1988.⁵

Are these examples justified? Are they sufficiently relevant to today's racial reparations debate?

Why are reparations being demanded now?

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota in May 2020 raised questions of racial justice not just in the USA but also around the world. Awareness of the remaining economic and employment disparities between different ethnic groups significantly increased and these questions were brought to the front of civil discourse.

While the movement began in the USA, it soon spread to the UK which also saw protests and increased public

discussion. The main call for reparations in the UK today revolves around the Transatlantic Slave Trade which began in the 16th century and was abolished by Britain in 1808. Many argue that reparations should be paid not just to compensate black people for the deep pain they suffered, but also to help redistribute wealth and economic prosperity between races today, as this was arguably distorted by the trade.

Should Countries outside the West pay reparations too?

History and the Christian faith both show us that cruelty and slavery are human and global sins and that they have never been localised. This adds an extra degree of complexity to the debate on reparations as slavery has occurred right across the globe and is not just limited to the West. Lord Peter Thomas Bauer once wrote, 'The slave trade between Africa and the Middle East antedated the Atlantic slave trade by centuries and far outlasted it. Slavery was endemic over much of Africa long before

the emergence of the Atlantic slave trade'.⁶

The historian Simon Webb agrees, writing, 'almost all the slaves seized in Britain and the rest of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were captured by Muslims and were specifically targeted because they came from white, Christian countries'.⁷ Webb further states, 'the Roman slave trade in Europe and the Middle East was probably more than ten times as extensive as that which was carried out across the Atlantic [...] there was nothing to distinguish that slave trade from any other'.⁸ Similarly, Thomas Sowell observes, 'It has been estimated that been estimated that there were more slaves in India than in the entire Western hemisphere'.⁹ Sowell continues, 'China, during the era of slavery, has been described as one of the largest and most comprehensive markets for the exchange of human beings in the world, slaves were a majority of the population in some of the cities in southeast Asia'.¹⁰

*Would it be reasonable and historically accurate to focus on the Transatlantic slave trade in particular?*¹¹

Does the universality of slavery reflect the Christian doctrine of the Fall? If all are guilty, do demands for reparations cancel each other out?

Even if we were to limit ourselves temporally or geographically to just the Transatlantic slave trade, we should remember that African chieftains were themselves complicit in the trade as they captured their own citizens and sold them into the trade.¹² Without these crimes, the slave trade would not have been possible. However, they have not even apologised so far and nor have they paid any reparations, despite demands today from their own citizens to do so.

Have reparations already been made?

Due to the significant chasm in time between now and when the slave trade was

banned back in 1808, some have argued that, to raise the question of reparations now is to effectively carry out an exercise in “anachronistic archaeology”. In other words, reparations should only be paid within years and maybe a few decades at most of offence being committed.

Where might we draw the line here?

Over seven generations have elapsed since the slave trade was banned and so no one alive is today or even their immediate ancestors were either slaves or slave-owners.¹³

Some argue that Britain especially has already made significant reparations in several different ways, doing so in the 19th century itself. First, she led the way in abolishing not just the Transatlantic slave trade specifically but also in banning slavery in general in 1833.¹⁴ It is worth remembering that slavery was still legal in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania until 1981, and in Saudi Arabia until 1961.¹⁵

These abolitions came at substantial cost to the UK economy and the bans were very expensive to enforce.¹⁶ It cost British taxpayers nearly as much to suppress the slave trade 47 years after it was banned than they earned during its last 50 years.¹⁷ In fact, the government spent 40% of the entire budget on buying freedom for those who had been enslaved.¹⁸ These acts together when taken in the round have been estimated to have constituted ‘the most expensive example of international moral action recorded in modern history’.¹⁹

Has sufficient reparation already been made?

How might reparations be calculated?

While many today support the principle of Britain paying reparations, there is so far little consensus on how much reparations would cost, who precisely should pay them, who precisely they should be paid to, or the time period in which they would need to be

paid. Even proponents of reparations admit that the waters are muddy here. Ta-Nehisi Coates, who wrote the first major case for reparations in 2014, ‘we may find that the country can never fully repay African Americans’.²⁰ Another advocate of reparations admits, David Brooks, something similar, ‘Reparations are drastic policy and hard to execute’.²¹

Even if we put to one side for the moment the question of whether or not such reparations would be affordable, perhaps the trickier question to answer is how exactly they would be calculated.²² This question is incredibly complex, much more so than one might at first expect. The question also presumes that guilt is inherited, transgenerational and collective.²³ No one alive today in the UK has owned a slave during the trade and no one alive today has been a slave under the trade.²⁴ What is therefore being proposed is an anachronistic, backward-looking exercise in archaeology. If possible, it would be an enormous historical and

forensic task to accurately discern who precisely is descended from slaves and who is not.²⁵ Furthermore, only a minority of white people in Britain ever owned slaves and so general taxation would not be a fair way to obtain the money. Furthermore, many non-white people in Britain today have migrated to the UK since slavery was abolished and so they cannot legitimately claim to have been adversely affected by it.²⁶ The question then becomes, 'Where do we draw the line? Is someone whose great, great grandmother was a slave, but whose great, great grandfather was not a slave eligible to receive reparations?'²⁷

This task of forensic discernment would be incredibly complex and time-consuming.

Would it be a divisive or unitive act?²⁸

Would it lead to claim and counterclaim, bitterness, envy and resentment, which Jesus abhorred?

Jesus distinctively commanded us not to keep a tally of wrongs and instead to forgive each other as many as seventy times seven and to even turn the other cheek. Just imagine if reparations had been demanded in South Africa after the ethnic strife there.

Should we instead follow in the footsteps of Zacchaeus, who made reparation and paid penance through both repentance and whole life transformation, not by coerced payment alone?

¹ 'Reparation, n.', *Cambridge Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162653>> [accessed 4 May 2023].

² 'Reparation, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/162653>> [accessed 4 May 2023].

³ *The Reparations Controversy: The Jewish State and German Money in the Shadow of the Holocaust, 1951-1952*, ed. by Yaakov Sharet (Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter, 2011).

⁴ Adeel Hassan and Jack Healy, 'America Has Tried Reparations Before. Here Is How It Went.', *The New York Times*, 19 June 2019, section U.S.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/us/reparations-slavery.html>> [accessed 4 May 2023].

⁵ Hassan and Healy, 'America Has Tried Reparations Before. Here Is How It Went.'.

⁶ Peter T. Bauer, *Equality, The Third World and Economic Delusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 73.

⁷ Simon Webb, *The Forgotten Slave Trade: The White European Slaves of Islam* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword History, 2021), p. 20 <The Forgotten Slave Trade>.

⁸ Webb, *The Forgotten Slave Trade*, p. 38.

⁹ Thomas Sowell, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (New York, NY: Encounter Books, 2006), p. 112.

¹⁰ Thomas Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2012), p. 479.

¹¹ Bauer, *Equality, The Third World and Economic Delusion*, p. 73;

Webb, *The Forgotten Slave Trade*, pp. 20, 38;

Sowell, *Intellectuals and Society*, p. 479;

Sowell, *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, p. 112.

¹² ‘African Slavery Apology “Needed”’, *BBC*

News, 12 November 2009

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/8356357.stm>> [accessed 4 May 2023];

David Smith, ‘African Chiefs Urged to Apologise

for Slave Trade’, *The Guardian*, 18 November

2009

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/nov/18/africans-apologise-slave-trade>> [accessed 4 May

2023].

¹³ Thomas Sowell, *Controversial Essays* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2002), pp. 59–61.

¹⁴ Bauer, *Equality, The Third World and Economic*

Delusion, p. 73;

Douglas Murray, *The War on the West: How to*

Prevail in the Age of Unreason (London:

HarperCollins, 2022), p. 145.

¹⁵ Webb, *The Forgotten Slave Trade*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Murray, *The War on the West*, pp. 145–46;

Bernard Edwards, *Royal Navy versus the Slave*

Traders: Enforcing Abolition at Sea 1808-1898

(Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword

Maritime, 2021).

¹⁷ Murray, p. 145.

¹⁸ Murray, p. 145.

¹⁹ Chaim D. Kaufmann and Robert A. Pape,

‘Explaining Costly International Moral Action:

Britain’s Sixty-Year Campaign Against the

Atlantic Slave Trade’, *International Organization*,

53.4 (1999), 631–68

<<https://doi.org/10.1162/002081899551020>>.

²⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, ‘The Case for Reparations’,

The Atlantic, 2014

<[https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/20](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/)

[14/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/)> [accessed

4 May 2023].

²¹ David Brooks, ‘Opinion | The Case for

Reparations’, *The New York Times*, 7 March 2019,

section Opinion

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/opinion/cas>

[e-for-reparations.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/07/opinion/cas)> [accessed 4 May 2023].

²² Murray, *The War on the West*, pp. 143–46.

²³ Sowell, *Controversial Essays*, pp. 59–61.

²⁴ Murray, *The War on the West*, p. 143.

²⁵ Murray, *The War on the West*, p. 144.

²⁶ Murray, *The War on the West*, p. 145.

²⁷ Murray, *The War on the West*, p. 144.

²⁸ Sowell, *Controversial Essays*, p. 60;

Murray, *The War on the West*, p. 135.