

[Michelakos on Beckles, 'Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Slavery and Native Genocide'](#)

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Hilary McD. Beckles. *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Slavery and Native Genocide.* Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2013. 292 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-976-640-349-2.

Reviewed by Jason Michelakos (York University) **Published on** H-Caribbean (June, 2014)
Commissioned by Audra Abbe Diptee

Hilary McD. Beckles's *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide* is a formidable anticolonial response to Great Britain's declaration at the 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, in Durban, South Africa, that the genocide of indigenous peoples, Atlantic slave trade, and institution of slavery carried out in the West Indies were not crimes against humanity when they were practiced. Despite the overwhelming historical evidence presented by Caribbean delegates at Durban, Great Britain refused to accept responsibility for these historical injustices and the subsequent post-emancipation white supremacy movement that continues to nourish the geopolitical isolation, material impoverishment, and racial inferiorization of indigenous and African peoples in the Caribbean. Beckles's monograph offers readers a substantive historical examination and an intriguing political manifesto to galvanize the Caribbean reparations movement against Britain in the wake of the historical erasure, discursive closure, and political opposition marshalled at Durban.

Beckles's analytical rigor and sophisticated research strategy includes a comprehensive dissection of archival and secondary source materials, which ultimately render a ground-breaking analysis of indigenous genocide and black slavery in the Caribbean through the lens of reparatory justice. In comparison to his other seminal works on slavery, which include *A History of Barbados: From Amerindian Settlement to Nation-State* (1990), *Centering Woman: Gender Relations in Caribbean Slave Society* (1999), and *Trading Souls: Europe's Transatlantic Trade in Africans* (2007), Beckles has diminished the theoretical depth and condensed the historical scope of this study to communicate his research beyond an academic audience. This approach contributes to a concise, yet penetrating analysis that will inspire innovative interdisciplinary research, and provide a critical road map to further explore the Caribbean claim for reparatory justice and the neocolonial bulwark organized by Great Britain to expunge its fruition.

As a representative negotiating on behalf of Caribbean nations at Durban, Beckles experienced the full weight of Britain's repeated denial that the indigenous genocide, slave trade, and institution of slavery was a protracted commercial, governmental, religious, and royal enterprise. Beckles's own socioeconomic internment on the "plantation village" growing up in Barbados, and the harrowing realities of poverty, illiteracy, and hard labor that subsist throughout the Caribbean, evince that the enduring wreckage of colonization does not effectuate its presence *in abstracto*. This book will appeal to political leaders, legal scholars, academics, and activists engaged in the reparatory justice movement through its insightful observation that the legacies of the colonial paradigm do not lie quiescent in the past, but are galvanized in current discursive and institutional practices of racism,

destitution, and exploitation.

The *raison d'être* for Great Britain's legal opinion and obdurate political posture at Durban rested on the hypothesis that these historical injustices were *de facto* violations, given the normative conditions of seizure, incarceration, transportation, and exploitation of African peoples. Beckles's study reveals how Great Britain and the United States wielded their economic and political influence to bolster the legitimacy of their position, impede a "conciliatory reparations" discourse, and ultimately smother the exploration of a legal resolution. While delegates from the Caribbean censured this tactic to stymie a sincere dialogical consideration of these human rights violations, the unwavering legacy of unaccountability, historical revisionism, and neocolonial leveraging undertaken by the West delegitimized the claim for reparations as a justiciable issue that could be tested under international law.

Britain's Black Debt is divided into two parts. In the first part (chapters 1-11), Beckles utilizes his extensive oeuvre on the history of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the wider English Caribbean, particularly Barbados, to demonstrate how indigenous genocide and African enslavement constitute human rights violations. The first section of this book focuses on the coordinated invasion, displacement, and extermination of indigenous peoples, as well as the kidnapping, confinement, transportation, hard labor, and sexual abuse endured by African captives in "castles" along the West African coast, during shipment across the "Middle Passage," and under conditions of slavery in the plantation colony.

The argument for reparation outlined in the first part of this study hinges on the observation that the nation-building efforts of England were coordinated by an assemblage of elite families, political institutions, and commercial establishments engaged in the illegal practices of genocide, human trafficking, and slavery. Beckles's monograph reveals how the diffuse and polyvalent network of the English slavocracy (royalty, clergy, politicians, and commercial actors) established a system of white supremacy through the discursive, literary, legal, political, and theological ordering of African peoples as "sub-human." This colonial crusade was legitimated by a biocultural ontology that exoticized, primitivized, and dehumanized those considered "nonhuman." The procedures of colonial intervention outlined in Beckles's study underscore how Britain ensconced a state of exception to conventionalize the subjugation and commoditization of an *infrahuman* black subject to replace white servitude. Slave labor played a crucial role in the geopolitical interest of Britain and the future course of European mimetic empire building and modernity.

In the slave colony, however, the institution of slavery configured a necropolitical terrain of torture, punishment, and death. The English plantocracy exercised their educational, financial, social, and political influence both in the slave colony and in *absentia* to secure their commercial interests, aggregate landholdings, maximize productive output, and frustrate resistance. The rise of the plantocracy percolated from a broader project of English nationalism to realize dominance in agricultural and technological production, naval supremacy, and international trade. Through an organized program of genocidal assault and the entrenchment of racialized slave labour, the British endeavored to transform the West Indies from *terra incognita* to a zone of industrialization.

The most compelling contribution in the first part of Beckles's monograph is his treatment of the unique circumstances of sexual abuse, rape, exploitation, and forced reproduction suffered by

enslaved women. His extensive corpus in this area of inquiry contributes to a sophisticated analysis into how the Church of England and elite English planters in Barbados targeted the demographic management of fertility, sexuality, and maternity for the purpose of securing an intergenerational slave labor force by encouraging enslaved women to breed. As gleaned with his previous works, techniques of slave management that focused on a system of incentive (a reduction of hard labor, financial support, and medical care) were used to implement a breeding program in order to secure the future slave labor force. Beckles's intersectional analysis requires further historical consideration into how the planter class initiated a biopolitical agenda through the disciplining of the black female body and an incentive program to encourage "breeding." These violations also entrenched a systemic dissemination of racialized labor appropriation, sexual exploitation, and material deprivation that continued to shape a cacotopic milieu throughout the Caribbean post-emancipation.

The final chapter of the first section lays bare the arduous task ahead for the Caribbean reparations movement in the current conditions of silence and intimidation. The British government's decision to offer a "statement of regret" and pursue a "settlement" instead of issuing an unequivocal apology and affirmation that these injustices constitute crimes against humanity is positioned as a strategic maneuver to escape legal culpability. Beckles argues that Britain's moral bankruptcy is compounded by its failure to answer the call for reparations given that British slaveowners were paid twenty million pounds in compensation for surrendering their slaves in 1838. This compensation advanced the capitalistic features of the plantation paradigm, by maintaining a system of racial hierarchy, a disciplinary policing apparatus, property exclusion, material impoverishment, and hard labor.

The second part of Beckles's monograph (chapters 12-15) illustrates how the case for reparatory justice is an ethical imperative, a political appeal for recognition, and a legal claim to hold to account Great Britain and institutions that benefited financially from carrying out crimes against humanity. Beckles explores how a legal claim for reparation could be considered by international covenants and institutions, such as the UN Charter and Permanent Court of International Justice, as well as the domestic judicial arena of British Common Law procedure. He maintains that statutes, such as "remoteness" and "Privity Principle," which would be called upon to limit legal responsibility for the systematic evisceration of indigenous peoples and enslavement of Africans, are of no force in international law when framing claims of reparatory justice. From Beckles's study, we can conclude that the invocation of these legal concepts serve as a diversion to locate these historical injustices outside the law (*ab legibus solutes*) in order to escape accountability.

Beckles argues that the best course of action should be for Caribbean nations to continue their position held at the UN World Conference that crimes against humanity played a fundamental role in the economic development of present-day Great Britain. He also maintains that efforts to discredit a reparations claim based on the argument that West African leaders were equal collaborators in the slave trade and racialized institution of bondage ignores the widespread resistance to invasion, kidnapping, destabilization, political coercion, and threat of war initiated by the slavocracy. This book takes aim at this ideological strategy to silence the realities of colonial genocide and slavery, and the ongoing campaign to submit the history of resistance to forms of erasure.

The second part of this study could have provided further reflection into how domestic institutions within the Caribbean would entrench a reparatory policy agenda. In what capacity will social, political, and institutional reform respond to the psychological despondency, public health crisis, and

educational development of Caribbean peoples as a manifestation of a broader fiduciary relationship with Great Britain? These considerations should also be explored with the expectation that further legal obstruction and political dissension will be buttressed by a narrative of fiscal austerity given the economic priorities of neoliberal governance in the West. Additional research into how England's enduring global imperium has ordered an autopoietic succession of racism and violence could also illustrate how current sites of oppression, such as victims forced into the global sex trade, bonded labor, and forced marriage, can be read through the appeal for reparatory justice.

The creation of a widespread system of racialized slavery, intergenerational servitude, and the wider juggernaut of global empire building being played out in the West Indies, nevertheless, remains the responsibility of Great Britain. For the demands of reparatory justice to be met, the British government must acknowledge that its hegemonic military position, emergence as the first industrialized nation, and financial command within the global economy were facilitated by a doctrine of *terra nullius* and colonial conquest that appropriated indigenous lands, siphoned resources, and carried out a policy of genocide, as well as the abduction, illegal trafficking, and racialized slavery of Africans. Despite the silence and continued obfuscation, Beckles still advocates an approach of respect, partnership, and fairness that will ultimately demand a profound reassessment of British history.

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