

David Cameron, the British Empire and the Issue of Slavery

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There are few more intrinsically brutal facts than slavery's role in the building of European, and then subsequently, its various settler empires. As a system, it became the peculiar institution, as it was euphemistically termed, in the American south. It signified a demographic theft that the African continent has struggled to overcome, a shock of exponential proportion.

Slavery was always lucrative, not merely because it filled the pockets of owners and investors, but because it was literally a state-building enterprise. The development of the southern US states, be it in terms of infrastructure, would have been inconceivable without slave labour. In 1776, it was estimated that 40 members of the British parliament were deriving earnings from enslaved entities of the Caribbean.

This historical burden has been handled in an assortment of ways. Caribbean voices were particularly angered at the end of September when Prime Minister David Cameron ducked and weaved around the issue about how to deal with slavery's legacy. He was not coming empty-handed – but an apology for Britain's slaver past was not on the cards.

A certain hierarchy of interest was noted by the former Jamaican Prime Minister, P J Patterson, who suggested that it was time to acknowledge “the black experience” in addition to such commemorations offered for past injustices against the Jewish people.[1]

“The refusal to apologise is a refusal to take responsibility for the crime. In a law-abiding world, this is not acceptable.” Patterson also had a side swipe at Cameron, noting that the overall “package he offered had discreetly omitted any mention of a £25-million contribution to the building of a prison.”

Cameron's DNA was doing much of the talking on that score. In 1833, when the Abolition Act was passed, mechanisms of compensation were instituted – for former slave owners. The shock to the economy with this sudden disruption saw claims made by individuals such as Cameron's own ancestors, including a certain Gen. Sir James Duff, MP for Banffshire in Scotland.[2] Chattels had suddenly become human subjects. It was a hard economic reality to swallow.

Cameron's entire trip to Jamaica was beset by a self-imposed historical vacuum. Coming out with a direct apology was never going to figure, despite the 15 member states of Caricom (Caribbean Community Secretariat) having agreed to establish working committees investigating the prospects of reparations by European powers for genocide, trafficking and chattel enslavement based on racial principles.[3]

The reparations argument goes back a good way, with compensation taking such forms as

“40 acres and a mule”.[4] In 1964, Trinidad’s representative on a UN committee on colonialism, Sir Ellis Clarke, argued that reparations should be made to former colonies as an inseparable part of gaining independence. “An administering power is not entitled to extract for centuries all that can be got out of a colony and, when that has been done, to relieve of its obligations by the conferment of a formal but meaningless – meaningless because it cannot possibly be supported – political independence.”

For Clarke, the reparations issue was inextricably linked to that of viable political independence. The former imperial power had to do its bit in forking out some form of compensation, an acknowledgment both financial and psychic, for the newly released colony to thrive.

“Justice requires that reparation be made to the country that has suffered the ravages of colonialism before that country is expected to face up to the problem and difficulties that will inevitably beset it upon independence.”

A distinction should be drawn from the principle of reparation itself, an economically and legally sound argument, to the form such modern reparation might take. The handing over of raw cash in contrition has already been pooh-poohed in various circles. Glenn C. Loury, writing in 2000, felt it a mistake to take the route of pure monetary compensation, claiming that it would let conservatives off the hook.[5]

Such packages become unduly reductionist, placing no onus on the former colonial power to truly atone. One falls into the old trap of assuming that money solves all. Loury, writing specifically about African-American efforts to seek reparations, suggested the need for lingering reminders.

“The heirs to this atrocity – long established Americans and newly naturalized citizens alike – should be confronted continually with the horrors of what their country wrought.”

This is not to say that various theatrical precedents have not taken place, though they suggest that compensation is all too easily politicised. Those two thespians of international politics, Silvio Berlusconi of Italy and Muammar el-Qaddafi, certainly gave the historical precedent a go. In that case, Italy’s colonial spectre became a matter of a \$5 billion compensation package, comprising construction projects, student grants and pensions for Libyan soldiers who served with Italy during the Second World War.[6]

The process, rather, should be a systematic network of alleviating fair trade – a point made by that long time student of brutality in Africa, Adam Hochschild. While various countries find themselves marching to the wrenching tune of free trade and undemocratic finance, a restructured system of fair trade can act as a form of tangible, and constructive contrition. Caricom’s 10 point plan, created last March, points to a variant of this, focusing on technology transfer and debt cancellation in addition to the sought after apology.

For all that, the human tendency to resort to forms of enslavement, and the monetising of human beings for profit, remain. The echoes of slavery find shape in debt bondage, indentured labour, and the modern phenomenon of disposable labour. Life may well be cheap, but human labour remains highly, and irresistibly valuable.

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Notes:

[1] http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/PJ-scolds-Cameron_19232777

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/29/how-do-we-know-david-cameron-has-slave-owning-ancestor>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/30/david-cameron-slavery-caribbean>

[4] <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/29/opinion/it-s-futile-to-put-a-price-on-slavery.html>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/05/29/opinion/it-s-futile-to-put-a-price-on-slavery.html>

[6] http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/31/world/europe/31iht-italy.4.15774385.html?_r=0

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