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Righting imperialism's wrongs, past and present

To create a more equitable society, we must also address colonialism's ongoing effects

At long last, European countries have begun to grapple with their colonial legacies. In the Netherlands, the government has issued an apology for the country's role in the global slave trade, and the king has 'asked for forgiveness.' The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has urged Denmark to 'address the negative impacts' of its colonisation of Greenland. And in the United Kingdom, media outlets, the Church of England, and cities like Manchester have acknowledged the hard truth: their wealth and power were built on the backs of enslaved people.

While these efforts are rightly recognised as historic, they have also been criticised for a lack of consultation with affected communities and an apparent reluctance to provide meaningful reparations. In fact, these statements and apologies often sidestep the question of what reparations should entail, rendering them toothless gestures of pseudo-accountability.

To be sure, the discussions such public apologies spark help raise the public's awareness about the horrors of colonialism. The conversations they nurture are crucial, and the fact that they are occurring in Europe's most venerable institutions – royal palaces, museums, centuries-old foundations, businesses, and media conglomerates – is a testament to the relentless efforts of organisers and communities to keep history from being swept under the proverbial rug.

But we must be wary of what Georgetown University's Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò calls 'elite capture,' whereby potentially transformative and liberating concepts are stripped of their radical content and appropriated by the political, social and economic forces they target. In many ways, the reparations discourse is already being co-opted in this way.

Buying their way out

While important, none of the recent acknowledgments and apologies seeks to tackle the living legacy of slavery, colonialism, imperialism and the extractive capitalism that they underpinned. Official apologies can serve as a good starting point, but those in positions of power must not be permitted to use the process of reckoning with the atrocities of colonial plunder to evade real accountability.

Focusing solely on memorialising and apologising for historical injustices without acknowledging their enduring effects risks perpetuating structural inequalities. Colonialism undergirded the international economic order. The over-policing of black youth, disproportionately high mortality rates among non-white mothers, workplace discrimination, migrants' limited access to social services, and the necropolitics of 'Fortress Europe' are all part of the legacy of the racist imperialism upon which Europe's wealth was built.

To address these systemic injustices, we must recognise that the emphasis on financial restitution in current debates about reparations is a problem. If we are not careful, governments and institutions could use this money-centric definition of reparations as a cop-out. As we know from international law, countries often prefer to pay damages for their human-rights violations rather than take meaningful steps such as revising laws, policies and practices.

If reparations are solely focused on the past, we risk neglecting the present and weakening their emancipatory potential.

This is not to downplay the vital role of wealth redistribution in building a just world. But financial settlements that seek merely to placate those who call for justice are not the same as redistributive policies that target systemic inequality. So far, European governments and institutions have been more than eager to blur the distinction between the two.

As Esther Stanford-Xosei and the Pan-Afrikan Reparations Coalition in Europe have argued, the financial aspect of reparations 'will be meaningful only if it serves the holistic purpose and strengthens the integral whole of our self-repair process.' In other words, any form of reparations must enable communities to reclaim power, dignity, and stewardship over their shared wealth and resources. If reparations are solely focused on the past, we risk neglecting the present and weakening their emancipatory potential. A more historically informed approach would view reparations as part of a larger project.

Much like the broader struggle for racial, social, economic, and climate justice, the purpose of reparations is to help build a more equitable world. The transition to such a world will not be costless and will undoubtedly require sacrifices. Reparations should ensure that these costs are distributed fairly rather than provide a monetary band-aid.

We must be willing to challenge the inherently harmful and extractive systems that we often take for granted.

To bring about a more just future, we must first meet the most urgent needs of communities grappling with the lasting legacies of colonialism. This means dismantling the unequal power structures in our legal, education, health-care, and political systems, as well as our workplaces and public services.

By adopting a community-oriented approach to addressing structures of oppression, we can ensure that marginalised groups have equal access to essential public goods. But we must also be willing to challenge the inherently harmful and extractive systems that we often take for granted.

Simply put, we can no longer accept that any framework, institution, or process that affects marginalised communities is established or operated without their meaningful participation. Rectifying historical injustices is not just about righting past wrongs. To create a more equitable society, we must also address colonialism's ongoing effects.

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