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REVIEW

Olúfémi O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 261pp., ISBN 978–0–19–750889–3

Reconsidering Reparations is a rich and politically urgent intervention into debates about racial justice, global inequality, and the climate crisis. Divided into six chapters, the book challenges us to rethink the world we live in as built on trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism, and while the primary focus is on the United States, the work frames the concept of reparations as a worldwide project. The book ties the idea of reparations as a *worldmaking*[1] project to climate justice and the need to contest structures of racial injustice.

Táíwò is explicit about his intended audience. The book is not written to persuade sceptics of racial justice or those opposed to reparations. Rather, Táíwò wants to persuade those who support the project of racial justice of the concept of reparations. The book offers a philosophical view of reparations and the idea of justice it emanates from; it argues against views which limit reparations to financial amends and fears that demands for reparations might be answered on the symbolic level only.[2] For Táíwò, demanding reparations is much more holistic. To that end, he advances what he calls a 'constructive view' of reparations – an approach that he defines as future-oriented and considering reparations as a global project.[3]

Central to Táíwò's argument is his account of the global economic order as a 'Global Racial Empire'. As he puts it, 'if global racial empire is the *what*, then capitalism is the *how*'.[4] This formulation highlights the interdependence of racial hierarchy and economic exploitation. Reparations, from this perspective, are not merely about a 'transfer of resources', but about 'the transformation of *all* social relations' and the 're-envisioning and reconstructing [of] a world-system'.[5] The historical and structural nature of injustice demands a response that is equally systemic.

1 One of the references he draws on in his conceptualisation is Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton University Press, 2019).
2 O.O. Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 1–4.
3 Ibid., 4, and Chapter Three, "The Constructive View", 69-103.
4 Ibid., 23.
5 Murphy et al., 'Introduction: World History and the Work of Reparations,' *Journal of World-Systems Research* 26, 2, 2020, 143–150, here 145, qt. in Táíwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*, 21.

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Táíwò traces the emergence of this global racial empire to colonialism, which he identifies as a foundational force in shaping the modern world economy. Colonialism entailed the geographical extension of military, political, and economic power, resulting in the theft of land and the violent reorganisation of societies. Drawing on thinkers such as Vine Deloria and Glen Coulthard, Táíwò emphasises that land theft was central to the accumulation of colonial capital, giving rise to settler colonialism and militarism. Control over land and sea enabled colonisers to plunder resources, regulate production and consumption, and impose systems of governance that served imperial interests. These processes laid the groundwork for contemporary neocolonialism and institutionalised racism.

Here, Táíwò situates slavery within broader historical processes of colonial expansion, economic exploitation, and the invention of race. He notes that coerced labour existed within Europe before it was imposed on Africans; marginalised Europeans such as the homeless, former prisoners, and those kidnapped or sold were subjected to enslavement. Over time, however, slavery became racialised, linking 'the condition of enslavement with an imaginary concept of race for which skin color was the convenient proxy'.[1] Racism, Táíwò argues, emerged as a solution to political and economic problems faced by empires such as ancient Greece, Britain, and the Roman empire. Race – as a social construct with no biological foundation – was later exported to Africa and fused with colonial domination. That led to the emergence of the global racial empire, with the Global North dominating the Global South and white people dominating indigenous peoples.

Táíwò maintains that the making of new nation-states has proven to be insufficient to achieve justice, due to the international economic and political system. Although modern nations are legally equal, they are deeply unequal in economic and political power. In offering an alternative, Táíwò draws on anti-colonial activists of the 1960s and 1970s who envisioned a New International Economic Order which would change the distribution of global wealth.[2] Specifically, he turns to legal scholar Dr Nkechi Taifa, who argues that the 'concept of reparations is closely tied to that of self-determination and should not be divorced from it'.[3] Nkechi was part of a group that, in 1968, advocated for the establishment of the 'Republic of New Afrika', demanding that the United States cede land to them, provide initial funding and grant the right to directly negotiate land with indigenous people.

This forward-looking orientation is what Táíwò defines as a constructive view of reparations: '[A] historically informed view of distributive justice, serving a larger and broader worldmaking project.'[4] Transitioning to justice requires redistributing benefits and burdens. Crucially, the existing world order is already distributive, Táíwò argues, but unjustly so. His approach seeks to correct this by replacing unjust

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1 Ibid., 48.
2 Ibid., 73 f.
3 Nkechi Taifa, "Reparations and Self-Determination", in *Reparations, Yes!: The Legal and Political Reasons Why New Afrikans, Black People in North America, Should Be Paid Now for the Enslavement of Our Ancestors: Articles*, edited by Chokwe Lumumba et al. (Washington, DC: House of Songhay, Commission for Positive Education, 1989), qt. in Táíwò, *Reconsidering reparations*, 71.
4 Ibid., 74.

distributions with fairer ones. At the same time, Táíwò is careful to note that this model is not meant to apply to every instance of harm or crime; it is specifically tailored to the historical and structural injustices of trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism.[5] This is not to suggest that before trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism the world was just, and the global racial empire was not a continuation of the world before. Reparations, in this sense, provide a framework for pursuing equality by confronting racialised economic stratification and political inequality. Social resources are unevenly distributed and justice demands reparations across space and time to attend to multiple levels and scales.

As Táíwò points out, traditional arguments for reparations often hinge on fault and causation, attempting to separate the guilty from the innocent. Táíwò finds this approach inadequate, noting that 'we are all morally "in the red", as Dr. Martin Luther King put it'.[6] The moral categories of everyday life, he argues, are ill-suited to addressing a system as vast and enduring as the global racial empire. Rather than focusing on blame, Táíwò turns to the legal concept of liability, specifically strict liability, which does not depend on fault and blame. This shift allows attention to move from moral recrimination to future-oriented choices about how to restructure the world. Since the Global North has been the primary beneficiary of the global racial empire, it bears responsibility for addressing the advantages it continues to enjoy.

Throughout the book, Táíwò contrasts his constructive view with two dominant approaches to reparations: harm repair and relationship repair. Harm repair focuses on material compensation and improved living conditions for Black people, while relationship repair emphasises reconciliatory justice. Táíwò argues that both approaches are limited because they do not fully acknowledge the scope of the world order produced by trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism. His constructive view promises a broader, future-orientated view capable of confronting structural injustice at its roots. This expansive perspective also allows Táíwò to link reparations to environmental concerns, arguing that reparations and climate justice must be pursued together.

Indeed, one of the book's most distinctive contributions is its integration of climate justice into the reparations debate. Táíwò urges advocates of racial justice to recognise that the climate crisis is equally important. Environmental catastrophes, he argues, are products of the same history that produced the global racial empire, creating 'new social divisions between those advantaged enough to buy or coerce security from climate impacts and those who cannot'.[7] He underscores the relationship between people and nature under the global economic system, which relies on the extraction of biophysical resources and energy from the Global South. While ecological risks ultimately affect everyone, their burdens fall disproportionately on the already disadvantaged.

5 Ibid., 75.
6 Ibid., 122.
7 Ibid., 162.

In the final chapter, 'The Arc of the Moral Universe', Táíwò weaves together the book's central themes, emphasising that this project of worldmaking will span generations. In order to overcome the sense that the struggle for justice could therefore be futile, he suggests that people relate to the world as ancestors. Struggles for justice have always existed – even the colonisers understood the weight of their unjust actions. Generational wealth of the families of colonisers and conquerors underscores how historical injustice continues to shape the present. Five centuries of injustice cannot be undone quickly. The constructive view of reparations invites readers to grasp the enormity of 'the whole thing: end oppression, build a new social system, and set up safeguards that prevent the system from backsliding into injustice'.[8] But justice, Táíwò reminds us, is not achieved all at once. It is achieved through sustained struggle. Our ancestors paved the way for us, they fought for our opportunities and we are morally responsible of our next generation – because the struggle for justice is continuous.[9]

Ultimately, *Reconsidering Reparations* makes a compelling case for understanding reparations as a global, forward-looking project inseparable from climate justice. By centering the human costs of slavery, colonialism, racism, and environmental degradation, Táíwò offers a powerful framework for reimagining justice on a global scale. The constructive view he advances opens new possibilities for thinking about reparations – not as a backward-looking settlement of accounts, but as a shared responsibility to build a more just world for future generations: 'We should think about our ancestors. But we will win and lose our own ethical battles based on what we do for our descendants. We are defined by what kind of ancestors we choose to be.'[10]

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8 Ibid., 199.
9 Ibid., 204-206.
10 Ibid., 206.