

COMMENTARY By DR. DHANPAUL NARINE

The Reparations Debate

Who should benefit from reparations? The answer is that anyone that was forcibly displaced by colonialism has the right to argue for redress. They include those from the African continent, from Asia, Europe, and the native peoples. This means that Blacks, Indians, Chinese, Portuguese, poor whites and Amerindians have a valid claim for reparations.

Eric Williams said that a man in a coffin had more room than those in a slave ship. The history is familiar. Slavery was inhumane, brutal and nasty. When the 'door of no return' was opened millions of Africans were transplanted to other countries. Their entry shaped the demography, economy and culture of America and the West Indies.

According to statistics, over 4 million Africans were transported to America and the West Indies from 1610 to 1865 as slaves. Slave labor built the new colonies, made them rich and led to a Civil War when the American South refused to go along with Emancipation. In recent years, there have been calls for reparations to be made to the descendants of those that were enslaved.

We should point out that reparations were made as far as 1862 but these were done to the slave owners for their loss of profits. On April 16, 1862 President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill ending slavery in the District of Columbia. The bill provided, 'for immediate emancipation, compensation to former owners who were loyal to the Union for up to \$300 for each freed slave, voluntary colonization of former slaves to locations outside the United States, and payments of up to \$100 for each person choosing emigration.' By the end of 1862 a total 930 petitions were approved from former owners.

What about reparation for the former slaves? When the Civil War ended in 1865 General William Sherman promised to make reparations to the former slaves. He suggested '40

acres of land and a mule apiece.' The land was to be set aside 'on the Georgia and South Carolina Coasts but the promise was quickly recanted and the land was taken back with no other plans for reparations.'

This did not stop persons calling for redress and in fact Martin Luther King drew attention to

opposition to reparations among whites while blacks feel that reparations are long overdue.

Reparations have been debated in the Caribbean as well. The Caribbean was a drop off point in the triangular trade and slavery filled the coffers of the planocracy. It is logical then that Caribbean governments would have made a case for reparations. In March 2014, fifteen Caribbean countries unveiled proposals to demand reparations from Europe for 'the enduring suffering inflicted by the Atlantic slave trade.'

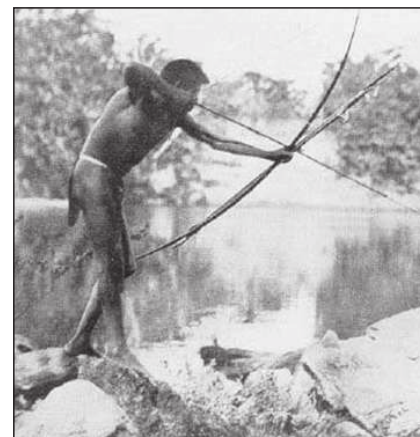
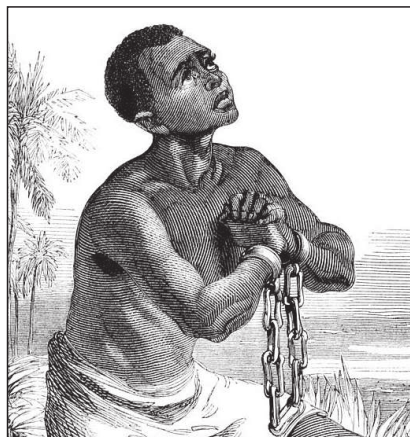
Sir Hilary Beckles from Barbados is the chair of the reparations task force. He said that money was not the main

both sides of the argument and they are vociferous and influential in the reparations debate. Those that are in favor of reparations say that the legacy of slavery remains. In his 2008 biography of abolitionist William Wilberforce, former British Foreign Secretary Mr. William Hague calls slavery, 'brutal, mercenary, and inhumane from its beginning to end.' However, he does not believe the reparations are the answer, nor does he suggest what might be.

Some of the arguments in favor follow Coates' views that slavery was inhumane, that blacks need to own wealth and that reparations will help solve

is not the answer. He argues that governments should fight the legacy of slavery by improving schools, provide adequate health care and improve the economy. Mr. Obama says, "I have said in the past-and I'll repeat again-that the best reparations we can provide are good schools in the inner city and jobs for the people who are unemployed."

Mr. Obama went on to win the Presidency in 2008 and to get re-elected four years later but reparations has not figured prominently in his social or economic policies. He has called reparations a distraction and has even said that while an apology for slavery would be appropriate it



Their children have a right to claim reparations.

the fact that the descendants of slaves were given insufficient funds and therefore could not compete on a level economic field. In 1998 Rep. John Conyers introduced a bill in Congress H.R. 40 to call for reparations and a national discussion on the impact of slavery in America. The bill is still to be passed and Conyers has vowed to keep introducing it until it happens.

One of the powerful intellectual arguments in favor of reparations has come from Ta-Nehisi Coates. In an article in the 'Atlantic' Coates says that after slavery and Jim Crow laws the system has made it difficult for blacks to move up the ladder. Coates argues that if America is to repay its debt to blacks there has to be compensation for the exploitation of their labor. It is interesting to note that in some surveys done in the United States there is

objective. According to Sir Hilary, 'we are not exclusively concerned with financial transactions, we are concerned more with justice for the people who continue to suffer harm at so many levels of social life.' Some of the 'justice' demands include citizenship for those black Caribbean nationals that decided to re-migrate to countries such as Ghana and Ethiopia, the improvement of communities that suffered from the after effects of slavery, more cultural exchanges between Africa and the Caribbean, the provision of medical help to the Caribbean, more literacy programs and an apology from Britain for conducting the slave trade. In 2007, Prime Minister Tony Blair said that slavery was a 'shameful enterprise' and that he regretted it but he stopped short of an apology.

There are lobbies on

the racial problems in the United States. In the Caribbean the lingering legacy of slavery continues to make the headlines.

Caricom has hired a British firm to represent it in the reparations arguments. The money if paid is estimated to be about \$400 billion but writer Denis Rancourt, and others, argue that it could run in the trillions. According to Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, 'these crimes against humanity ought to be repaired for the developmental benefit of our Caribbean societies.'

But there are those who are opposed to reparations and surprisingly they can be found in high places. In 2008 a young Senator from Illinois was running for President of the United States. He was Barack Obama. According to Mr. Obama, reparations

would not help to improve the lives of black Americans.

One President that came close to offering an apology was Nicholas Sarkozy of France. In February 2010, President Sarkozy visited Haiti. It was the first time a French President would make a visit to Haiti, a country that was once the pearl of the Indies and the world's richest colony. Haiti was sucked dry of its sugar, coffee, cotton, hardwood and indigo by the French planocracy. The Parisian boulevards with their spacious and imposing arches are as a result of slave labor.

President Sarkozy said in Port-au-Prince that 'the Haitian people have been wounded but they are standing.' He also wanted Haitians to take control of their own destiny. How can Haiti take control of its destiny without French intervention and admission of



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its brutality and exploitation? If ever there was an argument for reparations Haiti will always have a strong case.

In 1825, Haiti agreed to pay France 125 million francs in compensation for lost property that included slaves. This was as a result of the successful 1804 slave revolt and King Charles justified the fee as a payment of lost property. This was an astronomical sum that had to be paid with interest and it took Haiti until 1947 to repay it fully. It is little wonder that the country has remained poor.

There is the argument that the United States also owes Haiti billions in reparations for imposing sanctions on Haiti after 1804 and for ruling the country by force from 1915 to 1934. The official word is that France is not interested in paying reparations to Haiti as it might open a floodgate to other claims. There is a strong case then for the setting up of a Reparations Fund by England, France, Portugal, the US and others.

The aim of the fund will be to improve education, health, cultural expressions and the welfare of all of the peoples in a particular country or region. There is a strong argument for monies from the fund to be used to create Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programs and for higher education institutions to be strengthened.

Reparations then will not mean giving monetary handouts but by focusing on education and welfare the souls of the natives, the slaves and indentured servants will begin to know peace.

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of THE WEST INDIAN.