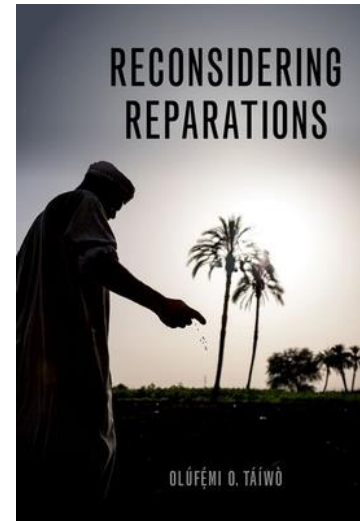


A Refreshing Global and Generational View of Reparations

a review from Dick Burkhardt of

Reconsidering Reparations

By Olufemi Taiwo (2022)



Taiwo brings a most welcome and articulate breath of fresh air to stale and narrow ideologies, based on both an African family background (Yoruba from Nigeria) and US upbringing. In this seminal work he places the project of reparations in a double setting of place and time – reparations for both slavery across continents and colonial history over the last 500 hundred years, now facing an uncertain future of escalating climate catastrophes. He challenges us to make reparations a “worldmaking” endeavor for the ages – to transform 21st century civilization to adapt to the climate emergency in ways that go the extra mile to uplift the livelihoods of those still damaged by the legacies of slavery and colonialism.

Taiwo views this as an inherited “liability” of Western civilization – an obligation due to complex circumstances, not a guilt trip. For example, the Global North should aid the Global South in practical, “constructive” ways, with restitution and reconciliation as secondary aspects, not the primary means of reparations as promoted by others. Debt relief would be a good start. This proposal is more promising than one might suppose because the global elites increasingly understand the threat of climate change and the need to include the world’s poor majority in the solution (“interest convergence”).

Taiwo calls the current legacy of slavery / colonialism “global racial empire”. Though he does make a good case that slavery played an important role in jump-starting colonial wealth, that race remains a

dominant organizing feature of today's imperial world order is not well substantiated. In fact, the industrial revolution, as driven by fossil fuels, took over during the latter half of the 19th century.

At one level Taiwo understands the primacy of economics, even from the beginning, quoting indigenous leader John Redhouse that “the so-called Indian Wars were always fought over issues of land and resources” (p 19) and Trinidad & Tobago leader Eric Williams that “Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (p 46). Yet he does not deal adequately with the fundamental role of cheap energy in driving economic growth, hence the depletion of key resources and the production of waste products that damage ecosystems. Human energy has long since receded into the background and fossil fuels are proving exceedingly difficult to replace. Thus “global oil empire” would be a far more accurate appellation.

Nevertheless it is most welcome to get many indigenous and some black leaders on board with climate justice. For far too long environmentalism has been seen as elitist by many advocates for justice – before the global consequences were widely understood. Taiwo clearly sees the need for more effective global governance and organizing, yet he does not follow up. He does not even cite the World Social Forums, or the World Trade Organization protests of the last generation, let alone the recent defeat of the Trans Pacific Partnership, or the strengths and weaknesses of UN and other international organizations.

Another peculiarity, in regard to world history, is that Taiwo does not cite Jared Diamond's famous “Guns, Germs, and Steel”, though he deals with the same issues in the same way. However, it is most welcome that he cites a widely variety of lesser-known authors, especially from other countries. This is a deserved rebuke to “American exceptionalism”. His final advice is simply patience and persistence: “The unjust world order we have is the outcome of five centuries of human action – it would be an incredible achievement to undo this evil in half that time” (p 199). Think and act, he says, “like an ancestor”.