The Long-Term Effects of Colonialism on Poorer Nations and What is Owed to Them: Monetary Restitution, Archaeological Artifacts, and Climate Change

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the enduring impact of colonialism on global wealth distribution, addressing whether affluent former colonial powers have a moral duty to provide reparations to their impoverished former colonies. It argues for direct payments to affected nations and individuals, repatriation of looted artifacts, and financial support for climate change adaptation. The study highlights historical atrocities, like the Namibian genocide and the British exploitation of India, to emphasize the depth of suffering caused. Ultimately, the research underscores the ethical obligation of wealthier nations to address the persistent legacies of colonial exploitation, encompassing economic, cultural, and climate-related restitutions.

Introduction

Colonialism has left substantial economic scars on the distribution of wealth in the world today. Former colonial powers remain some of the wealthiest nations in the world while most post-colonial states continue to suffer in poverty as developing nations. But do these once-colonial "rich" nations – i.e., the United Kingdom, Germany, and France – necessarily "owe" their poorer former colonies – i.e., India, Namibia, Benin – anything? For the purposes of this study, the term "owe" will be defined as being under a moral obligation to render.¹ To compensate for the injustices and atrocious damages done to the colonies, the rich nations are morally liable to make reparations to the poorer nations through direct payments to the country, as well as to historically affected individuals and communities. Wealthy nations should also return artifacts that were illegally taken from the colonies. Lastly, rich nations have a moral obligation, as beneficiaries of massive industrialization and fossil fuel usage, to make extra payments to help the developing nations adapt to climate change, which poor nations are disproportionately affected by, and convert to renewable energy.

Historical Injustices: European Conquests in Africa and India

Colonialism has led to "some of the most brutal injustices against colonized peoples all over the world."² The wealthy nations of the world accumulated vast amounts of wealth from their colonies during the second half of the last millennium, which remains to have significant implications on these former colonies because of years of

¹*Merriam Webster* (Springfield: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2022), s.v., "owe," https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/owe; *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), s.v., "owe," www-oed-com.

²Anna Dunham, "Should There Be Reparations To Post-Colonial States?" *Fourth Committee: Special Political and Decolonization* (Norfolk: Old Dominion University, 2015),

https://www.odu.edu/content/dam/odu/offices/mun/2017/ib-2017-fourth-reparations-final.pdf.



destructive natural resource extraction, harmful and unfree trade restrictions, local labor force exploitation, and so forth.³ Some colonizers promoted segregation through restrictive legislation, implemented policies of assimilation and integration, and even slaughtered large fractions of the indigenous population.⁴

Wealthy European colonizers, for example, wreaked havoc throughout Africa during the nineteenth century. One example is the horrendous Namibian genocide perpetrated by the German colonizers. This genocide killed about 75 percent of the entire Herero population and 50 percent of the Nama population, making it "one of the most effective genocides in history."⁵ The Belgians similarly destroyed native populations in the Congo. As historian Adam Hochschild writes, "During the Leopold period and its immediate aftermath the population of the [Congo] dropped by approximately ten million people," which was about half of the population.⁶ By massacring huge numbers of people, colonizers terrorized the survivors into gathering rubber and ivory; thus, the Belgians not only robbed the Congo of its people but also of its wealth of natural resources.

The British economically deprived India of its wealth as well. As Indian politician Dr. Shashi Tharoor expounds, "India's share of the world economy when Britain arrived on its shores was 23%, [but] by the time the British left it was down to below 4%" because the British took any profit for itself.⁷ Additionally, the Indian life expectancy decreased by 20 percent between 1872 and 1921.⁸ Although Indians, on average, live much longer (69 years) today, Britains still outpace them by 12 years (81 years).⁹ Between 15-29 million Indians died because of starvation from British-induced famines between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰ Historian Mike Davis explains that while peacetime famine vanished in late-nineteenth-century Europe, it escalated with profound destructiveness across numerous colonial territories as they were assimilated into the "modern world system" during the period known as the "golden age of Liberal Capitalism." Davis also highlights that in the famine of 1899-1900, which claimed the lives of 143,000 Beraris due to starvation, the province managed to export not just substantial quantities of cotton, but an astonishing 747,000 bushels of grain.¹¹ Even as recently as World War II, four million Indians died during the Bengal famine because Prime Minister Winston Churchill

³"Over 150,000 Canadian aboriginal children were placed in residential schools between the late 19th and early 20th century. Residential schools were designed by the Canadian government with the purpose of removing children from the influence of their own culture and assimilating them into the dominant Canadian culture." Keane Henderson, "Understandings of Colonization on Indigenous Health," University of Saskatchewan College of Medicine, March 14, 2018. https://medicine.usask.ca/news/2018/mymd/understandings-of-colonization-on-indigenous-health.php

⁴ Before the Europeans' arrival, for example, Latin America in 1492 had been inhabited by 50-100 million indigenous people. By the mid 1600s, the native population plummeted 3.5 million. Many of these people were slaughtered, died from slavery and foreign diseases, starved to death, being kicked off the land; "It was like the holocaust seven times over." Jason Hickel, "Enough of Aid – Let's Talk Reparations," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/nov/27/enough-of-aid-lets-talk-reparations; Julie Cassidy, "The Legacy of Colonialism." *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 51, no. 2 (2003): 409–55. https://doi.org/10.2307/3649152.

⁵C. Erichsen, "German-Herero conflict of 1904–07." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 5, 2022. https://www.britannica.com/topic/German-Herero-conflict-of-1904-1907.

⁶Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 233.

⁷As Mike Davis further states, "there was no increase in India's per capita income from 1757-1947." Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocaust: El Niño and the Making of the Third World*. Verso: New York, 2000), 311; Sashi Tharoor, "Dr. Shashi Tharoor MP – Britain Does Owe Reparations," *OxfordUnion*, July 14, 2015, https://youtu.be/f7CW7S0zxv4.

⁸ While the average life expectancy in Britain, and many other "rich" and "developed nations," neared 60 by 1921, in India it was only 25. Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 312.

⁹Max Roser, "Life Expectancy," *Our World in Data*, October, 2019, https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy. ¹⁰Tharoor, "Britain Does Owe Reparations."

¹¹ Davis, Late Victorian Holocausts, 66.

deliberately diverted essential supplies from Indian civilians to the Europeans.¹²

In actuality, colonialism did not end all that long ago and its aftereffects still live on today. It is impossible to replace, or "payback," the immense loss of human life, the gross means of labor extraction, the rape of natural resources that has deprived these nations of indigenous wealth and polluted their waters, as well as the intentional colonial policies that have left the "third world" at the periphery, rather than at the core, of the world economy.¹³ As such, these "rich" nations, which became "rich" largely from the wealth of their former colonies, do "owe" "poor" nations something. But what?

Rich Nations Owe Poor Nations, but What?

Many post-colonial states in the so-called Third World have been calling on former colonial powers to provide them a form of compensation and recompense for their historical wrongdoings called "reparations" to help them solve the contemporary problems resulting from colonialism. Monetary reparations should include payments to the "poor" government for infrastructure and materials to prevent tragedies resulting from colonialism's aftermath i.e., inadequate healthcare supplies, dirty water systems, nonrenewable energy sources, etc. Additionally, direct payments should be made to the individuals and communities reshaped by colonialism's wrath.¹⁴ In many cases, however, factions in the former colonial powers refuse to provide reparations by arguing that the actions taken during the colonial era were not illegal at that time.¹⁵ Others argue that these crimes were committed so long ago that the current government, and individuals in power, cannot be held accountable for the actions taken by the people and states of that era.¹⁶

Comparative Case Study: German Reparations and Reconciliatory Actions in Namibia and Israel

However incomplete, there are some examples of positive steps towards transnational reparations; in 2015, for example, Germany began negotiations with the Namibian government to compensate for the aforementioned genocide. In 2021, Germany apologized to Namibia and planned to pay 1.1 billion euros over the next thirty years for infrastructure, healthcare, and training programs to impact Namibian communities.¹⁷

Germany, however, deliberately avoided the word "reparation" and rather suggested "reconciliation" with the victims, to avoid opening a possible "legal avenue" for a multitude of nations to claim reparations for past colonial wrongs.¹⁸ The payments, the German government claims, are not a legal consequence of their moral and political recognition of the genocide. Therefore, some critics consider them a mere "formal gesture" and "lost opportunity" because the negotiations were secret, the proper parties were not involved, and international law

¹⁵The reactionary party, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), for example completely denies responsibility stating that the Germans must neither apologize or pay for colonial wrongs. Henning Melber, "Germany and Namibia: Negotiating Genocide." *Journal of Genocide Research* 22, no. 4 (March 2020): 502-514; https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/germany-acknowledges-genocide-namibia-stops-short-reparations-180977886/.

 $^{^{12}}Ibid.$

¹³Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), xv, 44.

¹⁴These payments should be made to those that directly experienced deleterious effects of colonial rule, as well as their ancestors.

¹⁶Dunham, "Should There Be Reparations To Post-Colonial States?"

¹⁷"Germany Officially Recognises Colonial-era Namibia Genocide," BBC, May 28, 2021,

https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57279008.

¹⁸Ibid.



bodies and precedents were ignored leaving Germany not "legal[ly] responsible for the colonial crimes."¹⁹ Many Namibians, as well, believe that the idea of "reconciliation" is an "insult," as many of the descendants of the victims were excluded by not receiving direct compensation, and wealthy German speakers continue to hold Namibian ancestral land, which critics believe Germany should buy to return to Namibians.²⁰

History has shown adequate reparations can significantly boost a developing nation. Consider West Germany's payment of 3 billion marks to Israel and 450 million marks to the World Jewish Congress at UN deliberations in 1952 as reparation for the Holocaust.²¹ The money was invested in Israel's infrastructure and played a huge role in helping Israel to become an economically viable country.²² Germany has admitted to executing a genocide in both cases, but the outcomes between Israel and Namibia are grossly different. Thus, in the case of Namibia, Germany should similarly compensate the ancestors of German colonial brutality as they have for victims of the Holocaust.

Case Study: British Reparations and Monetary Policy for India

Monetary reparations should also be paid in cases that involved economically abusive colonial policy, even if explicit "genocide" did not occur. Britain, for example, "owes" India for the massive extraction of wealth, and resultant mass death, during its occupation. Many suggest, however, that Britain has historically offered aid to India. Nevertheless, according to Dr. Tharoor, "British aid to India is about 0.4 percent of India's GDP" despite the fact that India was "Britain's biggest cash cow," i.e. the largest purchaser of goods and payer of high civil servant wages, that led to Britain's late nineteenth-century world hegemony and immense wealth.²³ Aid, however, is not a substitute for reparations. Aid is an act of charity and philanthropy; reparation is an act of responsibility and moral obligation.

Others also reject the idea that Britain should pay reparations to India by suggesting that British colonial presence revolutionized Indian transportation and thus forwarded current Indian economic modernization. British railway construction, however, came at a severe human cost. Critical observers, like Mahatma Gandhi, suggest that the British construction of the Indian railroad system, for example, bled India of adequate funds for hydraulic works, which could have been invested in to prevent massive famines.²⁴

https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/44534.

https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20162/v162.pdf#page=215

¹⁹ Henning Melber, "Why Reconciliation Agreement between Germany and Namibia Has Hit the Buffers," *The Conversation*, last modified January 9, 2022. https://theconversation.com/why-reconciliation-agreement-between-germany-and-namibia-has-hit-the-buffers-173452; Sarah Imani, Karina Theurer, and Wolfgang Kaleck, "The 'Reconciliation Agreement': A Lost Opportunity," *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, June 16, 2021,

²⁰"Germany Officially Recognises Colonial-era Namibia Genocide," BBC, May 28, 2021,

https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57279008; Rokhaya Diallo, "Europe has a long way to go on reparations," *The Washington Post*. July 21, 2021.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/21/europe-reparations-colonialism-france-senegal-benin-germany-namibia-britain/.

²¹United Nations, "Israel and Federal Republic of Germany Agreement." *United Nations Treaty Series: Treaties and International Agreements Registered or filed and recorded with the Secretariat of the United Nations* 162 (Luxembourg: United Nations), September 10, 1952, 205-314.

²²Moreover, Holocaust survivors continue to receive payments today. Germany gave \$662 million of COVID-19 relief aid, in direct payments, to about 240,000 poorest Holocaust survivors throughout the entire world in 2020; Lewis, "Germany to give \$662 million to Holocaust survivors struggling during the coronavirus pandemic," *CBS News*, Oct 15, 2020, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/holocaust-survivors-germany-reparations-coronavirus-pandemic/.

²³Sashi Tharoor, "Dr. Shashi Tharoor MP – Britain Does Owe Reparations." *OxfordUnion* https://youtu.be/f7CW7S0zxv4.

²⁴The British allocated thirteen times more resources and investment to railroads than hydraulic works. Sir Arthur Cotton and Florence Nightingale, thus, claimed that "the sad and humiliating scene of magnificent works

It appears, however, that only the Axis powers of World War II have been compelled to offer reparations to their former colonies, while the Allied powers who committed similar crimes have largely avoided responsibility. Like Germany's apology to Holocaust victims and Namibia, Italy apologized and compensated with medical care and 5 billion dollars to those harmed by the remnants of colonialism in Libya, according to The Treaty of Benghazi (2008).²⁵ Reparations should not just be a punishment for the losing party in the aftermath of a World War; it should be justice for those affected by colonialism throughout the world and thus all former colonial powers must pay reparations.²⁶

Returning Historical Artifacts to their Proper Context

Besides monetary reparations, the post-colonial states' ownership of the artifacts "found," or "looted," from colonized countries inevitably comes up regarding what rich nations culturally owe poor nations. Colonizers, such as the British and French, have a history of taking what they believed to be valuable.²⁷ Resultantly, about 90% of African cultural heritage items are estimated to currently be in Europe.²⁸ Because of colonialism's history, it is difficult not to believe that these artifacts were stolen. The British Museum, for example, houses more than 50,000 Egyptian artifacts. According to the former Egyptian minister of antiquities, however, 60% of Egyptian artifacts were taken out of the country illegally.²⁹ Likewise, Paris's Quai Branly museum holds 70,000 African objects, 46,000 of which qualify for repatriation, according to a French government report.³⁰

Removing the objects from their original context could impede our ability to fully understand them. When these objects were looted, their cultural, religious, and political significance was not taken with them.³¹ Additionally, these objects and artifacts could serve as a boon to the local economies through the tourism they may generate. Some people might argue that the artifacts should be kept in European museums because richer nations are better equipped to maintain, display, protect, and study them. As Dr. Zahi Hawass argues, however,

[[]railroads] have cost poor India 160 millions[dollars], which are so utterly worthless in the respect of the first want of India, that millions are dying by the side of them." General Sir Arthur Cotton, *The Madras Famine*, London 1877, p.5. See also Florence Nightingale, letter to the *Illustrated New*, 29 June 1877 as cited in Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, 332; Mahatma Gandhi, "Discussion with Woodrow Wyatt, in *The Collected Words of Mahatma Gandhi* 83, no.473 (13 April 1946), Ahmedabad 1981, pp.678, 703-7.

²⁵Natlino Ronzitti, "The Treat on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation between Italy and Libya: New Prospects for Cooperation in the Mediterranean?" *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 1, no. 1 (2009): 125-133. https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_126121_smxx.pdf

²⁶In 1965, Japan also paid \$300 million in aid, \$200 million in loans and \$300 million in loans for private trust to Korea as reparation, according to the Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and the Republic of Korea. United Nations, "Japan and Republic of Korea Treaty on Basic Relations." *United Nations Treaty Series: Treaties and International Agreements Registered or filed and recorded with the Secretariat of the United Nations* 162 (Tokyo: United Nations), June 22, 1965, 44-48.

https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8471-English.pdf; Miki Ishikida, *Toward Peace: War Responsibility, Postwar Compensation, and Peace Movements in Education in Japan* (Bloomington: iUniverse inc., 2005), 21; Tharoor, "Britain Does Owe Reparations."

²⁷ Such as the ring and sword of Tipu Sultan from India or the Parthenon friezes from Greece.

²⁸Ali Abbas Ahmadi. "The nuances of repatriation: Should the British Museum return its Egyptian collection?" *The New Arab*, December 13, 2019, https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/should-british-museum-return-its-egyptian-collection

²⁹Hawass has called for repatriation for these illegally taken artifacts including the Rosetta Stone from the British Museum. Ahmadi, "The nuances of repatriation."

³⁰Although France had returned 26 pieces of seized art to Benin in 2021, it clearly just represents a fraction of the 5,000 works Benin is seeking and the tens of thousands of seized African artifacts held in France. Reuters,

[&]quot;France returns 26 looted artifacts and artwork to Benin," CNN, November 12, 2021,

https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/benin-art-returned-scli-intl/index.html

³¹Tayo Bero, "How looted artifacts impede our understanding of history," CBC, April 20, 2022,

https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-looted-artifacts-impede-our-understanding-of-history-1.6424631.

the new Grand Museum in Giza, for example, is better equipped than most Western museums.³² As part of reparations, therefore, illegally seized artifacts should be returned to their country of origin.

The Devastating and Unequal Effects of Climate Change on Postcolonial Nations

Additionally, despite historically being negligent emitters of greenhouse gasses compared to developed "richer" nations, "poorer" Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and sub-Saharan African (SSA) states are the most vulnerable to climate change.³³ Since the Industrial Revolution, humans have emitted vast amounts of carbon dioxide and greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere, which has led to global warming, intense weather, rising sea levels, etc. By analyzing past data, scholars discovered that "developing countries have historically been the smallest emitters of greenhouse gasses, and yet, have been the worst victims of global climate change."³⁴

SIDS are particularly vulnerable to disastrous climatic conditions such as rising sea levels, increasing natural disasters, and changes in temperature and rain patterns due to their economic dependence on fragile sectors such as agriculture, fishing, and tourism that are susceptible to climate change.³⁵ On average, the proportion of estimated disaster damage to GDP was 4.5 times higher for poorer and smaller states compared to richer and larger ones, but this ratio soared to six times greater for Caribbean nations. Furthermore, the likelihood of natural disasters striking the Caribbean region is seven times higher than the average nation and the scale of devastation sometimes surpasses the entire economic output of certain countries. Hurricane Maria in 2017, for instance, is believed to have incurred costs equivalent to 225 percent of the Dominican Republic's GDP and 200 percent of Grenada's GDP, leaving substantial reconstruction demands that could span years to be fulfilled.³⁶ Rising sea levels and extreme weather like hurricanes and storms pose significant harm to the Caribbean island countries as they might "exacerbate the loss and erosion of coastal areas, the deterioration of marine ecosystems, the alteration of marine habitats and the local economies.³⁷

Even though tourism stands as the primary catalyst propelling economic advancement throughout the Caribbean region, climate change threatens even those moderate gains. Notably, in 2015 tourism infused USD \$53.1 billion into the Caribbean economy and created 709,000 jobs. Therefore, among twelve global regions, the Caribbean claims the pinnacle, holding the foremost rank in terms of tourism's proportional contribution to GDP. Consequently, the robustness and vitality of the Caribbean tourism sector stand as imperative prerequisites for the region's sustained expansion and prosperity. Nevertheless, research conducted by The UN Development Programme regarding sea level rise (SLR) in the Caribbean region suggests that approximately one-third of major tourism resorts and airports face a considerable risk due to a potential one-meter rise in sea levels. Moreover, a substantial portion of the land adjacent to seaports is also vulnerable to flooding stemming from a one-meter SLR. This perilous situation poses a direct threat to crucial sectors like tourism and vital infrastructure, including

³²Ahmadi, "The nuances of repatriation."

 ³³SIDS and SSAs are countries like the Dominican Republic, Congo, Solomon Islands, Mali, Liberia, Sudan, Chad, Guinea-Bissau, Micronesia, Niger, and Somalia. Islam, "Distributive justice in global climate finance."
³⁴Mofakkarul Islam, "Distributive justice in global climate finance," *Global Environmental Change* 73 (March 2022): 1-15, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2022.102475.

³⁵Office of Evaluation and Oversight, "Small Island States," accessed June 14, 2023.

https://www.iadb.org/en/ove/climate-change-caribbean-small-island-states

³⁶Inci Ötker and Krishna Srinivasan, "Bracing for the Storm," *International Monetary Fund: Finance & Development*, March 2018, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2018/03/otker

³⁷Bárcena Ibarra, Alicia Samaniego, Joseluis Peres, Wilson Alatorre, and José Eduardo, *The climate emergency in Latin American and the Caribbean: The path ahead – resignation or action* (New York: United Nations Publications, 2020).



seaports, airports, power plants, and coastal tourism resorts.³⁸ Notably, the aftermath of such an event could be particularly devastating for these smaller states, as the expenses associated with reconstructing such infrastructure could have the potential to account for up to 28% of the GDP of these nations in the foreseeable future.³⁹ Beyond GDP and tourism dollars, the effects of climate change also will affect clean water access and thus agricultural output, which may lead to devastating famines.

Poorer nations clearly bear the brunt of the international crusade against climate change, but their poverty makes them unable to adapt. Rich nations thus have a responsibility to help poorer countries, with resources and technology and transition to renewable eco-friendly energy.⁴⁰ Thus, the inequity between responsibility and impact supports the moral argument that the rich countries historically most responsible for climate change should provide financial and technical assistance to the poorer nations.⁴¹

Conclusion

Mass genocide, apartheid, ecological destruction, abusive labor practices, rampant wealth extraction, and cultural looting have created a debt that rich nations can never fully repay to poor nations. It is clear that rich nations "owe" poor nations, but the means are up for debate. Direct monetary reparations to individuals and communities, repatriation of looted artifacts, and the payment of money for infrastructural advancements to meet the present threats of climate change are only a start to healing colonialism's scars.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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⁴⁰Courtney Lindwall, "Rich, Polluting Nations Still Owe the Developing World." *NRDC.ORG*, January 21, 2022, https://www.nrdc.org/stories/rich-polluting-nations-still-owe-developing-world

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