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BOOK REVIEWS

Book Review: Revised Reparations

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Reconsidering Reparations
Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò
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Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, who teaches philosophy at Georgetown University, has a very different view of justice from ours. We believe that justice is based on the libertarian rights of self-ownership and Lockean appropriation, expressed in laws that apply to everyone and do not discriminate between different races or classes of people. Our view is a version of what Thomas Sowell calls traditional justice.

Táíwò, by contrast, is a proponent of what Sowell calls cosmic justice. Sowell (2000) explains:

> Unlike God at the dawn of Creation, we cannot simply say, "Let there be equality!" or "Let there be justice!" We must begin with the universe that we were born into and weigh the costs of making any specific change in it to achieve a specific end. We cannot simply "do something" whenever we are morally indignant, while disdaining to consider the costs entailed. . . .
>
> Cosmic justice is not simply a higher degree of traditional justice, it is a fundamentally different concept. Traditionally, justice or injustice is characteristic of a *process*. A defendant in a criminal case would be said to have received justice if the trial were conducted as it should be, under fair rules and

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> with the judge and jury being impartial. After such a trial, it could be said that "justice was done"—regardless of whether the outcome was an acquittal or an execution. Conversely, if the trial were conducted in violation of the rules and with a judge or jury showing prejudice against the defendant, this would be considered an unfair or unjust trial—even if the prosecutor failed in the end to get enough jurors to vote to convict an innocent person. In short, traditional justice is about impartial processes rather than either results or prospects.

Táíwò's variant of cosmic justice combines a racialized version of Marxism with a "capabilities" theory of justice similar to the approaches of Elizabeth Anderson, Martha Nussbaum, and Amartya Sen, but extended over the globe rather than restricted to the citizens of a particular country. Táíwò calls for massive redistribution to third-world countries, with programs to mitigate the effects of "climate change" foremost among them. The book consists of an introductory chapter, five body chapters, and two appendices. In what follows, we shall summarize and comment on a few points of interest in each of these.

In the introduction (chapter 1), Táíwò notes that some blacks such as Coleman Hughes and Adolph Reed have questioned the value of many proposals for reparations. They ask: What good are apologies for slavery? How do they help blacks today? They argue that we should instead concentrate on building a society that meets the redistributive requirements of "social justice." Táíwò answers that reparations and social justice aren't mutually exclusive: "The goal of *Reconstructing Reparations* is to argue for this perspective: the view that reparation is a construction project. Accordingly, I call this way of thinking about the relationship between justice's past and future the *constructive* view of reparations" (3; emphasis in original).

This goal leads Táíwò to criticize some "woke" practices. Blacks must not make the mistake, he says, of trying to justify their existence to whites. Instead, blacks must concentrate on the constructive view—do it my way or else! He says: "An entire industry of racial commentary, from think pieces to blogs to academic studies and whole fields of researchers, centers upon convincing imagined skeptical whites or Global Northerners that the social sky is in fact blue. . . . Most worrying, we spend so much time and energy responding to others' mistakes that we lose the ability to distinguish *their* questions from *ours*" (6–7; emphasis in original).

After the introduction, Táíwò turns to "Reconsidering World History," and the reconsideration is straight out of Karl Marx. According to Táíwò, capitalism was built on the back of slave labor from Africa and from plunder. Readers of the famous section on "Primitive Accumulation" in the first

volume of *Das Kapital* will learn little new here, other than a list of later writers who have parroted Marxist dogma: these include Kwame Nkrumah, Eric Williams, and Oliver Cromwell Cox.

Here is a sample of Táíwò's viewpoint: "In the beginning, the connection between racism, colonialism, and capitalism was obvious. The latter was built with political and juridical structures that explicitly mentioned race and empire and overtly managed the affairs of business in the context of both. As Karl Marx succinctly explains in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: 'Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. . . . Slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance'" (23).

It is apparent that Táíwò, like Marx before him, has conflated mercantilism and capitalism. The "Great Enrichment" that has taken place since the Industrial Revolution came about only when the market was released from the shackles imposed by mercantilism. Certainly, imperialism and colonialism continued after that; but in examining the causation of a change—in this case, the greatly accelerated prosperity—it is necessary to ask, What causal factor was present that was not there earlier?

During the nineteenth century, the British sought to end slavery, using the ships of their Royal Navy, the greatest in the world, to patrol the seas for slave traders. About 150,000 captives bound for a life of slavery were freed by the Royal Navy West Africa Squadron, and thousands of British sailors died in this campaign (Black 2004, 2020; Brain 2023; see also Rees 2009). Does this show that capitalist Britain was not altogether dominated by the dark motives Táíwò ascribes to it? He doesn't think so: "By 1842, Southern elites were already convinced of what scholars argued decades later: that the supposed 'humanitarian' project of imperial abolitionism was actually aimed at the empire's material interests. They took it that the empire's real goal was to disadvantage its slavery-reliant competitors and thereby gain an effective monopoly over the global supply of cotton and sugar" (34). Should we be equally dismissive of the moral arguments Táíwò offers for his "construction project"? Are these proposals simply to be viewed as ways to advance the economic interests of the third-world people with whom he identifies?

So far, we have seen little in the way of analytic philosophy in the book. Does this change in the next chapter, "The Constructive View"? We fear that it does not. Táíwò presents his position but does not offer any arguments that people have the rights to wealth redistribution that he says they do. He says:

> Since the world order is made out of distributive processes, the constructive view is a view about distribution. Because of past and present facts about how advantages and disadvantages have been distributed, they continue to accumulate unevenly and unjustly across different parts of the world, which is visible both at scales as small as individual differences (e.g., differences

> between white and Black workers) and as large as different political regions of the globe (Global North vs Global South). The just world we are trying to build is a better distribution system, by apportioning rights, advantages, and burdens in a better way than we've inherited from the global racial empire. It is also a view that looks to justly distribute the benefits and burdens of that transitional project of rebuilding. (74)

The equation of "unevenly" with "unjustly" is telling.

Táíwò criticizes John Rawls for adopting a theory of justice in which a country's obligations to its own citizens are much greater than its obligations to outsiders. The "construction project" would not have it so, but Táíwò ignores Rawls's arguments for his position—principally that the citizens of a country are tied to one another by bonds of solidarity. We of course do not support Rawls's theory, but our point here is that Táíwò has not considered the relevant issue. He says: "Rawls's focus on domestic justice takes the artificial separation of countries a little too seriously. As a result, he consistently fails to consider what the world system as a whole has to do with justice in any one of its countries. Rawls assumes that the major institutions of society are determined and regulated internally and thus that the justice of those institutions should be evaluated as though they are part of a closed system" (82–83). This is an ignoratio elenchi. If in fact an economic system is based on exploitation of the Global South, that needs to be taken into consideration in evaluating the system's justice. But that is an external criticism that does not address reasons for the two-tier view that are internal to Rawls's theory.

Matters improve somewhat in chapter 4, "What's Missing?" Táíwò raises two important philosophical issues, but his answers to them aren't satisfactory. The first of the issues is this: The "constructive project" to a large extent rests on claims that the ancestors of whites living today mistreated the ancestors of blacks living today. But why are people morally responsible for what their relations have done in the past? Táíwò slices though the problem. It doesn't matter, he says, whether they are responsible; they are still liable for the damages to the descendants of the mistreated:

> Responsibility is closely tied up with a web of related concepts like fault and cause. It is an important aspect of our moral lives, and the concept to which we instinctively appeal when we make the case that someone ought to give something to someone else. . . .
>
> But these common features of our daily moral concepts aren't built to respond to things on the scale of global racial empire. . . . It's not, in the straightforward sense, the *fault* of present-day descendants of settlers or whites that other people's

> descendants have a harder time of things. Nor was the world order founded centuries before their birth caused by their actions.
>
> There's a better concept we can use in responsibility's place: liability. Often liability is assigned on the basis of responsibility. . . . But it is possible to create some distance between them: for example, on the view that to be liable is simply to be obligated (typically to pay a price or bear a burden). Many legal systems have a version of what legal scholars call "strict liability," which obligates people and corporations to bear the costs of injuries in ways that bypass blame and fault-finding entirely. (121–22; emphasis in original)

Táíwò offers no arguments in support of the morality of strict liability. In sum, I want the money, and I'll take it from you. We shall leave it to readers to judge whether this is acceptable.

The second issue is indeed philosophically interesting.

> One particularly nasty complication with arguments about harm repair concerns what is termed the "non-identity objection" or the "existential worry." . . . Even had reparation been paid shortly after the abolition of slavery, how could one "repair" whatever harm was done to a child born into the condition of slavery. . . . Stated generally, it may be impossible to make sense of an individual "harm" claim if the action or process being charged with harm is also responsible for creating the harmed agent. According to this objection, there is no possible world or relevant counterfactual in which the agent is better off without the harming action, because every world in which the harming doesn't exist is a world in which the agent who claims they were harmed does not exist either. (128)

Readers should by now be able to guess Táíwò's "solution." We can ignore the problem; what we need to do is to redistribute resources to blacks, especially those living in the Global South. Again, we want money, and we want it now!

The remainder of the book requires little attention. In Táíwò's opinion, "climate change" is the biggest danger to the Global South, and he and a collaborator present detailed suggestions on how to cope with this. We are not "climate scientists," and an evaluation of this issue would be out of place here. We are inclined to think, though, that the danger is much exaggerated (Gordon 2022). An appendix offers an account of the Malê Revolt against slavery in Brazil, and in chapter 6, "The Arc of the Moral Universe," Táíwò invokes the wisdom of his Yoruba ancestors to encourage those who despair

that the task of establishing a new world system is too difficult. Such changes take time, and we must do what we can to improve things, even though the full realization of our aims is a hope for the future.

We finish this book with a sense of relief, glad to emerge from its miasma into the clear and penetrating light of the writings of Ludwig von Mises and Murray Rothbard.

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