

This is the Author's Original Version of this book review, since published in *Mind*:  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzac055>

*Reconsidering Reparations*, by Olúfemi O. Táíwò. New York, NY:  
Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. x + 261.

*Reconsidering Reparations* is a book about global justice. Its central philosophical argument claims that a just world would be one in which everyone enjoys the capabilities that they need to relate to one another as equals; maintains that realising this vision (in the right way) would serve as reparation for the injustices of trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism; and warns that this project is threatened by the climate crisis.

The book is part of OUP's Philosophy of Race series, edited by Linda Martín Alcoff and Chike Jeffers. It is a cross-disciplinary work, with the philosophical argument buttressed by material of a more historical or sociological nature. The content is pitched at 'a general audience' (p.8), and should serve this audience well. Táíwò is an accessible writer and skilled storyteller, whose fascination with the past and its ongoing significance shines in the historical narratives that are woven through the book.

Táíwò's main goal is to defend his 'constructive view' of reparations, designed specifically for the injustices of Trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism (pp.74-5). Chapter One is an introduction. Chapter Two is historical in nature. It is also the longest chapter. This is understandable given that it aims to provide a world history of how 'slavery and colonialism built the world we know' (p.18); leaving behind a global order that continues to distribute advantages and disadvantages along racist and colonial lines. Drawing inspiration from Charles Mills' theorisation of 'global white supremacy', and Cedric Robinson's work on 'racial capitalism', Táíwò terms this system the 'Global Racial Empire'. Chapter Three articulates Táíwò's vision of global justice and its relation to the reparative project. Chapter Four defends the constructive view over other accounts of reparations. The philosophical literature on reparations is substantial, and it is not possible to do it justice in the twenty pages that Táíwò devotes to this task. I suspect that proponents of these alternatives may therefore not be convinced by Táíwò's objections. However, he does not intend this critique to be decisive (p.124), and it will not be the focus of this review. Chapter Five links reparations to the pursuit of climate justice. And the final chapter presents an inspirational perspective on intergenerational justice, as a project of cross-generational cooperation in which we 'choose to relate to the world as ancestors' (p.11).

### The constructive approach to reparations

Táíwò's account of reparative justice is inspired by the thought of Nkechi Taifa, Robin D G Kelley, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor; and by social movements, including the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, and the Caribbean Community Reparations Commission (CRC) (pp.3-5). Two key messages drawn from these sources are that reparations: 1. cannot merely be symbolic, but 'should make tangible differences in the material conditions of people's lives' (p.140); and 2. shouldn't consist in financial transfers alone, but must bring about the structural change necessary for realising social justice. In Táíwò's words, this is a vision of reparative justice as a 'construction project' (p.4).

Though Táíwò does not describe it as such, the constructive view resembles a structural injustice approach, in the vein of Iris Marion Young (2011), and Catherine Lu (2017) – who applies Young's

insights to the wrong of colonialism. Like card-carrying structural injustice theorists, Táíwò is concerned with how global structures simultaneously generate advantage for some and vulnerability for others; and the need – accordingly – for structural change to create a better world. The social structures in question are both material and immaterial, including physical infrastructure, institutions, rules, and norms.

The structures Táíwò is particularly concerned with are those of Global Racial Empire. Like Lu (2017, ch.4), Táíwò understands colonialism and trans-Atlantic slavery as injustices that did not consist merely in wrongful events, but in enduring unjust structures (p.143). They are complex and large-scale structural injustices, in which many agents participated, and for which it can be difficult to isolate individual perpetrators (pp.118-122). In an evocative metaphor, Táíwò likens these structures to a ‘water management system’ with global reach, ‘channeling... advantages and disadvantages from one place to another’ (p.20), so that they ‘accumulate unevenly and unjustly across different parts of the world’ (p.74).

This is what Táíwò has in mind when he states what might otherwise look like the truism that ‘Slavery and colonialism built the world we know’ (p.18). What he means is that our world is a ‘continuation of the world of the eighteenth century’ (p.75), in the sense that ‘the patterns in how advantage and disadvantage flow have changed very little’. This demonstrates that ‘the global distribution system built by the Global Racial Empire continues to function’ (p.21; cf. Lu 2017, p.155). What reparative justice therefore demands is ‘a set of reforms that will comprehensively change the social structures that in fact undergird the forms of domination that live on in... current political conditions’ (p.143).

This makes the book a timely addition to accounts of reparations for slavery and colonialism as historical-structural injustices, many of which also draw inspiration from political movements (e.g. Waligore 2018; Nuti 2019; Bessone 2019; McKeown 2021). Táíwò’s view has at least two features that differentiate it from others in this field, however. First, it is perhaps uniquely ambitious in what it claims reparations should achieve. And second, it incorporates a distinctive understanding of where reparative duties fall in the present.

Regarding the first feature: for Táíwò, reparation for trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism must involve structural change of a global nature, in addition to more national, regional, or transnational measures. The simple case for this is that ‘slavery, colonialism, and the political structure they produced were and are global phenomena’ (pp.9-10). Táíwò adopts Adom Getachew’s terminology of ‘worldmaking’ to describe this task. In *Worldmaking after Empire* (2019), Getachew uses this term to emphasise how anticolonial movements did not view decolonization as simply an inward-looking, nation-building project. They believed that the realisation of national self-determination depended on remaking the international order as a system of nondomination. Similarly, Táíwò claims, reparations must be a project to ‘build a more just world on a global scale’ (p.5).

The goal is not, however, merely to build a world that is ‘more just’. Táíwò’s approach is also ambitious in its target. Reparative justice does not demand mere *reform* of the global order, but its total transformation into a world of justice (p.98). This makes his account extremely ‘future-oriented’ (p.124). For Táíwò, the aims of reparative justice appear identical to those of forward-looking social justice: reparations just *is* the very same project as ‘building the just world’. This feature of the view avoids the objection that ‘the call for reparations for some distracts from a more worthy political project that would provide justice for all’ (p.3). It is also, however, a little puzzling. Why does reparation for trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism require so much? The world prior to Global Racial Empire wasn’t just either, after all. And if reparative justice does coincide with forward-

looking social justice like this, has Táíwò inadvertently rendered the former redundant? (see Nuti 2019, pp.17-18; Blomfield 2021). We face the task of building a just world independent of our unjust history, so what does the call for reparations now add?

A reply to the redundancy worry can be found in the backward-looking element of Táíwò's theory, according to which the costs of transitioning to a just world should fall to those who inherit the moral liabilities of historical injustice (p.98). Reparative justice therefore *does* make a difference to what we ought to do now, because even though its end goals are no different to those of forward-looking social justice, reparation involves pursuing those goals in a different way (p.174). This, then, becomes the 'more specific role' of reparations for Táíwò: distributing the costs of the transition (p.74).

With the dimensions of Táíwò's approach in view, it is now possible to explain how he links reparations to the pursuit of climate justice. For Táíwò, 'The connection is largely contingent': the task of reparations is to build a just world, and 'it just so happens' that we cannot do this without addressing the climate crisis (p.158). Some – in philosophy, science, and the climate movement – defend a more constitutive relationship here, according to which colonialism is a significant component of the climate problem (e.g. Blomfield 2019; Whyte 2017; IPCC 2022, SPM.B.2). As grassroots collective Wretched of the Earth (WOTE), alongside dozens of other climate justice groups, puts it:

"The Truth" of the ecological crisis is that we did not get here by a sequence of small missteps, but were thrust here by powerful forces that drove the distribution of resources of the entire planet and the structure of our societies. The economic structures that dominate us were brought about by colonial projects whose sole purpose is the pursuit of domination and profit. For centuries, racism, sexism and classism have been necessary for this system to be upheld, and have shaped the conditions we find ourselves in. (WOTE 2019)

Táíwò does also support this picture of a less contingent connection between climate change and colonialism, perhaps most compellingly in his powerful telling of the history of Global Racial Empire behind the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina (pp.150-7). He also employs quantitative research to defend the claim that Global Racial Empire, by unevenly distributing advantage, has created a world of highly unequal climate vulnerability (pp.171-2). As Táíwò notes, we might therefore conclude that certain wealthier countries have special obligations to bear climate costs as a form of reparation for colonial injustice (p.178; see also Blomfield 2019, §10.4.2).

In what remains of this review, I examine the key characteristics of Táíwò's constructive view in further depth: What would it take to build a just world? And how should the costs of transition be shared?

### Building a just world

Táíwò's account of global justice is a form of cosmopolitan-capabilitarianism, inspired by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and disability justice. Specifically, he thinks we should globalize Elizabeth Anderson's (1999) state-focused theory of democratic equality. How to do this is not fully spelled out, but it seems that the goal will become a world in which everyone enjoys the capabilities that they need to relate to one another as equals – a form of global relational egalitarianism (Anderson 1999, p.313; see also Bertram 2005). In Táíwò's words:

Everyone in the *world order* should have capabilities that grant effective access to the means of maintaining their biological existence, economic power, and political agency. Our target must be a global community thoroughly structured by non-domination. (p.102).

This is a forward-looking, freestanding account of what global justice demands, in the sense that its defence does not make any reference to contingent historical facts, or the need for reparations. It is part of a broader philosophical programme that Táíwò appears to be developing, which he also refers to in a second book published this year: *Elite Capture*. Here, Táíwò describes his ‘constructive’ approach as a form of ‘pragmatic utopianism’ (2022, p.12). He seems to mean that although the approach is utopian in its goals (a just world), it pays plenty of heed to the question of transition – of how to achieve those goals from our current predicament. The answer, broadly speaking, is to identify strategies and tactics that will redistribute social power and resources (2022, p.84); an approach that Táíwò illustrates in *Reconsidering Reparations* (p.172-90). Though Táíwò understands this as a project of planetary dimensions, constructive politics can also take place at a local scale. What ultimately appears to mark something out as a constructive approach is a focus on building things that lead towards justice (2022, pp.107-8) – or on what others might term structural reform.

In thinking about how to build or rebuild structures, Táíwò claims we should be guided by concerns of distributive justice: we want structures that justly distribute capabilities (p.74). Although he might not thank me for saying so (given his critique of Rawlsian philosophy), this aspect of Táíwò’s view is reminiscent of John Rawls. Like Rawls, Táíwò appears to view structures as the basic subject of justice, to be assessed in terms of their distributive consequences over time. Two key differences are: 1. that Táíwò follows critics like Young (2011) in thinking that we must also attend to non-state structures, including global structures and informal structures such as social norms; and 2. that whilst Rawls assesses structures in terms of their distribution of ‘primary goods’, Táíwò favours the Sen-Nussbaum capabilities metric (p.93).

One of Táíwò’s objections to Rawls is that he has a ‘snapshot’ view of justice that assesses distributions in abstraction from how they came about (p.85). This characterisation is a bit misleading, because Rawls does not think we can judge a distribution to be just without knowing whether it arose from the correct operation of background institutions (1971, §14). It is fair to say, however, that Rawls is insufficiently attentive to the historical processes that actually engendered the current global distribution of goods (see e.g. Mills 2015). Táíwò instead aims to present a distributive theory that is ‘historically informed’ (p.73). So far, however, his cosmopolitan-capabilitarian account also appears to be purely forward-looking in orientation. To understand where history enters Táíwò’s theory, we must turn to his account of transitional justice.

### Sharing the costs of transition

As noted above, Táíwò suggests that the ‘more specific role’ of reparations concerns how to transition from the unjust status quo to a just world (p.74). In particular, reparative justice should tell us how to share the benefits and burdens of this transition (p.137). This appears to be the crucial backward-looking, historical component of the constructive view.

Táíwò claims that a key desideratum for this account is that it discriminates appropriately, by distributing these benefits and burdens ‘based on the different relationships of persons and institutions to the core moral wrongs’ (p.140). This involves ‘shifting the burdens toward those who’ve inherited the liabilities of global racial empire and benefits toward those who’ve inherited

claim rights upon it' (p.174). But how exactly do we identify those who have inherited such liabilities and claims?

To understand Táíwò's answer to this question, it helps to briefly outline his critique of two alternatives from the broader literature on reparations: the harm approach and the debt approach. On the harm approach, claims to reparations are possessed by present-day people who suffer harms that 'are causally connected to or constituted by past harms' (p.124; see e.g. Boxill & Corlett 2022, §7). A common objection to this approach is that to substantiate the claim that somebody in the present has been *harmed* by a past injustice, we need to show that they are *worse off* than they would have been had the injustice not taken place. However, this counterfactual comparison is intractable. In a world without trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism, would you have been better off or worse off? This scenario is hard to conceive, and the answer ultimately seems to be neither – you would not exist. Táíwò takes this as a reason to reject the harm approach (pp.127-133).

According to the debt approach, duties of reparation are like a debt that can persist over time. Commonly, such debts are taken to have originally been owed by collectives, such as corporations or nations. Since such collectives can be understood to persist across time despite changes in their membership, the hope is that we can make a relatively simple case for the persistence of reparative duties (e.g. Tan 2007; Butt 2009, ch.6). If France owed reparations to Haiti in 1804, for example, then this debt is one that simply endures, with non-payment itself becoming 'an ongoing injustice' (p.136).

I find Táíwò's objections to the debt approach harder to understand, but the main reason he thinks we cannot use it to identify present-day reparative claims and liabilities is that it is 'only built to handle a simple binary' (p.144). I think he means that the debt approach seeks to divide people into two mutually exclusive groups: those who have inherited reparative debts, versus those who have inherited reparative claims. It's not clear to me that the debt approach necessarily is binary in this way, given that we can be members of multiple collectives (some of which may be claimants whilst others are debtors). But in any case, we can take from this critique that Táíwò does not think there is a straightforward binary distinction between 'those who've inherited the liabilities of global racial empire and... those who've inherited claim rights upon it' (p.174).

Táíwò therefore seeks to ground claims and liabilities in a different relationship between present agents and past injustice. His view is that 'the differences in our relationship to history lie in the *extent* to which we are advantaged and disadvantaged by the world order of global racial empire' (p.145). This means that:

The racially advantaged, the Global North, and institutional repositories of plunder should bear more of the burdens of constructing the just world order... because of the relationship that their *advantages* hold to [the injustices of the past]. (p.123-4)

So the idea appears to be that instead of tracking debts or chains of harm across time, we track advantages. Unfortunately, however, Táíwò isn't entirely clear about what this entails. Clearly, given his critique of the harm approach, we are not to assess advantage by Global Racial Empire in counterfactual terms. Perhaps we are supposed to track the literal advantages created by trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism across time, but this seems an insurmountably complex task (cf. Nozick 1975).

A simpler alternative might be that we read moral liabilities and claim rights off present levels of advantage (assessed using the metric of capabilities (p.88)). This might seem like quite a good proxy for advantage by Global Racial Empire: slavery and colonialism have, after all, built this world.

However, some will argue that this approach fails to be sufficiently informed by our actual history. Contemporary levels of advantage are also a result of intervening wrongs (p.60), resistance movements, and more neutral factors such as ‘geological luck’ (p.159). Táíwò is clear, for example, that although ‘The work of replacing global racial empire with a just world order’ remains to be completed, it has already been advanced in some respects (p.200). This suggests there has already been some reordering of advantages in the direction demanded by justice. Current levels of capabilities might therefore seem an imperfect guide to the extent to which anyone has been advantaged or disadvantaged by the injustices of the past.

More guidance would therefore be helpful on how we are to assess the extent to which ‘rich countries’ (p.178) – or their citizens – have inherited moral liabilities versus claim rights. Take, for example, Singapore, Ireland, Qatar, Bermuda, Finland, and South Korea – all relatively wealthy in terms of GDP per capita. To what extent do their advantages derive from trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism, rather than something else? To what extent are they advantaged *because of* Global Racial Empire, as opposed to *in spite of* it? Unless we know how to answer this question, the collective debt approach might look like a more pragmatic option. To evoke a binary distinction between states that have a history as colonizers, and the states that they historically colonized, clearly oversimplifies the wrong of colonial injustice. However, it promises to make reparative duties more straightforward to identify and demand.

The collective debt view may also perform well on another of Táíwò’s desiderata: that of fitting ‘with the actual practice and discourse of activists’ like the CRC (p.138). Táíwò thinks his approach performs well here, and this seems correct to the extent that many of the measures demanded by the CRC (n.d.) entail structural change (albeit changes of transnational, rather than worldmaking, proportions – e.g. public health and literacy programmes). However, the CRC also seeks reparations *for* specific groups (‘victims and their descendants’), *from* specific debtors (‘European Governments’, who they take to have committed the original wrongs). The CRC is not calling for reparations to create a world that is fully just, and they do not suggest that historical injustice grounds obligations to contribute to this more general pursuit of social justice. The CRC is, specifically, ‘calling on the agents that historically harmed the region to make repair’ (McKeown 2021, p.789). This is presumably what they think it would take to ‘address the core moral wrongs of trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism’ (another of Táíwò’s desiderata – p.140). It also helps explain why the CRC’s first reparatory demand is symbolic rather than structural: an apology.

Such demands might be better captured by the collective debt approach than Táíwò’s. The constructive view is not built ‘for any particular group’; and whilst Táíwò is right that the pursuit of a just world ‘will serve each of them’ (p.139), it seems to do so more as a side-effect than a specific target. One question that merits further exploration, then, is to what extent these particular reparative relationships can be accommodated within Táíwò’s broader programme.

## Conclusion

In a work of this length and ambition, it is inevitable that some details of the argument merit further elaboration. *Reconsidering Reparations* is nevertheless an impressive achievement. Táíwò’s book is powerful in what it illustrates as well as what it argues. The stories that he weaves through the text in support of his philosophical vision help you feel the moral significance of the past: whether in the weight of history that entered the debating room with Baldwin and Buckley (pp.14-18); or in the historical processes of accumulation that lie behind Táíwò’s ability to write this book in the first place (pp.105-17).

The claim that reparation for trans-Atlantic slavery and colonialism necessitates structural change at the global level – and not just bilateral arrangements – is important and compelling. And whilst I'm sure others will share my puzzlement at the idea that reparation demands the creation of a fully just world, I am yet sympathetic to Táíwò's question of 'what other form of reparations could even be meaningful in the context of our reality' (p.3). So long as the global order continues to funnel advantages and disadvantages in the directions established by Global Racial Empire, any gains from smaller-scale reparation programmes threaten to be short-lived. Perhaps, then, the ultimate success of any national, regional, or transnational reparations project will depend on the achievement of Táíwò's more ambitious goal.\*

## References

- Anderson, Elizabeth 1999, 'What Is the Point of Equality?' *Ethics* 109
- Bertram, Chris 2005, 'Global justice, moral development, and democracy', in Brock & Brighouse (eds), *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Bessone, Magali 2019, 'The Colonial Slave Trade, Slavery and Structural Racial Injustice in France', *Critical Horizons* 20
- Blomfield, Megan 2019, *Global Justice, Natural Resources, and Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- 2021, 'Reparations and Egalitarianism', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 24
- Boxill, Bernard & J Angelo Corlett 2022, 'Black Reparations', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/black-reparations/>>
- Butt, Daniel 2009, *Rectifying International Injustice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- CRC n.d., 'CARICOM Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice' <<https://caricom.org/caricom-ten-point-plan-for-reparatory-justice/>>
- Getachew, Adom 2019, *Worldmaking after Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)
- IPCC 2022, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability* (Cambridge University Press)
- Lu, Catherine 2017, *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- McKeown, Maeve 2021, 'Backward-Looking Reparations and Structural Injustice', *Contemporary Political Theory* 20
- Mills, Charles W 2015, 'Decolonizing Western Political Philosophy', *New Political Science* 37
- Nozick, Robert 1975, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Nuti, Alasia 2019, *Injustice and the Reproduction of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Rawls, John 1972, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Táíwò, Olúfẹ̀mi O 2022, *Elite Capture* (London: Pluto Press)

Tan, Kok-Chor 2007, 'Colonialism, Reparations, and Global Justice', Miller & Kumar (eds), *Reparations: Interdisciplinary Inquiries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Waligore, Timothy 2018, 'Redress for Colonial Injustice', *Global justice: Theory, Practice, Rhetoric* 11

WOTE 2019, 'Open letter to extinction rebellion' <<https://www.redpepper.org.uk/an-open-letter-to-extinction-rebellion/>>

Whyte, Kyle 2017, 'Is it colonial déjà vu? Indigenous peoples and climate injustice', in Adamson & Davis (eds), *Humanities for the Environment* (Oxon: Routledge)

Young, Iris Marion 2011, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press)

MEGAN BLOMFIELD

University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

[m.blomfield@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.blomfield@sheffield.ac.uk)

\* My thanks to Chris Bertram and Komarine Romdenh-Romluc for comments on this review.