

SMALLTALK WITH STEPHEN SMALL: REPARATIONS FOR LIVERPOOL IMPERIALISM AND WEST AFRICA

INTRODUCTION TO REPARATIONS FOR LIVERPOOL IMPERIALISM AND WEST AFRICA



STEPHEN SMALL

Across Great Britain today everyone's talking about reparations for trans-Atlantic slavery but no one's talking about reparations for imperialism.

Everyone is talking about reparations for the enslavement of Africans in the West Indies, but no one is talking about reparations for the subjugation and exploitation of Africans in West Africa long after the British abolished slavery. Most discussions focus on reparations for Great Britain as a whole, but few people are talking about reparations for what happened in Liverpool in particular (or in many other cities beyond London). And while most people know that Liverpool became the 'slaving capital of the world', few people know about how it later became 'the second city of empire'. They don't know that it was responsible for more than 45% of all British imperial trade across the world or that it controlled more than 90% of trade with West Africa. They don't know that Liverpool developed extensive trade networks with Denmark, Norway and Sweden. And they don't know that Liverpool was at the forefront of the second industrial revolution – the expansion of British industry, railroads, mass production and international migration – from the 1870s until the 1920s.

British imperialism created legacies over and beyond slavery and many of these legacies are

just as important as the legacies of slavery. And British imperialism created some legacies that are even more important than the legacies of slavery. And these legacies are very evident in Liverpool. I know this is difficult to accept on first impressions, but I intend to persuade you that this is true. And I intend to persuade you that if we only demand reparations for slavery, then we are only looking at half the story. In fact, not even half the story. To grasp the full story, we must examine reparations for British imperialism in general and for Liverpool in particular. The same can be said for other cities in Great Britain too, especially beyond London.



Let me give you a quick overview of the main issues. During slavery Great Britain invaded and occupied vast territories across the Americas and forced millions of Africans into vicious slavery. At the same time, they kept the number of Black people in Britain to a minimum. During imperialism, Great Britain enlarged its occupation of West African territories from thousands of square miles to hundreds of thousands of square miles. And it expanded its political domination, economic exploitation and social subordination of hundreds of thousands of Africans to millions of Africans. There were far more Christian missionaries in West Africa during imperialism than there had ever been during the period of slavery. The British also invited and recruited more Black people into Britain than ever before in its history, especially in the 20th century. During slavery most Black people in England – including Black people in Liverpool – arrived from the West Indies (and America). But during imperialism, in terms of its Black population, Liverpool became an African city, while every other major city in Great Britain became a West Indian city.

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There are many reasons to look at British imperialism as well as British slavery. It reminds us that Black people were not really freed by abolition of slavery. The subjugation, exploitation and oppression of Black people continued in many other ways. After abolition, British elites continued to do business with the United States, Cuba and Brazil, nations that held millions of Black people in slavery for at least another fifty years. They continued to dominate Black people in British colonies in the West Indies, denying them the vote or opportunities to succeed, and importing hundreds of thousands of indentured Indian workers to divide and rule.

Liverpool was central to these actions. Most importantly for my argument in these articles, Liverpool substantially expanded trade and intensified economic exploitation in West Africa. It expanded control of territories along the coast from hundreds of square miles to hundreds of thousands of square miles. It extended its direct interactions with and domination of tens of thousands of Africans to hundreds of thousands of West

Africans. Thousands of West Africans died from the violence and wars of British invasion, including the Anglo-Ashanti wars in Gold Coast (Ghana) and the so-called Hut Tax War in Sierra Leone. More Africans died from the deadly diseases the British brought with them to West Africa like smallpox, tuberculosis and cholera.

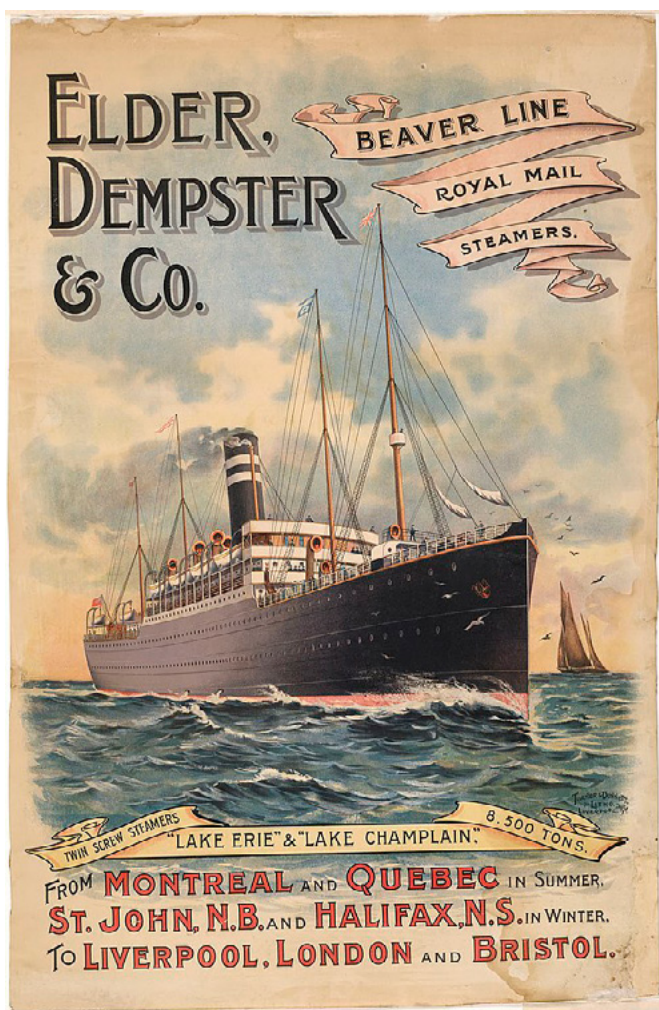
West Africans were forced to labour for exploitative wages, were denied opportunities to establish or own their own businesses and given few or no political rights. Hard labour in palm oil, palm kernels and rubber sent thousands of Africans to an early grave. These raw materials were indispensable to industries that thrived across Merseyside, creating tens of thousands of jobs producing soap, candles and margarine, and in a wide range of ancillary industries like coal, salt and chemicals.

In West Africa racial segregation was widespread in housing, jobs, politics and social interactions – and no Africans were allowed to supervise whites in businesses, shipping, medicine, the legal system or the military. Racial segregation became official British policy in all of British West Africa from 1913. Crimes against humanity were committed – and atrocities too – including violence, brutality and rape. Racist practices were rationalized by state-sponsored racist ideologies and assertions of African inferiority, beliefs influenced by social Darwinism. In other words, this was slavery in everything but name.

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Racism against Black people in Liverpool itself was intensified and took on new forms under Liverpool imperialism. Black people had already been enslaved in Liverpool itself, and some had been sold there too and racism was rife. But the operations of Liverpool slavery worked to force Africans into the West Indies and keep the number of Black people in Liverpool to a minimum. Most of the Black people that arrived in Liverpool during slavery were from the West Indies. The operations of Liverpool imperialism worked to significantly increase the number of Black people – overwhelmingly men from West Africa – in Liverpool. Discrimination under imperialism happened on the Elder Dempster ships that brought Africans to Liverpool, with low pay severe working conditions and subordinate status. It happened when they

were dumped unceremoniously in Liverpool to make way for white workers. It happened when they were herded into segregated hostels and confined to sailor-town, near the docks. And it happened when there were sexual relationships and marriage between African men and white women. These things happened on a daily basis, and the police were often collaborators or perpetrators. And hostility reached a vicious peak in the 1919 anti-Black riots and the murder of Charles Wootten.



Racial discrimination during this entire period was officially illegal – and the vast majority of Black people in Liverpool were British subjects. Elites held the power and made the biggest decisions, but working class men perpetrated most daily insults, indignities and injuries. National and local government officials preached equality for all, yet encouraged or condoned discrimination.

During Liverpool imperialism – in the same way as during Liverpool slavery – philosophers, academics, politicians, city notables, missionaries and many others actively promoted white superiority and insisted on African inferiority. They wrote books and articles to promote their views. School teachers taught

misinformation and lies in schools, as did the press, to justify their activities and to glorify Liverpool and Great Britain. During slavery it was biological racism and scientific racism. During imperialism it was Social Darwinism, eugenics and phrenology (measuring people's heads to determine racial identity). Religious views shaped racism in both periods. Monuments and memorials were built to Liverpool imperialists and some of the most prized possessions from West Africa were stolen, borrowed or begged during imperialism and placed in Liverpool museums. Even today, most of what we know about slavery and imperialism is biased, distorted or evasive. There are even some outright lies.

Africans never accepted any of this without a fight and they challenged domination at every opportunity. For every act of oppression there was an act of resistance. In West Africa they fought in battles and wars, they resisted religious domination, and they challenged attempts to undermine long-established traditions and families. Under Liverpool slavery some Black people were able to document and write about their experiences – questioning the distortions, fallacies and lies. In Liverpool they fought back against racist violence, formed families to survive and succeed, and formed communities for protection and reassurance.

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Under imperialism new generations of Black people wrote far more about their experiences and left us far more information than had been possible during slavery. Black people created more accurate, more comprehensive and more inclusive accounts of what really happened. Right now, we don't know enough about what Black people thought and said and wrote during this period, and even afterwards. Because most of what we know about these issues was produced by self-interested Liverpool (and other) scholars, politicians and press. The truth is that Africans in Africa and across the Diaspora have left us significant writings about their experiences. Many Black people passed through Liverpool, stayed in the city for days, weeks, months or years; and some spent the rest of their lives here. And many Black people of course were born and raised in the city. We are gathering more and more knowledge about what they wrote, the information they shared in lectures, speeches, meetings and political and community organizations during this period.

Identifying and reading this is the most important first step in decolonising knowledge and education. In these articles I mention some of the most significant people and the writings that they have bequeathed us.

By the way, it was elite white men in Liverpool that made imperial political decisions, led the navy and armies, got the most wealth, organized companies, acquired artifacts, wrote the books, received the awards and titles and had statues built and streets and buildings named after them. But it would be a mistake to assume that the 'man in the street' (or the woman in the street for that matter) did not benefit. The profits of Liverpool imperialism were not shared equally, but working-class white men were sailors and soldiers in imperial armies and occupied most jobs on ships and in businesses. They were the majority in the cotton mills and factories, in the construction of buildings and in the operation of railroads and roads. They were the ones paid to construct museums and universities as well as statues and streets. Working class women were often the majority of workers in factories. And just as tens of thousands of working class men and women had marched on the streets in opposition to the abolition of slavery; so, after slavery, they marched to maintain Liverpool's imperial trade, especially to beat competition from the United States, Germany and France.



Alfred Lewis Jones

For all these reasons we need to consider reparations for Liverpool imperialism over and beyond reparations for Liverpool slavery; and we need to consider reparations for Liverpool imperialism and West Africa, over and beyond Liverpool slavery and the West Indies. Who were the most important Liverpool companies, businessmen, families, scientists and politicians involved in West Africa? What role did Liverpool play in the military activities and wars that occurred in West Africa? What labor regimes, housing policies and medical practices were introduced and enforced? How did British racism drive the political and economic politics and practices in West Africa? What role was played by Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and the University of Liverpool? What role was played by Liverpool's foremost imperialists like businessmen Jones, William Lever, Henry Tate, John Holt and John Laird? Politicians William Ewart Gladstone and Joseph Chamberlain? Medical scientists like Patrick Manson and Ronald Ross? Senior Liverpool museum staff like director Henry Ogg Forbes, and senior University of Liverpool staff like W A Herman and Ramsey Muir? And what was Liverpool's role in the 1897 Punitive Expedition to Benin (led by Liverpool-born Admiral Harry Rawson) that plundered thousands of West Africa's most precious cultural artifacts – many of which are currently held in Liverpool museums?

The truth is that British slavery turned the village of Liverpool into a town; and British imperialism turned the town of Liverpool into a city. Liverpool's triangular trade with West Africa made many men in Liverpool rich; and its imperial bilateral trade with West Africa made many more men far richer. British slavery brought Black people from the Americas into Liverpool, while British imperialism brought far more Black people from Africa, especially men, into Liverpool. That's why Liverpool became an African city in the 20th century, while every other major city in Great Britain became a West Indian city.

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Today we live with the legacies of Liverpool imperialism just as we live with the legacies of Liverpool slavery. My goal is to build knowledge and understanding, not to destroy. And I believe we can't make comprehensive demands for reparations until we have far more accurate information about imperialism.

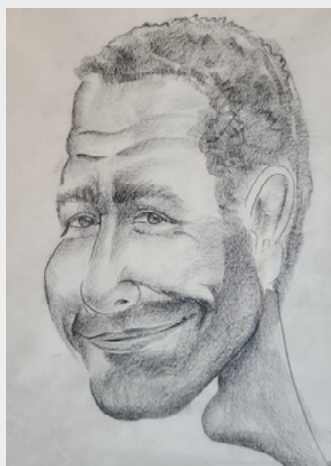
My framing of these issues has three elements – 'reparations, reparatory justice and decolonising knowledge and education'. By reparations I mean financial compensation. By reparatory justice I mean acknowledgement of crimes committed, especially crimes against humanity, and suffering; and I include repatriation of artifacts. By decolonising knowledge and education, I mean reassessing all research carried out on slavery and imperialism by academics and by companies, individuals, family historians and so on. And by education I mean formal education taught in schools. And I don't just mean adding Black voices, I mean questioning the very assumptions upon which most of the knowledge and education that exists in Liverpool schools has been based.

In this series of articles – **Smalltalk with Stephen Small: Reparations for Liverpool imperialism and West Africa** – I highlight some of the most important dimensions of Liverpool imperialism and West Africa. I focus primarily on imperial Liverpool in the century following the abolition of British slavery, that is, from the 1830s through the 1930s. This period corresponds to one of the most invasive periods of British imperialism during the so-called scramble for Africa. And I focus

primarily on West Africa. I mention many of the key people, events, episodes, educational institutions and museums that should be at the centre of discussions of reparations, reparatory justice and decolonising education and knowledge. In this way I hope to expand our discussion of reparations for Liverpool slavery and the West Indies and to elevate and amplify discussion of reparations for Liverpool imperialism and West Africa.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Jimi Jagne, Leona Vaughn, Deborah Freedman Lustig, Debra Primo, Terry Small and Patricia Wong for detailed feedback on all nine articles. And special thanks to Karl Smith, Gaila Sims and Adrian North for feedback on several of the articles.



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Stephen Small is a Professor in the Department of African American Studies and African Diaspora Studies where he has taught since 1995; and he is Director of the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (since June 2020). He earned his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley (1989); his M.S.C in Social Sciences from the University of Bristol (1983); and his B.A. (honours) in Economics and Sociology from the University of Kent at Canterbury (1979). He researches the history and sociology of Black people across the diaspora, including the United States, Western Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil. He has held visiting positions at universities in Great Britain, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe.

His most recent book is *20 Questions and Answers on Black Europe* published in January 2018. His next book is tentatively entitled: *Inside the Shadows of the Big House: 21st Century Antebellum Slave Cabins and Heritage Tourism in Louisiana*, to be published in 2022. He is currently writing a book on

Slavery, Imperialism and their legacies in Black Liverpool. As part of that project, he's investigating the voices and visions of Black men and women from across Africa and the diaspora in anti-colonial movements for self-determination. He is co-editor of *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*, 2009.

Stephen is a child of the Windrush Generation, his dad having arrived in England from Jamaica in 1946. He was born and raised in Liverpool – the city with the nation's longest-standing Black population. He was a member of several Black and multi-racial organisations across England, and in the 1990s was research assistant to the Right Honourable Bernie Grant, MP, researching and lecturing on reparations and museums. He was a member of the Consortium of Black Organisations and the Federation of Black Liverpool Organisations, both in Liverpool, in the early 1990s. And he was a Guest Curator at the Atlantic Slave Trade Gallery at the Merseyside Maritime Museum (which became the International Slavery Museum in 2007).