

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

DECOLONISING KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION  
ON IMPERIAL LIVERPOOL AND WEST AFRICA



STEPHEN SMALL

**British slavery lasted from the 1500s to the 1830s, and Liverpool was at the centre of it from very early on, especially in the West Indies.**

Liverpool was responsible for capturing and transporting millions of Africans into vicious slavery, and thousands of men in Liverpool became rich and powerful in this nasty business. Tens of thousands more men and women in Liverpool got jobs and earned income directly or indirectly from slavery every year. Many of the men that became rich and powerful have streets, statues and buildings named after them throughout the city and region, and their legacy is written about, praised and memorialised. The ancestors and families of these men continued to enjoy financial and social benefits long after they died, and many may still be alive enjoying these rewards today. Africans in Africa, the West Indies and in Liverpool itself were exploited, subjugated and oppressed throughout this entire period, though they resisted at all times. Their descendants continue to resist in the 21st century. For every act of oppression there was an act of resistance.

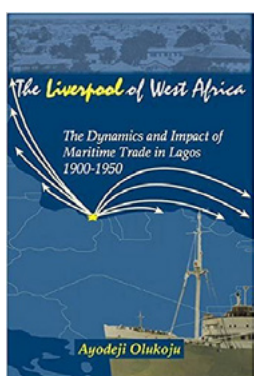
British imperialism lasted from the 1830s to the end of the 20th century, by which time the majority of African nations had become independent. And Liverpool was at the centre of imperialism, especially in West Africa. British imperialism is the system of political domination, economic exploitation and social

subjugation of Africans in Africa and across the world that was implemented and expanded after British slavery was legally abolished. It involved the capture of vast territories across the African continent, and the creation of nation states like Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Rhodesia and Kenya. It involved the highly profitable extraction of raw materials like gold and diamonds, as well as palm oil and palm kernels, all of which played vital roles in British industrial expansion. It involved the subordination of African men on British merchant shipping. And in Liverpool it involved high unemployment, poor working conditions, low pay, racial segregation and violence against Black people.

British imperialism reminds us that the abolition of slavery did not really free Black people. Not in the West Indies, not in West Africa and not in Great Britain. In Liverpool, thousands of men became rich or powerful in this nasty imperial business, including many that had first become rich during slavery. Tens of thousands more men and women in Liverpool got jobs and earned income directly or indirectly from British imperialism every year. Just like the men that came before them, many imperialists also have streets, statues and buildings named after them throughout the city and region. Their legacy is also written about, praised or memorialised. The ancestors and families of these men also continued to enjoy financial and social benefits long after they died, and many may still be alive enjoying these rewards today. During imperialism Africans in Africa, the West Indies and in Liverpool itself were exploited, subjugated and

oppressed, though they too resisted at all times. And once again, their descendants continue to resist in the 21st century and for every act of oppression there was an act of resistance.

British imperialism is a direct legacy of slavery and yet it also created its own legacies. I argue that some of these legacies are as important as the legacies of slavery. In fact, many people say that British imperialism is still alive and kicking today, as with the protests against the visit to the Caribbean by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge in spring of this year (2022). This is evident in Liverpool and across Great Britain. Imperial legacies in Liverpool, to name just a few, include massive West African shipping and trade exemplified in the businesses of the John Laird, William Lever and Alfred Jones; the ascendancy of politicians like Liverpool-born William Ewart Gladstone who rose to become prime minister of Great Britain on four occasions between 1868 and 1894. The establishment or expansion of institutions like Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, (LSTM) the University of Liverpool (UoL) and Liverpool museums (including the acquisition of thousands of precious African artefacts). The imperial legacy also includes the transformation of the Liverpool Black population from mainly West Indian origins to mainly West African origins, almost entirely men, with a high proportion of mixed origins. This period is also one in which Africans from across the continent and the diaspora produced far more knowledge, information and insights about the British Empire – and about Liverpool’s role in it – than they had ever produced during slavery.



*The Liverpool of West Africa – Ayodeji Olukohi*

We know a great deal about British slavery and its legacies – which is why we hear vocal demands for ‘reparations for slavery’ across Great Britain and in Liverpool today. But we don’t know as much about Liverpool imperialism, and we almost never hear demands for ‘reparations for imperialism’ across Great Britain or in Liverpool. That needs to change. I’ve written these articles to persuade people to interrogate British imperialism in general, and Liverpool

imperialism in particular, especially in West Africa. I wrote 8 articles (plus an introduction) in recognition of Liverpool 8, where the majority of Black people have lived since the 1950s. It should be obvious from these articles that demands for reparations for slavery in the West Indies should be matched by equally vocal demands for reparations for imperialism in West Africa.

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One of my goals is to expand our attention from Liverpool’s role in slavery in the West Indies to include Liverpool’s role in imperialism in West Africa. A second goal is to expand our attention from the enslavement and exploitation of Africans in the West Indies, to focus on the subjugation and exploitation of Africans in West Africa. (Which was slavery in all but name). A third goal is to expand attention from London to Liverpool during imperialism. London is not representative of how Great Britain treated Africans under slavery and imperialism. For example, during imperialism London politicians paid very little attention to West Africa (they were far more preoccupied with Egypt and southern Africa), while Liverpool controlled 90% of West African trade. So, we need to look at the specifics of what happened in Liverpool in both periods.



*Ray Costello*

These are some of the reasons I put Liverpool at the centre of analysis in these articles. The city benefitted from the extraction of raw materials using cheap and expendable African labor, and from the export to West Africa of a wide range of products like metalware, tobacco, firearms, gunpowder, alcohol and salt. Liverpool played a role in the thousands of West Africans that died from the violence and wars of British invasion. Liverpool soldiers and sailors, missionaries and government functionaries brought deadly diseases with them to West Africa like smallpox, tuberculosis and cholera. Africans were segregated in their own

homes; none were allowed to exercise authority over whites, and racism was widespread. On ships Africans faced discrimination and injustice in pay and working conditions. Shouldn't reparations be paid for all these injustices?

In these articles I've highlighted many of the most important Liverpool men, women and families that benefited directly – and indirectly – from Liverpool imperialism in West Africa. I mentioned several of the prominent imperial institutions that emerged or were expanded during Liverpool imperialism – like LSTM, UoL and Liverpool museums. But these are not the only ones – there are far more yet to be uncovered. For example, I said very little about Liverpool's involvement in the British army and navy, or about the role of Liverpool churches and missionaries. Future research must focus directly on each of these institutions of imperial authority and power.

Black people resident in Liverpool also suffered during imperialism. The majority of Blacks in Liverpool during this period arrived from West Africa, mainly men via shipping. They too faced discrimination, segregation, inequality and injustice. And because they were mainly men, they established relationships or married local white women and as a result the Black population in the city became increasingly of mixed origins (since the 1970s, self-defined as Liverpool-born Blacks). As a result of these imperial developments, in terms of its Black population, Liverpool became an African city, while every other city in Great Britain became West Indian. This is fundamentally different from the Black experience in London in the 20th century, where most Black people arrived from the West Indies, there were large numbers of women and most relationships and marriages involved two Black people, rather than being interracial.

In other words, British slavery turned the village of Liverpool into a town; and British imperialism turned the town into a city. Liverpool's triangular trade in slavery with West Africa made many men in Liverpool rich; and its imperial trade with West Africa made many more men far richer. And while many of the relationships between Liverpool, West Africa and the West Indies can be explained as direct legacies of slavery, many others can only be explained as direct legacies of imperialism. It would be an oversimplification to say that imperial Liverpool's wealth and power was achieved only on the backs of Africans and Blacks alone, but their exploitation was an indispensable element of that wealth and power. That's why the legacies of Liverpool imperialism must be examined.



LBHRS

Where are we right now in Liverpool in terms of reparations, reparatory justice and decolonising knowledge and education? And what can a focus on Liverpool imperialism add to this? In these articles I have pointed out many of the baby steps that have been made by some prominent Liverpool institutions. For example, NML and UoL have organised talks, memorials, begun research and acknowledged their role in slavery (and implicitly, imperialism). UoL has recruited several lecturers on Black British history, provided £180,000 for research on slavery, and begun renaming buildings. LSTM has also begun some talks, but a recent report documented significant racism at LSTM today. Some plaques and memorials to Black people have been installed recently, for example, on Princess Avenue and elsewhere, including one to Eric Lynch in the city centre, and one to African merchant seamen. Liverpool politicians and others have committed themselves on paper to equal opportunities in a range of areas. The city council already apologised for slavery years ago. All of which is to be welcomed.

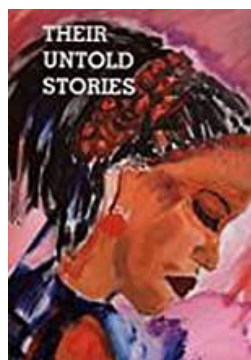
But before we start ringing the bells at the top of the hill, let's put this in perspective – bearing in mind the several hundred years of slavery and imperialism that came before. What has actually happened so far, and why did it happen? For example, I know of no businesses in Liverpool – whether banking, shipping, insurance or otherwise – that have publicly acknowledged their role in slavery and its legacies, have discussed reparations or offered to pay them. Has any financial compensation been paid? Are there any statues of Black people in St. John's Gardens at the back of St. Georges Hall or at the Pier Head? I don't think so.

And most of the baby steps are about Liverpool slavery, not Liverpool imperialism. That has to change. Have any institutions acknowledged how they profited from the subjugation of Africans in West Africa, **after slavery was abolished?** Have the beneficiaries of William Lever and Alfred Jones acknowledged and compensated anyone for discrimination in shipping or in the myriad of businesses they controlled in West Africa? Has LSTM examined its role in racial segregation in West Africa? What about the death and destruction

that arose from British invasion, the diseases they brought and the wars they waged? Have the many streets, statues and buildings named after Liverpool's most prominent imperialists been identified, revealed, renamed or removed? And have the public figures and schoolteachers that insist that Liverpool has always been a city of racial harmony taken their heads out of the sand and acknowledged the widespread evidence of institutional discrimination in the city from its very beginning? The short answer is "no".

**British Christian missionary David Livingstone described colonialism as being motivated by the "three C's" – Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation. Adebajo suggested that it would be more accurate to describe British colonialism with "three Ps" – Profit, Plunder and Prestige'**

And the work we are doing to identify, acknowledge and reverse the effects of both slavery and imperialism on the lives of Black people in Liverpool today, should be matched by a focus on the legacies of slavery and imperialism in the lives of Africans in West Africa today. And again, Black voices are indispensable. Let me share just one. In a recent book by Professor Adekeye Adebajo called "Pan-African Pantheon. Prophets, Poets, and Philosophers", published in 2021 he pointed out that the British Christian missionary David Livingstone described colonialism as being motivated by the "three C's": Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation. Adebajo suggested that it would be more accurate to describe British colonialism with "three Ps"- "Profit, Plunder and Prestige". That's what decolonial education looks like.



*Their Untold Stories* by  
Ntombenhle Protasia  
Khotie Torkington

Most importantly, the baby steps I have mentioned in these articles only happened as a direct result of protests by Black people and others in response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020. And that's after decades and generations of protests by Black people in the city. Again, most protests focus on slavery not imperialism.



*Marches in Liverpool 8 – L8 Law Centre Archives*

There's one more point that needs to be made. Both slavery and imperialism are thoroughly intertwined, and both of them have left tremendous legacies in Great Britain, in Liverpool, and across the world. We don't yet have a complete picture of the full extent of political domination and economic exploitation during slavery, even though we have made tremendous strides forward. And we have barely begun to evaluate the damage done by imperialism to fully understand its legacies. That has to change. And until we have a full account of both, it's premature to ask for reparations. I'm not saying we should not demand reparations until we do more research. Far from it – we know enough to make significant demands right now. But comprehensive demands for reparations will not be complete until a far more comprehensive analysis of both slavery **and** imperialism has been undertaken.

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How can a focus on Liverpool imperialism help us, and what should we do? We need to act on many fronts and in many areas. As an educator I believe that our primary need is to decolonise knowledge and education. In these articles I argued that the first step in decolonising knowledge and education is to identify and collect information and insights from Black people in every decade of Liverpool imperialism. 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 produced numerous accounts – more accurate, more comprehensive and more inclusive than the dominant accounts – in every decade, of what really happened during Liverpool imperialism including in West Africa. Many of these accounts have been published and are readily available; far more information exists in archives and documents yet to be collected. I mentioned many of the most prominent names.

With the information they have bequeathed to us, we can challenge the dominant views.

### **Transformative change won't happen unless we continue to mobilize.**

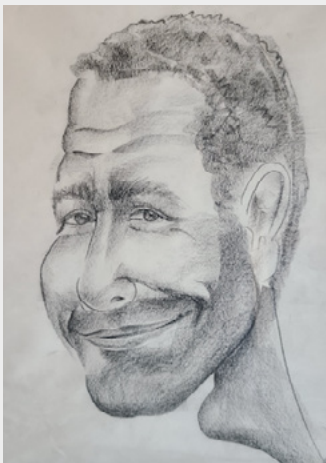
I fully recognise that Black people in Liverpool don't have the authority or power to convince businesses and politicians to act immediately. We do not control schools and universities; we do not own large museums or precious objects and we don't have vast financial resources. But that has never stopped us in the past, and transformative change won't happen unless we continue to mobilise. We marched, protested and

campaigned for equality, and we are doing the same to decolonise education. I am convinced that baby steps will never become giant strides unless Black people continue to protest. I could be wrong about that. But I'm probably right. Probably certainly right. In fact, I believe I'm certainly, certainly right. I'm not likely to find out the final answer during the research I'm doing over the rest of the year because transformative change will take far longer than a year. So only time will tell.

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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.Sc 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 1947. 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).