



The Internationalist

Episode four transcript – what’s the place for reparations?

Natasha Lokhun:

Hello, and welcome to this latest edition of The Internationalist, Higher Education Matters, a podcast from The Association of Commonwealth Universities. I'm Natasha Lokhun.

In this series, we are looking at the responsibility of universities to confront both the past and the present. I'm asking, who gets to learn and who gets to teach in today's society, where the legacy of empire is still an open, and often, painful issue. Universities are places of learning, and they have a critical role to play in creating open and fairer societies. But they also reflect the world in which they operate, and they can even reinforce inequalities.

Today, we'll be talking about reparations and the relationship between universities and their immediate environment, the communities around them and the land that they exist on. What's the place for reparations? I'm delighted to be joined today by two guests who are going to help us explore this question further, Professor Shaun Ewen is Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous at the University of Melbourne in Australia. And he's currently a visiting professor at King's College, London in the UK. Welcome, Shaun.

Shaun Ewen:

Good morning, Natasha, afternoon. Sorry.

Natasha Lokhun:

Professor Sir Hilary Beckles is Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies and Chairman of the Reparations Committee of CARICOM, the regional group of Caribbean nations. Sir Hilary, thank you for joining us today.

Sir Hilary Beckles:

Thank you so very much. It's an honour and a pleasure to be with you.

Natasha Lokhun:

A lot of public discourse around reparations tends to focus on the idea of monetary repayments, but the actual concept of reparations can be much broader than that. Sir Hilary, could you tell us a little bit about your university's relationship and work with the University of Glasgow in the UK?

Sir Hilary Beckles:

First of all, I should say that Glasgow in the face of obvious historical facts recognized that it had been a critical participant in the crimes against humanity represented by chattel slavery, and their engagement with the slave system, both at the level of slave trade and the chattelization of African people was complex. They received substantial endowments from those who profited from the slavery enterprise. The university, itself, became a favourite university for the children of slave owners. It was deeply embedded in the commercial activities of the city. Glasgow, itself, as one of the largest slave trading ports in the world. And it was almost impossible to separate city from campus, and city and campus both extracted their survival revenue from slaving.

The important issue is that the university provided that cloak of respectability, a legitimacy, to these activities, thereby putting them in a position to see no contradiction between receiving those slave base endowments, and other forms of influx of capital and cash, and their own academic mission.

When Glasgow presented it, the evidentiary basis of their own deep participation, my proposal to them is that research and run that has become the norm in Europe, where a university researches its engagement, its participation, or a corporation does that, and then, they say, "Well, here we are. We've revealed the truth. We are sorry. And goodbye. Ta-ta." And I said, "Research and run is the worst kind of conversation you can have." You have the participation evidence. You should now create a structured partnership to do a number of declared projects that will help the conversation.

Natasha Lokhun:

If I can bring in Shaun at this point, and the reason is that... Shaun, you're the convener of the ACU's Peace and Reconciliation network, and the network had its first conference earlier this year. And you run a whole session on the idea of reparations of place. And I think that's very much what Sir Hilary's talking about, this really strong idea of the link between the city and the campus, and how this ecosystem that Sir Hilary's described. And then, I guess how you start to then evolve that relationship in the current times. Shaun, could you talk to us a little bit about this idea of reparations to place and where its come from?

Shaun Ewen:

Yes. And as Sir Hilary was talking, I was thinking exactly about these notions of place and the connection between many universities and the cities. But, in an Australian indigenous context, the relationship between the university and the land on which it sits, and many of the first Australian universities, Sydney, Melbourne, and so on, established in the mid to early 1800s, they were built on unceded indigenous land. And we would say that all of the land remains unceded to this very day. But the point is though, they were part, if you like, of the colonial project. And one of the traditions in Australia now is that, before any kind of formal or important event, an acknowledgement or a welcome to country is given. So, a welcome to country from an elder, and he or she being an Aboriginal elder of the country, will welcome the participants.

Or if they're not available, someone else will acknowledge country, but that's just performative. It's important, but it's not transformative to the relationship between the university and the city or the place. And as it goes on, it becomes like any of the airlines telling us how to put our seatbelts on before the plane takes off. We're told so often that our eyes just glaze over, and it loses its meaning. And yet, its meaning should actually lead to transformative action. At the University of Melbourne, I won't speak for other universities, there is a very well-recorded history, if you like, of actually going out and grave robbing from the nearby rivers and bringing the Aboriginal bodies back into the Department of Anatomy so that they could be used for science and had a value for science.

So, there's the reparations of place, but it relates, for me, to the relationship between people and place. And that place comes to life through that relationship. And as time has gone on, there's been more and more, if you like, cohabitants through migration, but the Aboriginal people have gone nowhere. And so, how do we understand, in the sense of reparations, to repair that relationship between people and place, and including the more unseemly aspects of colonization, slave trade, and so on as was alluded to by Sir Hilary.

Natasha Lokhun:

This idea of, we're almost talking about a very, very physical manifestation of issues and things that can seem like history that were a long time ago. In the scheme of things, it's not. You're talking a series of decades. But to my mind, when we talk about place, we are talking about these physical representations, and that's through the environment, and it's also through people, as you said, Shaun. Sir Hilary, I know that a graveyard was discovered on the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Sir Hilary Beckles:

Well, I would say that not just our Mona campus. Literally, all of our campuses in Barbados and Trinidad, they were all built on slave plantations. Yes, the Mona campus, 10 years ago, we were developing, arguably, one of the finest medical facilities in the world to reflect the excellence of the university and the medical sciences. And when the contractor came on-site and started to prepare the earth for the foundation, the bulldozers were just throwing up dozens and dozens, and dozens of bones. And of course, we had to stop that to find out what was going on. We did not know the

history of the archaeologists. We did not know that that site, that location was the burial ground for the Africans, who were just thrown into shallow graves and covered over in dirt and unmarked. We were able to recover these remains, and of course, carry out the appropriate ceremony. But it has left a scar, a very deep scar in the mind of the campus because it really brought home precisely what the university was all about.

How can the university not seek to repair the contemporary violence of that excavation? And for young people, students to see the bones of ancestors thrown to the dirt like that and disrespected, it traumatized the students. Here we are developing a pedagogy of change, a pedagogy of future imaginings. This is the role of the university to shape the future. But the past erupted in the midst of this discourse, and said to everyone within the academy, "How can you go forward without dealing with this is?" Is it okay to say, "Oh, it was a hundred years ago." A hundred years ago is nothing.

Let me tell you. When my great-grandmother died, she was over a hundred years old, and her parents were slaves. And I grew up in a household hearing about slavery as if it was yesterday because the memory of it, the names, and the memory, and the conversations about it. So, it is a part of the present, and it was certainly a part of my childhood socialization, and therefore, every one of my generation. We are bonded forever by this horrendous history. On the whole, I can say to you that we and the university sector are not doing anywhere, anywhere near enough to acknowledge this history.

Natasha Lokhun:

So it's interesting to hear that because there are examples of universities, at least, trying to do this in practice. And one such example that's often held up is Georgetown University in the US.

Speaker 4:

[inaudible 00:10:50].

Group:

[inaudible 00:10:52].

Speaker 6:

Several 2020 democratic presidential candidates are grappling with the question of reparations for slavery. Today, students at a major American university are hoping to provide an answer.

Speaker 7:

Undergraduates voted overwhelmingly yesterday in favour of a \$27 per semester fee to benefit descendants of 272 slaves that were sold by the school in the 1800s.

Natasha Lokhun:

So, the students at Georgetown voted for this in April, 2019. And six months later, it went through approval with the university itself, and they announced that they were actually going to move forward with the effort, but in a different way to what the students had envisaged. And rather than creating a reparations fund through student contributions, they were going to rely on fundraising to pay for it. Shaun, this initiative, it seems very specific to Georgetown and its place, its environment, its history. How do you think it could be replicated in other places, at other universities?

Shaun Ewen:

I think the Georgetown example's interesting, and it's quite linear and proximal. They're framing using a capital D as descendants of slaves, and it's quite a linear relationship between direct descendants as they can work it out. And part of their reparative process is to help families with genealogies as well. I think some of the principles can be replicated. That is, and Sir Hilary, you mentioned before, reparative research. I think the purpose of universities needs to be considered here as well. How do we think about reparations through research? How do we think about reparations through curricula? Why is there often pushback about having full and deep, in an Australian context, indigenous histories being told around massacres and so on as part of history? Why is some of those histories or some of those stories challenged as are, that's just political and

shouldn't be there? But I want to push a little bit more to the idea of financial reparations because I don't think you can actually ever really repair, in a financial sense, to the full amount.

Think about, oft used example, I think, but a road traffic accident where someone's a quadriplegic as an outcome. That can't actually be repaired. I was taken, and I know it's, again, oft used by Shashi Tharoor's commentary about one-pound reparations from Britain to India. And he didn't mind if one pound was paid every year for 200 years. And for me, thinking about the reparations, whether it's curricular research or financial, it's not about, in the financial sense, the monetary amount. The giving or the acknowledgement of the need for reparations, and of the one pound, if done authentically, changes the institution on who is giving the reparation. It changes their outlook. It doesn't change the financial position of those who were wronged in the past. That's a different matter. But on the repairing of the relationships, for me, it changes the outlook, the positioning, the intent of the institution that might do it.

So, if a university in Australia, for example, took up that challenge and said, "Okay, we recognize that we are on ceded land. Here are all the things that we do that are non-financial as such, curricular scholarships, research, so on, representation on the built environment. But actually, know over and above that we can never really repair that damage. And as recognition of that, we will do this symbolic reparation." And as I said, it changes the giver as much as it changes the ability to fully repair. And I think there's always a challenge by saying, "Well, that's just cynical. We'll get on, and we'll just hand over a dollar, or a pound, or whatever." But done meaningfully, I think it does create change.

Sir Hilary Beckles:

If I may add to that..

Natasha Lokhun:

Yes, please. Please do.

Sir Hilary Beckles:

One of the challenges that we are faced with at the moment, despite the range of university participation, whether as active entrepreneurs or receivers of revenue, there is a tendency for universities to want to control the narrative of what reparations should look like. And that it is a continuation of the white supremacy attitude. Those of us in the reparations movement have a fundamental problem with the persistence of that racism that says, "We are the determining party," in much the same way we determined that black people were of an inferior nature, should be enslaved property, and all of that. Today, in the repair conversation, we will determine the content and the outcome of that narrative. Today, those of us in the reparations movement are rebelling and resisting the white supremacy control of the narrative, or their attempt to determine what we should get.

So that when a major corporation like Lloyd's of London said, "Okay, yes, 80% of the African people who were shipped across the Atlantic, we did the insurance of them. We insured them as property. But here's a million pounds that we will give to grassroots organization. Take that and go away." It is the evil of the persistence of white supremacy. We probably should have started the conversation by noting that the universities were not just participating in the system that they came along and found. The universities were critical in enabling the structures of slavery to be created in the first place. There were architects. There were designers. They didn't just come along and say, "Well, here's a system where we could get some quick cash by investing." No, they were there the outset, at the very beginning, arguing the case that slavery was in the national interest.

So, out of the universities came the philosophies of law, of jurisprudence, of theology to build this structure and the white supremacy superstructure that laid the foundation for Western slavery to contribute to Western economic development. And you can take, you can identify the role of universities, A, in the philosophical contribution to the narrative, B, as entrepreneurs and investors in slavery.

Shaun Ewen:

But I think there's an element there, which is... I agree with all that. And where you're pushing me to think is you talked about white supremacy. And for me, I'm thinking about, if you like, the hegemony of Western knowledge systems, as they have laid their ground in our universities, and even in the idea of reparations is curricular, to get indigenous knowledges as part of the currency actually remains a challenge. There's always a discussion about space in the curricula. There's always a discussion about, is this valid? There's the debates, which is not just the financial bit that you so eloquently described in its enormity on reparations, but how do we actually continue to work to find space in a legitimate, equitable, shared way if our universities are to remain important as, if you like, serving our societies, as opposed to just serving the societies from which they, in a symbiotic relationship, made for their own benefit.

Sir Hilary Beckles:

Yes, but we have to distinguish between the paradigm of serving and the paradigm of shaping. Now, you can be executing your functions, serving the national interest, serving the community interest, but in the context of this discussion, not only where the university's serving, but they were shaping. And not only were they shaping, they were designing so that the universities had a more powerful voice and a more powerful influence on slavery colonization and all of the crimes against humanity. The universities were the ones that society looked to for legitimacy when the national interest was being defined.

Natasha Lokhun:

This idea of this kind of circle, the way that universities are so entangled in and enmeshed in, in this system, and also, the scale, I think, is one thing that's really striking. How could reparations of any sort, and we've spoken about a few different ways or types that it could take, thinking about this idea of the scale and about redressing past wrongs, how could any sort of reparations, how does that actually help change the consequences of these past wrongs?

Shaun Ewen:

I am taken by a conversation that we had early in the year with one of the members of the ACU network, Professor Gobodo-Madikizela at Stellenbosch. And she's working with Queen's Belfast and thinking about this idea of solidarity. Now, the importance of this coming from her, as many listeners will know, she was a truth and reconciliation commissioner in South Africa, and reparations were an important part of that process.

Pumla actually has started talking much more about this notion of solidarity, which is more forward-looking in saying, "Okay, there are things we need to do to repair the relationship. But given where we are, had we find elements, say, between the university and those who have been wronged that provide a notion of solidarity for a way forward. What are our shared interests, whether they're place-based, whether they're intellectual, whether they're knowledge, economy, and how do we recognize that the past and grapple with dealing with that?" But actually say, "Okay. What's that point of solidarity? What's our point of further engagement?" I'd be interested to hear from Sir Hilary if there's part of that in terms of a relationship between Glasgow and the West Indies in why you would work together.

Sir Hilary Beckles:

Well, okay. Allow me to say this. The tendency, at the moment, and I'm being frank about it because I've been involved in this for the last 20 years. The tendency, at the moment, is for universities not to come to the discussion with clean hands. They have been coming to the debate looking for an exit strategy. And basically, that is a mental construct. They come into this conversation looking for an exit strategy that allows them to get some public relations out of it and to settle things down. If you take, for example, my own alma mater, the University of Hull. Hull, a slave trading city, university built there upon that city. In 2007, when the British government funded the project at Hull to establish the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation. And the acronym, of course, is WISE. WISE has been doing some good work researching the history of slavery, and Hull, and contributing to the national discourse.

When Prime Minister Blair held a reception at 10 Downing Street to, effectively, launch the WISE project. And we were all gather there under the patronage of his dear wife, Cherie Blair. And I asked

a question, and this was 2007, so this is a good few years ago. I said, "Why are we calling this WISE? Why should it not be called not just the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation. It should be called the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery, Emancipation and Reparations," in which case, the acronym would have been WISER. So, we had to choose between WISE and WISER. And all of my colleagues went for WISE. I was left standing up there calling for WISER. Now, because the university did not come to the conversation, neither the British government, with clean hands.

Natasha Lokhun:

Shaun, I'm going to give the final word to you on just this idea that the discussion on both sides. So, the critic, there has been this fundamental opposition. That's what Sir Hilary's talking about, this fundamental opposition to the idea of reparations, the notion of it, for hundreds of years. And we see that through these different phases, and we still see that today. What do you say to critics who are opposed to it?

Shaun Ewen:

I think the challenge remains a systemic challenge in terms of the people who remain in power. So, Sir Hilary talks about what happened 170 years ago in terms of who has been impacted as being slaves, and their parents, and so on. It's exactly the same in the reverse. The people that empower, their classes, their social structures, their networks remain in power. And for me, it's those, how do you change the councils on universities, in terms of the governing councils, the representation and whose interests they're best serving? It is, for me, that really challenging issue of power of the university and where these ideas come from.

So, I'm not at all surprised in the examples that Sir Hilary has shared. I'm disappointed, in some ways, but the history repeats itself because the systems and the structures haven't fundamentally changed. And very briefly, I know our podcast is on... Doesn't always have to be so proximal, but you've just seen this all play out in who's been impacted through our current global pandemic. It's the social inequities that haven't changed over centuries, in many ways, set up by the Dutch East India company, the British East India company, and so on. They've done such a wonderful job in what they set out to do that we're still trying to clean up their mess now.

Natasha Lokhun:

This is such a huge topic, and we have covered so much ground today. It's really, really been fascinating. So, thank you to our guests, Professor Shaun Ewen, Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and Professor Sir Hilary Beckles, Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies.

This conversation has really highlighted the scale and the intricacies of what we could call historical wrongs, but clearly, we are still living with the consequences of them today. I think it's also brought to my attention how different forms of reparations could actually make a difference, and how they could really move the conversation and actions from, as Shaun said, performative to transformative. And I think that's something that is worth fighting for.

Our next episode, will look at symbols of colonialism, such as statues and buildings. We will discuss name and face, living with the past in the present. I hope you found this episode of The Internationalist valuable. The Association of Commonwealth Universities is committed to highlighting the issues that influence learning and teaching in our world. Please do subscribe to the series wherever you get your podcasts, and like, comment, and share the program. You can find us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Just search for The Association of Commonwealth Universities. Thank you for joining me, Natasha Lokhun. The producer is Lindsay Riley, executive producer, Richard Miron, and it's an Earshot Strategies Production.