

THE BLACK AGENDA FOR THE NEXT CENTURY: RETHINKING THE PAST
LECTURE DELIVERED AT CONFERENCE ON REPARATIONS BIRMINGHAM, 11
DECEMBER, 1993 BY DR P.F. WILMOT

INTRODUCTION

TO SAY THAT THE PRESENT GROWS OUT OF THE PAST, OR THE FUTURE OUT OF THE PRESENT, IS A TRUISM. BUT FORGETTING A TRUISM CAN BE DANGEROUS, AS WHEN A DRUNKARD STEPS FROM A HEIGHT BECAUSE HE FORGETS THE NATURE OF GRAVITY. WHAT THE BLACK MAN OR WOMAN IS TODAY, OR WILL BE TOMORROW, IS A PRODUCT OF HISTORY: OF CONQUEST, SLAVERY, COLONIALISM, RACISM, APARTHEID, NEO-COLONIALISM, RACE DISCRIMINATION, AND SELF-HATRED. BUT ALSO OF RESISTANCE, COURAGE AND THE WILL, AGAINST ALL ODDS, TO SURVIVE AND TRIUMPH.

NO RACE HAS SUFFERED MORE IN THE PAST FIVE HUNDRED YEARS, AND NONE HAS MORE TO OFFER TO MANKIND IN ITS PERPETUAL STRIVING TO SEEK LIBERTY AND HAPPINESS, AND END SUFFERING AND HUMILIATION. THE DEHUMANISATION SUFFERED BY BLACK MEN AND WOMEN CAN BE THE MEANS FOR ALL MEN AND WOMEN TO REALIZE THEIR HUMANITY, AS SOME DID IN THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE STRUGGLES AGAINST SLAVERY, COLONIALISM, APARTHEID AND ALL OTHER FORMS OF RACIAL HATRED AND EXPLOITATION.

REPARATIONS, FROM THE LATIN WORD FOR "TO REPAIR" AND "MAKE WHOLE AGAIN", DEMANDS COMPENSATION FOR THE INJURIES INFLICTED ON AFRICANS AT HOME AND ABROAD OVER THE PAST FIVE CENTURIES. THESE INJURIES WERE PRIMARILY ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL, BUT ALSO CULTURAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND RELIGIOUS. THE SLAVE MASTER AND COLONISER WERE NOT CONTENT TO DESTROY STATES, SHATTER ECONOMIES AND DISRUPT SOCIAL SYSTEMS, BUT ALSO WAGED WAR AGAINST THE BELIEFS, VALUES AND PERSONALITIES OF THE CONQUERED PEOPLE. THEY WERE NOT CONTENT TO DESTROY BODIES, WHICH WERE NECESSARY FOR LABOUR, BUT SOULS, WHICH WERE CONSIDERED UNNECESSARY LUXURIES IN SUB-HUMAN CHATTEL.

THE REPARATIONS MOVEMENT SEEKS TO RESTORE THE BALANCE OF A HISTORY BASED ON DENIAL AND UNTRUTH, WHICH HAS DISTORTED AND DISCOLOURED THE PRESENT, AND UNDERMINED FAITH IN THE FUTURE. IT IS A CALL TO JUSTICE DENIED, EQUALITY MADE IMPOSSIBLE. IT SEEKS THE RESTORATION OF ECONOMIES BUT ALSO THE REHABILITATION OF HUMAN PERSONALITIES. IT SEEKS JUSTICE, NOT VENGEANCE. LAW AND JUSTICE DEMAND THAT THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN INJURED MUST BE COMPENSATED, THAT THE BROKEN AND MUTILATED BE MADE WHOLE AGAIN.

IN THIS CENTURY THE FRENCH WERE COMPENSATED BY THE GERMANS AT THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR; JAPANESE-AMERICANS WERE COMPENSATED FOR THEIR ILLEGAL INTERNMENT BY THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT; THE GERMANS COMPENSATED THE JEWS FOR THE HORRORS OF THE HOLOCAUST DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR; THE JAPANESE COMPENSATED KOREANS FOR ATROCITIES COMMITTED AGAINST THEM; AMERICA, CANADA AND AUSTRALIA HAVE COMPENSATED INDIGENOUS PEOPLES FOR CRIMES COMMITTED DURING CONQUEST, COLONISATION AND ENSLAVEMENT; AND IRAQ HAS BEEN FORCED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY TO PAY REPARATIONS TO KUWAIT AND ALL OTHER NATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS INJURED IN THE INVASION OF ITS NEIGHBOUR.

THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE OF 17 NOVEMBER, 1993, REPORTED THAT THE US CONGRESS FORMALLY APOLOGISED TO NATIVE HAWAIIANS FOR OVERTHROWING THEIR NINARCHY 100 YEARS AGO. WHEN WILL THE CONGRESS APOLOGISE FOR ENSLAVING AFRICA? WHEN WILL EUROPE APOLOGISE FOR OVERTHROWING HUNDREDS OF AFRICAN KINGDOMS, AND ENSLAVING HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF AFRICANS? IF ALL THE OTHER INJURED AND DISINHERITED OF THE WORLD DESERVE REDRESS, WHY NOT AFRICA? WHY COMPENSATE THE SLAVE MASTERS INSTEAD OF THEIR VICTIMS, WHEN SLAVERY IS "ABOLISHED"?

AFRICANS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORA HAVE NEVER BEEN COMPENSATED FOR THE CRIMES OF SLAVERY AND COLONISATION OF THE PAST FIVE CENTURIES, EVEN THOUGH THESE SURPASS THE SUFFERING OF ALL OTHER INJURED PEOPLES, AND PERSIST UNTIL TODAY. THE ECONOMIC DISLOCATION SUFFERED BY THE CONTINENT IS OBVIOUS FROM THE SQUATTER CAMPS OF SOUTH AFRICA, THE DESTITUTE MASSES OF ANGOLA, TO THE CRACK-INFESTED GHETTOES OF THE AMERICAN CAPITAL. THE RACISM OF EUROPE AND AMERICA, WHICH DID NOT EXIST BEFORE AFRICANS WERE ENSLAVED, BUT WAS INVENTED TO JUSTIFY THE INHUMANITIES OF ENSLAVEMENT, HAS NOT JUST PERSISTED BUT INTENSIFIED.

IN THE DIASPORA AFRICANS ARE DISCRIMINATED AGAINST, ABUSED, HARASSED, DENIED PROMOTION, AND MURDERED IN RANDOM, RACIST VIOLENCE. ON THE CONTINENT, IN WARS REMINISCENT OF THE ERA OF THE SLAVE TRADE, OUTSIDE FORCES SUPPLY BOTH SIDES WITH WEAPONS TO WAGE WAR AGAINST THEIR OWN PEOPLE. BUT INSTEAD OF SLAVES, IT IS TELEVISION IMAGES OF FAMINE VICTIMS AND WAR-WOUNDED WHICH ARE CAPTURED AND SOLD IN THE WEST. AND INSTEAD OF RELIGIOUS MISSIONARIES, THE IMF, WORLD BANK AND "AID" AGENCIES PERPETUATE THE MYTHS OF THE "WHITE MAN'S BURDEN" AND THE "CIVILISING MISSION".

AFRICANS ON THE CONTINENT AND IN THE DIASPORA MUST RECAPTURE THEIR OWN HISTORY, TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR PRESENT DIRE SITUATION, AND PROJECT THEIR DESTINY INTO A FUTURE THAT NOW APPEARS UNCERTAIN AND PROBLEMATIC. WE MUST BE MOVED BY THE SPIRIT OF HEROIC ANCESTORS WHO KEPT THE HOPES OF LIBERTY ALIVE, HEROES AND HEROINES SUCH AS QUEEN NGOLA, TOUSSAINT LOUVERTURE, SAMORY TOURE, FREDERICK DOUGLASS, NANNY, AND ANTONIO MACEO,

THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY AND COLONISATION

SLAVERY AND COLONISATION IN AFRICA DID NOT BEGIN WITH THE EUROPEAN INCURSION AT THE END OF THE 15TH CENTURY. AFRICAN COMMUNITIES, INCLUDING ARABS IN THE NORTH, WEST AND EAST, PRACTICED FORMS OF SLAVERY AND COLONISATION OVER EXTENDED PERIODS OF TIME. BUT THESE FORMS DIFFERED SUBSTANTIALLY FROM THOSE PRACTICED BY THE EUROPEANS. WHILE MORALLY INDEFENSIBLE, INTRA-AFRICAN SLAVERY HAD LITTLE ECONOMIC OR POLITICAL CONSEQUENCE. SLAVES WERE INCORPORATED INTO HOUSEHOLDS, AND BECAME PART OF THE COMMUNITY. TODAY'S CONQUERORS COULD BE TOMORROW'S SLAVES.

SLAVES WITH ABILITY COULD RISE TO THE TOP AND WERE NOT FOREVER CONDEMNED TO POSITIONS OF INFERIORITY. MANY RULERS PREFERRED WAR COMMANDERS AND TREASURERS TO BE FROM SLAVE LINEAGES, AS THEY WERE CONSIDERED MORE TRUSTWORTHY THAN THOSE OF ROYAL BLOOD. IN FACT THE MOTHERS OF MANY RULERS WERE OF SLAVE ORIGIN, BECAUSE THE RULING CLASSES CONSIDERED THIS USEFUL IN CEMENTING TIES WITH THE SLAVE POPULATION. NO FATHER DENIED HIS OWN CHILDREN BECAUSE THEIR MOTHERS WERE "SLAVES". IN MANY CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETIES, SOME VERY POWERFUL OFFICIALS ARE KNOWN TO BE FROM "SLAVE" LINEAGES, WITHOUT ANY DIMINUTION OF PRESTIGE.

NO ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH OR POWER IN AFRICA CAN BE TRACED BACK TO THE ENSLAVMENT OF ONE AFRICAN COMMUNITY BY ANOTHER. THE WARLORDS AND KLEPTOCRATS WHO DOMINATE MANY AFRICAN SOCIETIES NOW ARE AGENTS OF THE EUROPEAN POWERS WHICH BECAME WEALTHY AND POWERFUL AS THE RESULT OF THE SLAVE TRADE, COLONIALISM AND NEO-COLONIALISM. AND THE "TRIBALISM" WHICH THEY PRACTICE IS A VERY MODERN FORM OF THE RACISM WHICH THEY INHERITED FROM THEIR FOREIGN MASTERS, WHICH THEY USE TO JUSTIFY THE LOOTING OF THEIR OWN COUNTRIES. MOBUTU WAS IMPOSED BY THE CIA AFTER TWO THIRDS OF THE PEOPLE OF ZAIRE VOTED FOR PATRICE LUMUMBA. HE IS NOW WORTH \$5 BILLION AND HAS DESTROYED HIS COUNTRY THROUGH METHODS REMINISCENT OF THE SLAVE RAIDERS WHO SET ONE COMMUNITY AGAINST ANOTHER.

EUROPEAN ENSLAVMENT AND COLONISATION OF AFRICA REPRESENT THE GREATEST TRANSFER OF RESOURCES FROM ONE PEOPLE TO ANOTHER IN HUMAN HISTORY. THE SCALE OF THE PLUNDER, AND THE DEGREE OF EXPLOITATION OF FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS NECESSARY TO EFFECT IT, GAVE RISE TO THE MYTH OF RACIAL SUPERIORITY AS A MEANS OF JUSTIFYING MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN. WHEN THE PORTUGUESE ESTABLISHED A SLAVE COLONY TO GROW SUGAR ON SAO TOME OFF THE COAST OF GUINEA IN PRE-COLOMBIAN TIMES, AFRICA WAS ABOUT AT PAR WITH EUROPE IN TERMS OF WEALTH AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT. THE NARROW GAP WIDENED ASTRONOMICALLY AS A RESULT OF SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM.

WEALTH IN EUROPE WAS CONCENTRATED IN THE HANDS OF ROYALTY, NOBILITY AND MERCHANTS, AND THE MASSES WERE GENERALLY WORSE OFF THAN THE AFRICAN POOR. THE EUROPEANS WERE NOT ATTRACTED TO AFRICA BECAUSE IT WAS POOR, BUT BECAUSE IT WAS RICH IN GOLD, SILVER, PRECIOUS STONES, SPICES AND, ABOVE ALL, HUMAN LABOUR. AFRICANS WERE ALSO NOT CONSIDERED INFERIOR TO EUROPEANS AS THE BIBLE AND ANCIENT GREEK AND ROMAN POETS, PHILOSOPHERS AND HISTORIANS HAD WRITTEN OF POWERFUL AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS. PORTUGUESE VISITORS HAD ALSO DESCRIBED VISITS TO MAGNIFICANT AFRICAN KINGDOMS IN BENIN, ANGOLA AND CONGO (NOW CONGO AND ZAIRE).

COLUMBUS' MISTAKEN BELIEF THAT HE HAD DISCOVERED A NEW ROUTE TO INDIA OPENED A WHOLE NEW WORLD TO EUROPEAN EXPLOITATION. THIS WOULD REQUIRE LABOUR TO MINE FOR GOLD, AND LATER TO GROW CROPS FOR EXPORT TO EUROPE. ON HIS SECOND VOYAGE IN 1493 HE TOOK THE SUGAR CANE PLANTS WHICH WOULD CHANGE THE HISTORY OF AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS. HAVING DESTROYED THE INDIGENOUS POPULATION THEY FOUND ON THE CARIBBEAN ISLANDS AND CENTRAL AMERICA, THE EUROPEANS TURNED TO AFRICA, CONSIDERED AN INEXHAUSTIBLE RESERVOIR OF CHEAP LABOUR. AFRICA WAS DEVASTATED SO THAT EUROPE COULD ASCEND TO PRE-EMINENCE.

AFRICANS WERE ENSLAVED BECAUSE THEY WERE HARD-WORKING, PRODUCTIVE, AND DISCIPLINED. IT IS IRONIC THAT RACIST MYTHS NOW PORTRAY AFRICANS AS THE OPPOSITE. EXPERIMENTS WITH WHITE SLAVES WERE ABANDONED BECAUSE WHITES WERE CONSIDERED USELESS, LAZY, DISSOLUTE, TROUBLESOME AND EXPENSIVE. THE REAL REASON WAS THAT THE SLAVE MASTERS COULD NOT USE RACISM TO JUSTIFY LONG-TERM DEHUMANISATION OF PEOPLE WHO SHARED THE SAME APPEARANCE AND SKIN COLOUR. THE SPANISH KING AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ALSO FORBADE ENSLAVEMENT OF JEWS, MOSLEMS AND HERETICS BECAUSE OF FEAR THAT THEY WOULD CONVERT FELLOW-SLAVES TO THEIR RELIGIONS.

THE FIRST "ASIENTO" (CONTRACT) FOR SUPPLYING SLAVES TO THE "NEW WORLD" WAS GRANTED BY THE SPANISH CROWN IN 1517, THOUGH THE PORTUGUESE OPERATED SLAVE PLANTATIONS IN AFRICA MUCH EARLIER. SLAVERY WAS OFFICIALLY ABOLISHED IN CUBA IN 1880, FOLLOWING ABOLITION BY THE FRENCH, BRITISH, DANES AND AMERICANS AT DIFFERENT TIMES DURING THE 19TH CENTURY. IT IS DIFFICULT TO ESTIMATE HOW MANY AFRICANS WERE ENSLAVED, OR DIED IN THE PROCESS OF ENSLAVEMENT OVER ALMOST FOUR CENTURIES.

AT PRESENT THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 150 MILLION PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN THE DIASPORA (OVER 75 MILLION IN BRAZIL, 40 MILLION IN THE USA, 10 MILLION IN THE WEST INDIES, 15 MILLION IN THE REST OF THE AMERICAS, AND 10 MILLION IN EUROPE. IN THE PROCESS OF CAPTURE 50% OF THE SLAVES DIED, SOME RESISTING CAPTURE, SOME DYING FROM HUNGER, DISEASE AND EXHAUSTION ON THE MARCH TO THE COAST, AND OTHERS COMMITTING SUICIDE. A FURTHER 25% OF THOSE WHO SURVIVED DIED IN THE ATLANTIC CROSSING OR AT THE PORTS AWAITING SALE, WHILE UP TO 33% DIED DURING THE YEAR OF "SEASONING", WHEN THE SLAVES WERE BROKEN INTO THE HARSH REGIME OF DISCIPLINE AND DEGRADATION.

THE SLAVE MASTERS HAD A DELIBERATE POLICY OF WORKING SLAVES TO DEATH SO THAT THEY COULD RECUPERATE THEIR COSTS IN THE SHORTEST POSSIBLE TIME. IT WAS CHEAPER TO REPLACE DEAD SLAVES WITH IMPORTS RATHER THAN TREAT THEM WELL AND HAVE THEM LIVE TO OLD AGE. THE RESULT WAS THAT, DESPITE PROLIFIC BREEDING, THE SLAVE POPULATION FAILED TO KEEP UP WITH IMPORTS. RICHARD HART ESTIMATED THAT OVER THE PERIOD OF ALMOST 150 YEARS BEFORE ABOLITION, ONE MILLION SLAVES WERE IMPORTED INTO JAMAICA, TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND WERE RE-EXPORTED, LEAVING A NET OF 800, 000. YET THE TOTAL POPULATION WAS JUST 323, 827 IN 1833. ERIC WILLIAMS PRESENTS SIMILAR FIGURES FOR OTHER WEST INDIAN SLAVE COLONIES TO DEMONSTRATE THE MORTALITY OF SLAVERY.

GIVEN THIS BACKGROUND, AND THE HARSH POST-SLAVERY CONDITIONS, POPULATION GROWTH WAS LIMITED BY DISEASE, OVERWORK, MALNUTRITION AND HIGH INFANT MORTALITY. THUS THE SURVIVING POPULATION OF AFRICANS IN THE DIASPORA REPRESENTS A NET LOSS TO THE CONTINENT OF HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF MEN AND WOMEN, ALL IN THE PRIMES OF THEIR LIVES. WHILE AFRICA IS CONSIDERED OVERPOPULATED BY MANY WESTERN "EXPERTS", INDIA HAS ONE AND A HALF TIMES THE POPULATION OF AFRICA PACKED INTO ONE SEVENTH THE SPACE.

ACCOUNTS OF THE TREATMENT OF SLAVES DURING CAPTURE, TRANSPORT AND WORK MAKE IT SEEM SURPRISING THAT SO MANY HAVE SURVIVED TILL TODAY. CLR JAMES PROVIDES GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS: "THE SLAVES WERE COLLECTED IN THE INTERIOR, FASTENED ONE TO THE OTHER IN COLUMNS, LOADED WITH HEAVY STONES OF 40 OR 50 POUNDS IN WEIGHT TO PREVENT ATTEMPTS AT ESCAPE, AND THEN MARCHED THE LONG JOURNEY TO THE SEA, SOMETIMES HUNDREDS OF MILES, THE WEAKLY AND SICK DROPPING TO DIE...AT THE SLAVE PORTS THEY WERE PENNED INTO 'TRUNKS' FOR THE INSPECTION OF THE BUYERS...."

BECAUSE OF CONSTANT RESISTANCE THE SLAVES WERE "CHAINED, RIGHT HAND TO RIGHT LEG, LEFT HAND TO LEFT LEG, ATTACHED IN ROWS TO LONG IRON BARS. IN THIS POSITION THEY LIVED FOR THE VOYAGE, COMING UP ONCE A DAY FOR EXERCISE...BUT WHEN THE CARGO WAS REBELLIOUS OR THE WEATHER BAD, THEN THEY STAYED BELOW FOR WEEKS AT A TIME...DURING THE STORMS THE HATCHES WERE BATTENED DOWN, AND...THEY WERE HURLED FROM ONE SIDE TO ANOTHER BY THE HEAVING VESSEL, HELD IN POSITION BY THE CHAINS ON THEIR BLEEDING FLESH.

...A CAPTAIN HELD UP BY CALMS OR ADVERSE WINDS WAS KNOWN TO HAVE POISONED HIS SLAVES. ANOTHER KILLED SOME OF HIS SLAVES TO FEED THE OTHERS WITH THEIR FLESH...ONE CAPTAIN, TO STRIKE TERROR INTO THE REST, KILLED A SLAVE AND DIVIDING HEART, LIVER AND ENTRAILS INTO 300 HUNDRED PIECES MADE EACH OF THE SLAVES EAT ONE, THREATENING THOSE WHO REFUSED WITH THE SAME TORTURE."

UPON ARRIVAL AFTER THE CROSSING THE CRUELTY CONTINUED, WITH SLAVES BRANDED ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BREAST WITH A HOT IRON TO SHOW OWNERSHIP. THE SLAVES HAD ALREADY BEEN BRANDED WITH THE MARK OF THE TRANSPORTER BEFORE THE CROSSING. JAMES SPEAKS OF THE IRONS ON THE HANDS AND FEET, BLOCKS OF WOOD THE SLAVES DRAGGED BEHIND THEM WHEREVER THEY WENT, THE TIN-PLATE MASK TO PREVENT THE SLAVE EATING SUGAR CANE, THE IRON COLLAR. "WHIPPING WAS INTERRUPTED IN ORDER TO PASS A PIECE OF HOT WOOD ON THE BUTTOCKS OF THE VICTIM; SALT, PEPPER, CITRON, CINDERS, ALOES, AND HOT ASHES WERE POURED ON THE BLEEDING WOUNDS. MUTILATIONS WERE COMMON, LIMBS, EARS, AND SOMETIMES THE PRIVATE PARTS, TO DEPRIVE THEM OF THE PLEASURES WHICH THEY COULD INDULGE IN WITHOUT EXPENSE. THEIR MASTERS POURED BURNING WAX ON THEIR ARMS AND HANDS AND SHOULDERS, EMPTIED THE BOILING CANE SUGAR OVER THEIR HEADS, BURNED THEM ALIVE, ROASTED THEM ON SLOW FIRES, FILLED THEM WITH GUNPOWDER AND BLEW THEM UP WITH A MATCH; BURIED THEM UP TO THE NECK AND SMEARED THEIR HEADS WITH SUGAR THAT THE FLIES MIGHT DEVOUR THEM; FASTENED THEM NEAR NESTS OF ANTS OR WASPS; MADE THEM EAT THEIR EXCREMENT, DRINK THEIR URINE, AND LICK THE SALIVA OF OTHER SLAVES."

THESE CRUELITIES WERE NOT ONLY THE RESULT OF SADISM, HOWEVER, BUT HAD A FIRM PROFIT MOTIVE. TORTURE, ABUSE AND OVERWORK REPRESENTED VALUE FOR MONEY. RICHARD HART REPORTS THE TESTIMONY OF HENRY COOR, A WHEELWRIGHT WITH HIS OWN GANG OF SLAVES IN JAMAICA, TO A BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE IN 1791:

"IT WAS MORE THE OBJECT OF THE OVERSEERS TO WORK THE SLAVES OUT, AND TRUST TO SUPPLIES FROM AFRICA...I HAVE HEARD MANY OVERSEERS SAY, 'I HAVE MADE MY EMPLOYERS 20, 30 OR 40 MORE HOGSHEADS PER YEAR THAN ANY OF MY PREDECESSORS EVER DID; AND THOUGH I HAVE KILLED 30 OR 40 NEGROES PER YEAR MORE, YET THE PRODUCE HAS BEEN MORE THAN ADEQUATE TO THAT LOSS'".

ERIC WILLIAMS REPORTED THAT GEORGE DOWNING (FATHER OF DOWNING STREET) WROTE TO GOVERNOR WINTHROP OF MASSACHUSETTS IN 1647 THAT SLAVES IN BARBADOS WERE EXCELLENT VALUE FOR MONEY: "THE MORE THEY BUY, THE BETTER THEY ARE ABLE TO BUY, FOR IN A YEAR AND A HALF THEY WILL EARN (WITH GOD'S BLESSING) AS MUCH AS THEY COST." THIS FANTASTIC RATE OF RETURN OVER HUNDREDS OF YEARS LAID THE FOUNDATION OF EUROPEAN WEALTH, ESPECIALLY OF GREAT BRITAIN, THE SOON TO EMERGE POWER OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION.

IN WHAT WILLIAMS DESCRIBED AS THE TRIANGULAR TRADE, EUROPEANS PROFITED FROM EXPORTS OF ALCOHOL, FIREARMS AND TEXTILES TO AFRICA; THEY PROFITED FROM EXPORTS OF SLAVES FROM AFRICA; THEN FROM THE EXPORTS TO EUROPE OF SUGAR, COTTON, TOBACCO AND OTHER GOODS PRODUCED IN THE WEST INDIES BY SLAVES. THIS TRANSFORMED FISHING VILLAGES SUCH AS LIVERPOOL INTO WEALTHY PORTS, AND LONDON INTO THE METROPOLIS OF THE WORLD. IT BOOSTED THE SHIP-BUILDING, TEXTILE, IRON, BANKING AND OTHER INDUSTRIES, AND CREATED THE MAGNIFICENT SPECTACLE OF THE RICH WEST INDIAN PLANTER. IN 1764 IT WAS REPORTED THAT THERE WERE 50 OR 60 WEST INDIANS IN THE UK PARLIAMENT, WHO COULD SWING VOTES IN THE FAVOUR OF SLAVE INTERESTS.

IN 1683 TRADE WITH TINY BARBADOS EMPLOYED 400 SHIPS, CASH IN THE ISLAND WAS ESTIMATED AT 200, 000, AND EXPORTS TO THE UK WERE WORTH 300, 000. WILLIAMS RECORDS PROFITS OF BETWEEN 66 AND 117% FOR THE ROYAL AFRICAN COMPANY BETWEEN 1698 AND 1720. UP TO 1770 ONE THIRD OF MANCHESTER'S TEXTILES WERE EXPORTED TO AFRICA, ONE HALF TO THE WEST INDIAN AND AMERICAN COLONIES. IN 1709 10% OF ALL BRITISH SHIPPING WAS INVOLVED IN WEST INDIAN TRADE. SO IMPORTANT WERE THE SUGAR PRODUCING ISLANDS THAT GUADELOUPE WAS PREFERRED TO CANADA, WHICH VOLTAIRE DESCRIBED AS A "FEW ACRES OF SNOW"; JAMAICA WAS PREFERRED TO INDIA, AND EVEN THE AMERICAN COLONIES. THE ISLAND WAS DESCRIBED BY CROMWELL AS A "LAND OF PLENTY" WHILE NEW ENGLAND WAS DISMISSED AS "DESERT AND BARREN WILDERNESS".

THE FABULOUS PROFITS OF THE SLAVE TRADE WERE NOT INVESTED IN AFRICA OR THE WEST INDIES, BUT IN EUROPE. ALTHOUGH THEY WERE SUPPORTED BY BLACK SLAVES AND FREED MEN AND WOMEN FROM AMERICA AND THE WEST INDIES, THE WHITE SETTLERS IN AMERICA SAW THEIR REVOLUTION AS INDEPENDENCE FROM BRITAIN FOR THEMSELVES, NOT THE BLACKS WHO WERE CONSIDERED LESS THAN HUMAN. THE FACTORIES, UNIVERSITIES, BANKS AND OTHER SOURCES OF WEALTH GREW IN EUROPE, NOT IN AFRICA OR COMMUNITIES OF AFRICANS ABROAD. EDUCATION WAS DENIED: AFTER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF SLAVE TRADE AND COLONIALISM THERE WAS NOT A SINGLE UNIVERSITY IN NIGERIA, AFRICA'S MOST POPULOUS NATION, AT INDEPENDENCE IN 1960. TODAY THERE ARE OVER 30. THE PLANTERS AND SLAVE DEALERS SENT THEIR CHILDREN TO SCHOOLS IN EUROPE, RATHER THAN BUILD THEM IN THEIR COLONIES.

SLAVERY WAS ABOLISHED WHEN SLAVE REVOLTS AND CHANGES IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY MADE COLONIALISM MORE PROFITABLE. IN BOTH SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM BLACKS WERE PREVENTED FROM ACCUMULATING WEALTH, FROM MANY TYPES OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITY, FROM CERTAIN PROFESSIONS, FROM RECEIVING THE BEST EDUCATION. LAWS WERE PASSED TO LIMIT THE AMOUNT A CHILD BORN OF A WOMAN SLAVE COULD RECEIVE FROM ITS FATHER WHO WAS A SLAVE OWNER, AND AFTER ABOLITION MANY FREED SLAVES LOST THEIR TINY PLOTS OF LAND, AND WERE DISCOURAGED FROM PURCHASING LAND TO FORCE THEM TO WORK ON THE PLANTATIONS. THEIR TAXES WERE ALSO USED TO SUBSIDISE INDENTURED LABOUR FROM ASIA, WHICH WAS DESIGNED TO KEEP THEIR OWN LABOUR CHEAP. TO THOSE THAT HAD, TO THEM IT WAS GIVEN IN ABUNDANCE. AND THE LITTLE THAT THEY HAD WAS TAKEN FROM THOSE WHO HAD NOT.

SHAPING THE FUTURE

AT THE END OF THE LAST CENTURY WEB DUBOIS SAID THAT THE HISTORY OF THE 20TH CENTURY WOULD BE THE HISTORY OF THE COLOUR LINE. THE RACIST DIVISION OF THE WORLD CREATED BY CENTURIES OF SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM PERSIST UNTIL TODAY. THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS WHICH CREATED AND MAINTAIN THE RACIAL DIVISION OF THE WORLD ARE STILL WITH US. EVEN THE "INDEPENDENT" AND "SELF-GOVERNING" NATIONS AND COMMUNITIES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES ARE OFTEN RULED BY THE POLITICAL EQUIVALENT OF THE SLAVE-MASTER'S WHIP, BY FORCE AND FRAUD, RATHER THAN CONSENT.

CAN AFRICA AND ITS SCATTERED CHILDREN SURVIVE ANOTHER SUCH CENTURY? NOT UNLESS WE UNDERSTAND THE HAZARDS OF THE PAST, WHICH HAVE BEEN PERPETUATED INTO THE PRESENT. AFRICANS AT HOME AND ABROAD NEED TO REJECT DECISIVELY THE MASTER-SLAVE RELATIONS IMPRINTED IN ALL OUR MINDS. WE NEED TO PUT OUR COLLECTIVE HOUSE IN ORDER AND ACT AS ONE TO REMOVE THE OBSTACLES WHICH MAKE LIFE HELL ON EARTH FOR ALL OF US. AFRICANS AT HOME AND ABROAD ARE ONE PEOPLE, TORN APART BY HATE, INCLUDING SELF-HATE. THROUGH REPARATIONS THE WOUNDS MUST BE HEALED, AND MAN MADE ONE AGAIN. THE OAU HAS ADOPTED REPARATIONS AND INVITED AFRICANS IN THE DIASPORA TO BE OBSERVERS AT ITS DELIBERATIONS.

ON THE CONTINENT THE MARCH TO DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT MUST BE PURSUED WITH VIGOUR, AND WITHIN A PAN-AFRICAN CONTEXT. THERE MUST BE NO CLOSED BORDERS IN AFRICA TO PEOPLE WHO WERE TORN FROM HER SOIL. ADMINISTRATION AND ECONOMIC POLICIES MUST BEAR THE HALLMARK OF HONESTY, TRANSPARENCY AND INTEGRITY. AFRICA MUST RID ITSELF OF THOSE WHO ACT LIKE SLAVE MASTERS AND COLONISTS, TORTURING THEIR OWN PEOPLE AND LOOTING THEIR COUNTRIES. WHY SHOULD AFRICANS TAKE THE BLAME FOR THE ATROCITIES CAUSED BY MONSTERS CREATED BY EUROPE?

IN THE DIASPORA AFRICANS MUST RESCUE ITS LOST CHILDREN WHO BEAR THE SEEDS OF THEIR FUTURE. THE DRUGS AND GUNS WHICH FLOOD BLACK NEIGHBOURHOODS ARE THE SAME AS THE ALCOHOL AND FIREARMS WHICH DEVASTATED AFRICA IN PAST CENTURIES. THEY ARE NOT FROM THE BLACK GHETTOS OR AFRICA BUT THE DEATHS AND DESTRUCTION THEY CAUSE ARE. WHAT FUTURE IS THERE FOR CRACK AND GUNS BUT THE SCREAMS OF DEAD AND DYING, AND THE FINAL SILENCE OF THE GRAVE?

IF THE PEOPLE OF AFRICA CAN SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE THEY CAN TELL THEIR OPPRESSORS THAT THE END TO RACISM CAN COME ONLY WHEN ITS ORIGINS ARE RECOGNISED, ACCEPTED AND ATONED FOR, THAT GOOD RACE RELATIONS CANNOT EXIST ALONGSIDE BAD ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL RELATIONS. RACISM DOES NOT CONSIST ONLY IN "LYNCHING NIGGERS" OR ABUSING "JUNGLE BUNNIES" BUT IN ACCEPTING A SOCIAL ORDER WHICH CONDEMNS MILLIONS TO PREMATURE DEATHS, POOR HEALTH, HOUSING, EDUCATION AND OTHER SOCIAL ILLS, SIMPLY BECAUSE OF THE COLOUR OF THEIR SKINS. WHILE AMERICAN CITIZENS OF EUROPEAN DESCENT ENJOY THE HIGHEST STANDARDS OF LIVING IN THE WORLD, AFRICAN-AMERICANS RANK 32ND, ALONGSIDE BARBADOS.

THE POVERTY OF THE AFRICAN IS CAUSED NOT BY GENES, WHICH ARE SIMILAR TO THOSE OF OTHER RACES, BUT BY SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONDITIONS DETERMINED BY HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE PAST FIVE CENTURIES. WHAT WOULD IT COST THE EUROPEANS, EVEN THOSE WHO ARE NOT CHILDREN OF SLAVE-MASTERS, TO ACCEPT THIS AND SAY: "WE ARE SORRY?" THE LATE GERMAN CHANCELLOR WILLY BRANDT, WHO APOLOGISED TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE FOR THE CRIMES OF THE NAZIS WAS NOT A NAZI AND FOUGHT AGAINST THESE RACIST MASS-MURDERERS. HE APOLOGISED NOT ONLY FOR THE SUFFERING OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE BUT ALSO TO ENABLE THE GERMANS EXORCISE THEIR SENSE OF GUILT AND EVIL, AND BE AT PEACE WITH THEMSELVES.

WHEN AFRICA REACHES OUT TO EUROPE AND DEMANDS APOLOGY, IT IS NOT ONLY TO RESTORE AFRICAN SELF-ESTEEM BUT ALSO TO ENABLE EUROPE FREE ITSELF FROM THE NIGHTMARES IT SEES IN EACH BLACK FACE. EUROPE IS HAUNTED BY ITS OWN GHOSTS AND CONFINED BY THE PRISON IT HAS MADE OF EACH BLACK SKIN. IN HELPING TO MAKE US FREE, IT FREES ITSELF, AND IN MAKING PEACE WITH ITS "ENEMIES", IT FINDS THAT ITS WORST ENEMY IS ITSELF.

(FOR FURTHER READING ON THIS TOPIC SEE ERIC WILLIAMS, "CAPITALISM AND SLAVERY" AND "FROM COLUMBUS TO CASTRO"; RICHARD HART, "THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY" AND "SLAVES WHO ABOLISHED SLAVERY" (2 VOLS); CLR JAMES, "THE BLACK JACOBINS"; USEFUL REFERENCE WORKS ARE: "KNOW AFRICA" (3 VOLS) BY AFRICA BOOKS AND "THE UNESCO GENERAL HISTORY OF AFRICA (8 VOLS).