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REPARATIONS, SLAVERY

The idea of slavery reparations has been a topic of considerable debate. The premise is that the federal government should provide some form of restitution for the centuries in which the United States benefited during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Those in support of reparations generally argue that the current economic and social disparities between Blacks and Whites are direct results of the racist legacy of slavery and segregation. This is manifested in problems that African Americans have experienced in acquiring property and income and accumulating wealth, they argue. Supporters of reparations assert that reparations will be a first step toward erasing the existing inequality between Whites and Blacks. Since 1989, Congressman John Conyers, Jr. has introduced a bill each year to study slavery reparations; each year, the bill has failed to garner enough support.

Those against reparations generally maintain that because no African Americans currently living in the United States personally experienced slavery, they are not entitled to such benefits. Furthermore, those against reparations argue that slavery was legal at the time it existed. Thus, although it is evident in retrospect that slavery was morally wrong, there is no legal basis for slavery reparations to be administered. Moreover, they argue that corporations that were involved in the economic exploitation of slave labor have long since mended their ways and should no longer be held liable for the current status of African Americans. Those against reparations also contend that paying reparations would increase racial tensions in this country. This entry discusses the two perspectives and their historical background.

What Supporters Say

Some supporters justify slavery reparations with arguments pertaining to promises of land for the newly freed slaves shortly after the Civil War. General William Tecumseh Sherman issued Special Field

Order No. 15, which set aside land in the South for the freedmen. Forty acres were to be distributed to each head of a former slave family. The term *Forty Acres and a Mule*, which is a rallying slogan for reparations supporters, originates from Sherman's order. Even though Sherman never specifically mentioned mules, some believe that the army may have distributed them to help the freedmen till the land. However, after President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and Andrew Johnson became president, the order was reversed and the land was redirected to Whites.

After emancipation, the lives of the former slaves did not change that much. Although the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments were passed to provide equal rights and protection under the law for the newly freed slaves as U.S. citizens, equality was not the reality. Black Codes and Jim Crow laws were instituted so that options were limited for Blacks. Many continued working on the plantations for White landowners. Blacks and Whites were segregated socially and legally.

Moreover, violence against Blacks did not stop with emancipation. The lynching and murder of Blacks also continued, and race riots in Chicago, Illinois (1919); Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921); and Rosewood, Florida (1923), left many Blacks dead or victimized by White rioters. In addition, even though there has been ample opportunity to do so, the U.S. government still has not formally apologized for slavery, and recent legislative proposals by Congress to do so have not been supported either.

Even though slavery has been abolished, reparations supporters point out that disparities and inequality between Blacks and Whites still exist. One of the main points of contention is that the wealth gap between Blacks and Whites is pronounced. Because of laws that prevented slaves from owning property, the legacy of slavery has produced adverse generational effects on the descendants of slaves. Thus, although White families were able to pass on wealth and assets from generation to generation, Black families were not able to do so. The current racial wealth gap is best manifested in that home equity disparities between Blacks and Whites are enormous. Some scholars estimate that today's generation of Black families are missing out on billions of dollars in home equity. This is primarily because of the legacy of slavery, supporters of reparations say, but also because of discriminatory housing practices such as restrictive covenants, steering, and redlining.

The concept of issuing reparations to atone for the mistreatment of a particular group is not new. Following World War II, Germany paid \$822 million to Holocaust survivors and heirs. The United States has paid reparations to Alaskan Natives and various Native American tribes such as the Klamaths, Lakota, Seminoles, Chippewas, and Ottawas. More recently, in 1990, \$1.2 billion in reparations, or \$20,000 per person, was paid to living Japanese American internees of World War II.

The Japanese American Redress Movement, which began in Seattle, successfully argued that because Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from their homes against their will, their property was confiscated or stolen, and their children were taken from schools and also interned, reparations should be issued to rectify the federal government's wrongdoing. Supporters of slavery reparations have argued that the compensation paid to these groups have been legitimate and rightly deserved; likewise, reparations for slavery are also as just as, if not more, deserving and long overdue, they say.

What Opponents Say

Opponents of slavery reparations claim that the circumstances of African Americans are different from those of groups that have received compensation. Reparations in previous cases were paid to living survivors who were directly affected, opponents argue. Because no living survivors of slavery exist, reparations should not be distributed to descendants who did not directly undergo the suffering and hardships of slavery, opponents say. Opponents also maintain that identifying descendants of slaves to receive reparations would be difficult. Also, according to the one-drop rule (which classified as Black anyone with "one drop" of African blood), many in the United States could start to claim Black ancestry for the sole purpose of receiving reparations. Furthermore, reparations opponents argue that that recent immigrants to the United States who had nothing to do with slavery and did not benefit whatsoever from it would unfairly be obligated to help pay for reparations.

Those against reparations also assert that the United States was not the only country engaged in the slave trade and that because slavery was legal at the time, no laws were broken and the government should not be held accountable. Opponents also argue that corporations such as banks and insurers that profited

from financing the slave trade or insuring slaves have long since changed their ways. A few of these corporations have apologized for their involvement and now actively recruit potential Black employees. Anti-reparations advocates maintain that targeting these firms with lawsuits may financially cripple these companies and lead to disastrous economic outcomes for many individuals and communities.

Reparations opponents assert that issuing slavery reparations will increase racial tensions in this country. They maintain that because most present-day U.S. residents could state, "My family never owned slaves," reparations will only further divide the racial and ethnic groups in the United States by fostering resentment among those that believe they are paying for what happened long ago.

In sum, the issue of slavery reparations is quite contentious, with many having strong, passionate feelings of support for or opposition to slavery reparations. In addition, not all Blacks support reparations and not all Whites are against reparations. Some opposition may be based on the popular misconception that reparations would be distributed in the form of individual checks to African Americans; however, the issuance of individual checks is only one proposed manner of doling out slavery reparations. Other proposals include apportioning a percentage of the tax dollars paid by Blacks into an allotted pool. This money would then go to a reparations fund that would be reinvested into Black communities to increase social services, educational opportunities, housing loans, health care, and jobs. In this manner, many reparations supporters claim that society as a whole would benefit.

Andrew Cho

See also Abolitionism: The Movement; Abolitionism: The People; African Americans; Internment Camps; Jim Crow; *Plessy v. Ferguson*; Redlining; Restrictive Covenants; Segregation; Slavery

Further Readings

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