

“REPARATIONS: THE NEW CIVIL RIGHTS AGENDA”

Several months ago a progressive black New York City Councilman, Charles Barron, submitted a bold resolution to his City Council “to support the using of reparations for descendants of enslaved Africans in New York City.” Barron called for the creation of a “Queen Mother Moore commission to hold hearings, conduct research and recommend compensation to the descendants of enslaved Africans in New York City.” The naming of the resolution in honor of Queen Mother Moore was significant, because more than any other single personality in the twentieth century, she was most closely identified with the struggle for black reparations.

Barron’s call for the creation of a reparations commission was also notable in its historical arguments advanced that justified legislative action. “The enslavement of Africans continued in New York City after the colonial period” and the founding of the United States, Barron’s resolution declares. “In short, Africans built New York City’s infrastructure and economy and were never paid.... They were (also) subjected to the worse kind of rape, torture, brutality and murder the human mind can conjure up. Evidence of this cruelty can be validated by the over 20,000 African ancestral remains that have been excavated in downtown Manhattan....”

Barron, who is widely being considered as a potential mayoral candidate in New York City for 2005, knows his history well. When New York City was first founded by the Dutch and later English colonists, African Americans were brutally exploited to construct the wealth of that city. We were, in effect, the first “stock” on the New York Stock Exchange—which was a slave market. Enslaved blacks built the wall on Wall Street. Compensation is about four centuries overdue.

Several months ago, celebrated Harvard law professor Charles Ogletree and other legal activists filed a suit demanding reparations to the black survivors of the 1921 Tulsa, Oklahoma

race riot. The actual history of this horrific crime against black humanity has only become publicized in recent years.

On May 31, 1921, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a large mob of whites threatened to lynch a black man named Dick Rowland who had been accused of attempting to rape a white woman and was being held under police custody. A group of African Americans tried to protect Rowland from being taken from custody, and white rioters became uncontrollable. Local, county, and state officials did nothing to quell the white violence as black-owned businesses and homes were looted and burned. Many of Tulsa's "special deputies" led the mob, participating in murder, assault, and robbery against African-American victims. The white mob targeted its rage on the city's black middle-class neighborhood of Greenwood, which African Americans commonly referred to as the "Black Wall Street."

An estimated 10,000 whites ransacked Greenwood, destroying its hospital, library, and virtually every school, church, and business. Perhaps as many as 300 people, nearly all African Americans, were killed. Although property damage at that time was estimated at \$2 million, and more than 1,200 homes had been destroyed, local prosecutors and law-enforcement officers failed to arrest or indict a single white rioter. Local officials changed Tulsa building-code regulations to make it difficult for the black survivors of the riot to rebuild their homes and businesses in the Greenwood neighborhood.

For the next seventy years, state and local leaders successfully suppressed any inquiry into these racial atrocities. Finally, in 1997, State Representative Don Ross successfully sponsored a bill creating a state commission to investigate the Tulsa race riot. There were several

factors that contributed to the success of the commission's subsequent investigations. Foremost was the fact that about 100 African-American survivors of the riot were still alive and effectively testified about the events of May 31–June 1, 1921. Unlike slavery, the tragedy was close enough to our time for most whites to feel connected with and in some cases even responsible for the breakdown of civil authority resulting in mass murder.

In February 2001, the Oklahoma state commission recommended that reparations be paid to the survivors and called for scholarships and the construction of a state memorial to mark the tragedy. Republican Governor Frank Keating formally apologized, describing the Tulsa riot as “an unforgivable, unexplainable part of our history.” Attorney Ogletree's recent lawsuit is designed to force the state of Oklahoma to live up to its legal and moral obligations.

These recent legislative and judicial efforts indicate that the issue of black reparations is not and will not go away. There are indeed effective ways for the advocates of reparations to get around the issues of “sovereign immunity”—the prohibition against suing the government—“and statute of limitations”—that these crimes were committed so long ago that prosecution cannot occur.

There are many international conventions or legal covenants to which the U.S. is a signatory that define fundamental violations of human rights, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The Genocide Convention outlaws all policies and practices that would exterminate any people on the basis of their racial identity. The Geneva conventions after World War II also established

legal criteria for what constituted “crimes against humanity.” There is no international statute of limitations for mass murder and genocide.

If the University of Michigan’s affirmative action program currently being reviewed by the U.S. Supreme Court is overturned, African Americans will then be confronted with a new “Plessy v. Ferguson” decision, which back in 1896 legalized the “separate but equal” standard creating Jim Crow segregation. The argument for black reparations may be our most effective tool for pushing forward the struggle for African-American freedom in the twenty-first century.

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