

“In Defense of Black Reparations”Part One of a Two-Part Series

Throughout this year, the black reparations debate has become widely known, and it continued to attract increased national and international attention. In February 2002, CNN and *USA Today* commissioned the Gallup organization to conduct a national poll to assess public opinion on the issue. The results seemed to directly mirror the nation’s parallel racial universes that are reproduced by structural racism. When asked whether “corporations that made profits from slavery should apologize to black Americans who are descendants of slaves,” 68 percent of African Americans responded affirmatively, with 23 percent opposed, while 62 percent of all whites rejected the call for an apology, with only 34 percent supporting it.

On the question of financial compensation, however, whites closed ranks around their racial privileges. When asked whether corporations benefiting from slave exploitation should “make cash payments to black Americans who are the descendants of slaves,” 84 percent of all whites responded negatively, with only 11 percent supporting payments. A clear majority of African Americans polled, by contrast, endorsed corporate restitution payments, by a 57 to 35 percent margin, with 8 percent expressing no opinion. When asked if the government should grant “cash payments” to blacks, nine out of ten white Americans rejected the proposal, while a strong majority of blacks favored it, by 55 to 37 percent.

Inspired by Randall Robinson’s 2000 book, *The Debt*, that became a pro-reparations manifesto, a stellar group of trial lawyers, led by Johnnie Cochran, and Harvard University law professor Charles Ogletree, began to meet regularly to map legal strategy. Other attorneys with extensive experience in winning litigation around victim compensation claims became involved,

including Richard Scruggs, who won a \$368.5 billion settlement from the tobacco industry, and Alexander Pires, who won more than \$1 billion to compensate black farmers for the decades of racially discriminatory policies by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

It was inevitable that as the demand for reparations achieved majority support among African Americans, black conservatives would be trotted out to defend the preservation of white power and privilege. The premier black apologist for the worst policies of the Reagan administration in the black community, economist Thomas Sowell, declared that “the first thing to understand about the issue of reparations is that no money is going to be paid.” Sowell argued that the reparations cause was nothing more than an elaborate plot by black “demagogues,” because “they are demanding something they know they are not going to get. But if we start operating on the principle that people alive today are responsible for what their ancestors did in centuries past, we will be adopting a principle that can tear any society apart, especially a multiethnic society like the United States.” Conservative economist Walter Williams seconded Sowell’s objections, observing that “the problem, of course, is both slaves as well as their owners are all dead. What moral principle justifies forcing a white of today to pay a black of today for what a white of yesteryear did to a black of yesteryear?”

Economist Glen Loury, noted for his recent public evolution from extreme conservatism toward more liberal views, also questioned the wisdom of the reparations effort. “This will isolate black Americans from our natural allies among working-class whites and immigrants,” Loury warned. “We need allies to press for more expansive social policy that can get aid to those at the bottom.” Younger black neoconservatives such as John McWhorter pointed out that even if the reparations movement succeeded in its efforts to create a national “slavery fund” to provide new resources to impoverished black communities, it would only reproduce the unequal

structures of black dependency. “The reparation crowd’s move from individual checks to a general fund will allow community-wide assistance,” McWhorter admitted, “but this model has done nothing for forty years now. Who would get the money? For what purpose?”

The black conservatives’ criticisms and complaints can easily be addressed. First, there is a crucial difference between “guilt” and “responsibility.” White Americans who are alive today are not guilty of enslaving anyone, in the legal definition of the term. Most white Americans below the age of fifty played no role in directly supporting Jim Crow segregation and are not guilty of overt acts to block the integration of public accommodations and schools. But white Americans, as a group, continue to be the direct beneficiaries of the legal apparatuses of white supremacy, carried out by the full weight of America’s legal, political, and economic institutions. The consequences of state-sponsored racial inequality created a mountain of historically constructed, accumulated disadvantage for African Americans as a group.

The living legacy of that racialized, accumulated disadvantage can easily be measured by looking at the gross racial deficits that segment Americans by race, in their life expectancies and in their unequal access to home ownership, business development, and quality education. The U.S. government, for nearly two centuries, established the legal parameters for corporations to carry out blatantly discriminatory policies and practices. Consequently, it is insufficient for us to simply say that once the Jim Crow laws were changed, the state’s responsibility to redress those victimized by discriminatory public policies ended. The U.S. government and the various state governments that created and perpetuated legal racial disparities are “responsible” for compensating the victims and their descendants. As citizens of this country, whites must bear the financial burden of the crimes against humanity that were carried out by their own government.

Another way of thinking about this is to point to the fiscal mismanagement and repressive social policies of the Reagan administration two decades ago. Billions of dollars of tax money paid by blacks and whites alike were allocated to the military industrial complex to finance global military interventions and a nuclear arms race. The vast majority of African Americans strongly opposed these reactionary policies. We were not “guilty” of participating in the decisions to carry out such policies. Yet, as citizens, we are “responsible” for paying to finance Reagan’s disastrous militarism, which left the country deeply in debt. We have an obligation under law to pay taxes. Thus, all citizens of the United States have the same “responsibility” to compensate members of their own society that were deliberately stigmatized by legal racism. Individual “guilt” or “innocence” is therefore irrelevant. America’s version of legal apartheid created the conditions of white privilege and black subordination that we see all around us every day. A debt is owed, and it must be paid in full.

Dr. Manning Marable is Professor of History and Political Science, and the Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University in New York. “Along the Color Line” is distributed free of charge to over 350 publications throughout the U.S. and internationally. Dr. Marable’s column is also available on the Internet at www.manningmarable.net.