

**“Reparations, Black Consciousness, and the Black Freedom Struggle”**

The contemporary black reparations movement, the demand for compensation to African Americans due to centuries of unpaid labor exploitation under slavery, segregation, and ghettoization, has grown remarkably in recent years. On November 7-8, 2002, at Columbia University’s Institute for Research in African-American Studies, Professor Farah Jasmine Griffin and I are coordinating a major research conference on black reparations scholarship, inviting academic papers to provide the social science data essential for constructing successful legal briefs. Scholars must play an active role to contribute the socioeconomic and historical evidence illustrating the central role of the U.S. government and the various state and local governments, in creating the legal frameworks for the systemic exploitation of African Americans to take place by white corporations and throughout society.

There is, however, a political challenge that the black reparations campaign must address and overcome, if it is to become a truly mass movement. For decades, the demand for reparations has been largely pushed by black nationalist organizations and Afrocentric political groups. The most important of these forces has been N’COBRA, which has led an outstanding educational effort to build grassroots awareness and support for black reparations. Nationalist groups such as the Nation of Islam, the Black United Front, and December 12<sup>th</sup> have also contributed to this movement, in different ways. Some of these groups pushed this month for a reparations march in Washington, D.C., which largely failed to reach out to broad and diverse

constituencies within the African-American community. Labor, most faith-based groups, women's organizations, legal aid groups, and civil rights groups like the NAACP and Rainbow-PUSH have been almost completely outside of the process of black reparations mobilization. This inability to reach beyond the black nationalist sector has meant that the majority of African Americans still do not fully understand the reasons justifying the demand for economic compensation, and the legal necessity for the U.S. government to acknowledge that "slavery was a crime against humanity."

It may be instructive to re-examine that black freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s, to build an effective multi-tendenced, multi-class coalition, that had the capacity to challenge the government to change its racial policies. Everybody involved in the Civil Rights Movement shared the same immediate goals: the outlawing of legal racial segregation, and the guaranteeing of black voting, civil liberties, and equality under the law. Beyond these clear goals, there were tremendous ideological and political differences between groups and individuals. Some people hated each other almost as much as they opposed the white racists. But the successful construction of a united front requires unity without uniformity. There will be a need for divergent personalities and organizations to build a broad, popular movement.

Historians frequently make the mistake of telling a story from the vantagepoint of "great" people's (usually men's) lives. To be sure, an unusual number of talented and extraordinary black women and men came into the public arena a generation ago, to push forward measures to outlaw American apartheid: Dr. King; the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, King's closest friend and confidant; the brilliant tactician Bayard Rustin; Medgar Evers, the leader of

Mississippi's NAACP branch who was brutally assassinated in front of his home and family in 1963; Septima Poinsette Clark, who created the Citizenship Education program which taught thousands of poor and illiterate blacks to read, write, and to register to vote; Robert Moses, a young mathematics teacher, who went into Mississippi to organize voter education and registration campaigns; the Vanderbilt Divinity student, James Lawson, who trained civil rights activists in civil disobedience techniques and taught them the philosophy of non-violence of Mohandas Gandhi; the courageous Ella Baker, veteran of civil rights organizations who inspired the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1960; the legendary Fannie Lou Hamer, a former cotton field laborer who co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and challenged the whites-only state delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention; and John Lewis, who in his early twenties participated in "freedom rides" to desegregate interstate bus routes, and led non-violent "sit-in" demonstrations at whites-only lunch counters; Thurgood Marshall, lead attorney of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and later the first black Supreme Court Justice; and Gloria Hayes Richardson, who led the desegregation campaign in Cambridge, Maryland.

Creative and talented individuals often help to define a moment in history, yet history is fundamentally made by ordinary people, who work every day, who sacrifice for their children, and find social meaning through their struggles and contributions to their communities, voluntary organizations, and religious institutions. The struggle for freedom was always expressed in collective terms for the African-American people. The spirit of freedom was expressed in their celebrations of what was first termed "Negro History Month" held every February; through celebrations such as "Juneteenth," honoring the date of June 19, 1865, when blacks in Texas first

learned of their emancipation from slavery; to the popular national liberation flag of the black masses inspired by Marcus Garvey, a flowing colorful banner of “red, black and green.”

The fierce and unrelenting character of white racism, and the structural barriers that inhibited the flourishing of full democratic life in the U.S., constructed a national consciousness and political culture that expressed itself through a myriad of institutional and organizational forms. Black people regardless of their social class deeply felt a sense of linked fates, which bound them to each other, as well as to their collective history of resistance. The successes of any one member of a disadvantaged community are, in many ways, shared and experienced by all.

The modern desegregation movement was successfully constructed, and was able to transform America’s political and social institutions, because it fully reflected that national black consciousness, a collective identity borne of triumphs as well as tragedies, the fruit of deferred dreams and democratic aspirations. During the desegregationist phase of the struggle for civil rights, from roughly 1954 to 1965, voluntary organizations supported a number of national political groups, all espousing civil rights, but disagreeing sharply over the appropriate strategies and tactics used to achieve them. Middle class-oriented blacks usually favored the moderate approaches of the NAACP and the more conservative National Urban League, both of which favored coalitions with white liberal constituencies in government, business, and philanthropic agencies to implement racial reforms, such as affirmative action and minority economic programs to promote the development of black capitalism.

The African-American religious community and faith-based institutions provided the necessary resources to King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), founded in 1957. Unlike the NAACP, which emphasized litigation and legislation, the SCLC practiced civil disobedience mass campaigns, designed to mobilize church congregations to pack the jails, in order to pressure authorities to eliminate discriminatory laws. The SCLC used economic boycotts and the tactics of peaceful civic disruption to force local business and political leaders to change their policies towards blacks. To their left politically, were the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded by James Farmer and Bayard Rustin in 1941, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), launched from the "sit-in" student protests during the winter and spring months of 1960. Throughout most of its history, CORE was a racially integrated organization that actively used civil disobedience tactics, such as "sit-ins" and "freedom rides" to challenge Jim Crow laws.

SNCC activists also desegregated lunch counters and initiated voter education and registration drives in many of the most poverty stricken and dangerous areas of the rural South. But they also described themselves, with youthful élan, as the "True Believers," absolutely dedicated to placing "their bodies on the line" in the struggle to outlaw Jim Crow. SNCC frequently used the "jail-in" tactic of breaking segregation laws and refusing to pay fines or to post bail, preferring to overload the capacity of the criminal justice system to manage public resistance in black communities. Although all of these formations disagreed with each other about many issues, they all came together in a common front to eliminate the Jim Crow regime. The variations and divergences represented by their different styles of work were really a strength, not a weakness. That diversity reflected the complex and sometimes contradictory

constituencies and competing interests within the African-American community as a whole. The mass democratic movement for desegregation, over a period of many years, had finally convinced the majority of white Americans to end their longstanding commitment to legal segregation.

The struggle for black reparations will ultimately be won, but the length of time it will take to get there depends on our ability to learn from our own history. The next stage of the African-American freedom struggle, the demand for reparations, must become the new political consciousness of the great majority of our people, in order to win.

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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](http://www.manningmarable.net).