

The Cases for and Against Reparations

Below the title of Ta Nehisi-Coates' recent article, "The Case for Reparations," published in *The Atlantic* in June 2014, he writes: "Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole."³¹ Whether the US government ought to give reparations for slave labor and its legacy and consequences is a deeply contested question. Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich) has introduced the Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act (H.R. 40) to Congress every year since 1989, and it has never passed.³²

Advocates of reparations for slavery argue that something must be done to acknowledge and remedy "the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery in the United States and the 13 American colonies between 1619 and 1865" as well as the subsequent "de jure and de facto racial and economic discrimination against African-Americans, and the impact of these forces on living African-Americans."³³ Among advocates, there is not a consensus about what form reparations should take, but they share the position that without reparations for slavery and various forms of institutionalized discrimination aimed specifically at Black Americans, justice will never be done.³⁴ A separate example of reparations in America's past is Ronald Reagan's Civil Liberties Act, which in 1988 gave a formal apology and \$20,000 to each surviving victim of Japanese-American internment during World War II.³⁵

In debates about reparations for slavery and discrimination against Black Americans, many questions remain. Some critics hold that reparations are not appropriate because those responsible for the institution of slavery in the United States can no longer be held accountable and punished. Additionally, the question of who is to blame for slavery remains unsettled for some people.³⁶ Another worry is that it would be impossible to decide who should pay this money and how much they should pay, given how much time has passed and other factors. Another worry is that policies such as affirmative action and the expansion of welfare programs already play the same role as reparations,³⁷ or that the unjust wealth and advantage produced by slavery for slaveholders and others have not persisted over time so they need not be rectified.³⁸ A final worry is that it would be divisive to focus government resources in this way.³⁹

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the moral significance of financial restitution?
2. Should Black Americans receive reparations for slavery and/or continuing discrimination?
3. Does a person need to have caused a harm in order to be morally accountable for that harm, or is it enough that they benefit from the legacy of that harm?

³¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

³² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/reparations-black-americans-slavery_us_56c4dfa9e4b08ffac1276bd7

³³ <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/hr40>

³⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/06/08/are-reparations-due-to-african-americans/horrific-injustice-of-slavery-must-be-repaired>

³⁵ <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/08/09/210138278/japanese-internment-redress>

³⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/23/opinion/23gates.html>

³⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/06/08/are-reparations-due-to-african-americans/no-consensus-on-need-or-possible-results-of-reparations> and

<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/06/08/are-reparations-due-to-african-americans/who-would-pay-for-reparations-and-why>

³⁸ <http://www.hoover.org/research/case-against-reparations-slavery>

³⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/bernie-sanders-reparations/424602/>

