

Reparations: Sense or Sensibility?

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A United States Congress subcommittee will soon take up the question of whether a committee should be established to address the question of payment of reparations in connection with America's history of slavery. For centuries, wars in Africa between tribes resulted in the production of slaves imported to Europe and the Colonies, and eventually the United States as well. Those slave-hunting parties were typically made up of local Africans, frequently aided by Arab slave traders. The markets primarily in Western Africa thrived on human flesh and bondage. The United States and other nations took advantage of the African slave trade to their economic benefit. The United States' Founders struggled with slavery and its underpinnings from the inception of the Republic.

The question has arisen as to whether America, made up today by only a minority of those who were descendants of slave traders or owners, should pay reparations to the African-American population in this country, many of whom are unrelated to those who served as slaves in this nation. The question is not merely one of morals and ethics, but rather practicality and purpose.

No one could or should argue for a moment concerning the horrors of the slave trade and slavery in general. Much ink has been spilled on who would be responsible for reparations, how it would be distributed and to whom.

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, the new democratic nation established on the ruins of the Third Reich paid reparations to Holocaust survivors. Virtually all of those survivors are dead, and the reparation system will end. Future generations of Germans and their European partners who murdered the entirety of the Jewish population of Europe, beginning with the first Crusade through the end of World War II, will not pay reparations to the offspring of Jews. Even effectuating the return of looted and stolen Jewish property to the heirs of those victims has been excruciatingly difficult. It has been the decision of the world community that future generations of Europeans should not be made to pay reparations to future generations of members of the Jewish community. Well over one million Jews were run out of North Africa, Iran and Iraq after 1948. Reparations have been paid by no countries to any of those people or their offspring.

Some thoughtful members of the African-American community support reparations as a moral statement, regardless of the logistical difficulties and fairness to others. When African-Americans were being mistreated in this country, my ancestors were being placed in ghettos and murdered throughout Europe. The entirety of my mother's family, save

three survivors, were incinerated in the ovens of Europe. My father's family, at a much earlier time, were forced to flee from Germany because they would not accept forced conversion to Lutheranism. Nobody has paid me reparations, and no one ever will. Instead, my job is to do what I can to assure that the world remembers what bigotry looks like, how it works, and its impact on others. Rather than reparations to the Jewish community, it would be great to see organizations like the United Nations step back from the institutional anti-Semitism which they have embraced.

The African-American community in this country is correct to demand a just and enlightened nation. Education, opportunities for those who want to work, and freedom to think are the reparations which America needs to provide to the entirety of the nation. Only African-Americans were enslaved in this country, while others faced virtual enslavement in sweat shops, building railroads, and in the mining industry, just to name a few. All those immigrant groups worked for virtually nothing, while being ripped off by industry. They were afforded little or no protection from the government. What are the reparations that we are going to pay to the ancestors of those people who built America off the sweat of their brow and the crushed bones of their bodies? Once again, the only definitive answer is education, opportunity, and a just society. Reparations paid by those who are not **responsible** for the harm to those who did not **suffer** the harm is akin to placing a scarlet letter on an entire portion of the population. We would all be better off without singling out discrete members of our nation because of the color of their skin.

A just society provides opportunity through fair government, a reasonable tax system and equal opportunity. We do not place the mark of Cain upon those whose ancestors may have done the wrong thing, and we do not reward those who could not possibly trace their ancestry to victims living 150 years ago.

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