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Reparations and Ta-Nehisi Coates's Pyrrhic Victory

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In 2014, Ta-Nehisi Coates was catapulted to intellectual stardom by a lengthy *Atlantic* polemic entitled “The Case for Reparations.” The essay was an impassioned plea for Americans to grapple with the role of slavery, Jim Crow, and redlining in the creation of the wealth gap between blacks and whites, and it provoked a wide range of reactions. Some left-wing commentators swallowed Coates’s thesis whole, while others agreed in theory but objected that reparations are not a practical answer to legitimate grievances. The Right, for the most part, rejected the case both in theory and practice.

Although the piece polarized opinion, one fact was universally agreed upon: reparations would not be entering mainstream politics anytime soon. According to Coates’s critics, there was no way that a policy so unethical and so unpopular would gain traction. According to his fans, it was not the ethics of the policy but rather the complacency of whites—specifically, their stubborn refusal to acknowledge historical racism—that prevented reparations from receiving the consideration it merited. Coates himself, as recently as 2017, lamented that the idea of reparations was “roundly dismissed as crazy” and “remained far outside the borders of American politics.”

In the past month, we've all been proven wrong. Senators Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris have both endorsed the idea, and House speaker Nancy Pelosi has voiced support for proposals to study the effects of historical racism and suggest ways to compensate the descendants of slaves. These people are not on the margins of American politics. Most pollshave Harris and Warren sitting in third and fourth place, respectively, in the race for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination, and Pelosi is two heart attacks away from the presidency.

Let me pre-empt an objection: neither Harris nor Warren has endorsed a race-specific program of reparations. Indeed Harris has made it clear that what she's calling "reparations" is really just an income-based policy by another name. The package of policies hasn't changed; only the label on the package has. So who cares?

In electoral politics, however, it is precisely the label that matters. Given that there's nothing about her policies that requires Harris to slap the "reparations" label onto them, her decision to employ it suggests that it now has such positive connotations on the Left that she can't reject the label without paying a political price. Five years ago, Coates, his fans, and his critics more or less agreed that it would be political suicide for a candidate to so much as utter the word "reparations" in an approving tone of voice. Now, we have a candidate like Harris who seems to think it's political suicide *not* to. The Overton window has shifted.

In one sense, Coates should be celebrating. He, more than anyone, is responsible for the reintroduction of reparations into the public sphere. Most writers can only dream of having such influence. But in another sense, his victory is a pyrrhic one. That is, the very adoption of reparations by mainstream politicians throws doubt on the core message of Coates's work. In his 2017 essay collection, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Coates argued that racism is not merely "a tumor that could be isolated and removed from the body of America," but "a pervasive system both native and essential to that body"; white supremacy is "so foundational to this country" that it will likely not be destroyed in this generation, the next, "or perhaps ever"; it is "a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it."

Now ask yourself: How likely is it that a country matching Coates's description would find itself with major presidential contenders proposing reparations for slavery, and not immediately plummeting in the polls? The challenge for Coates and his admirers, then, is to reconcile the following claims:

1. America remains a fundamentally white supremacist nation.
2. Presidential contenders are competing for the favor of a good portion of the American electorate partly by signaling how much they care about, and wish to redress, historical racism.

You can say (1) or you can say (2) but you can't say them both at the same time without surrendering to incoherence. Coates himself has recognized this contradiction, albeit indirectly. "*Why do white people like*

what I write?” he asked (italics in original) in *We Were Eight Years in Power*. He continued:

The question would eventually overshadow the work, or maybe it would just feel like it did. Either way, there was a lesson in this: God might not save me, but neither would defiance. How do you defy a power that insists on claiming you? *What does the story you tell matter, if the world is set upon hearing a different one?* [italics mine]

In Coates’s mind, the fact that so many white people love his work suggests that they do not fully understand it, that they are “hearing a different” story to the one he is telling. But a more parsimonious explanation is readily available: white progressives’ reading comprehension is fine and they genuinely love his message. This should be unsurprising since white progressives are now more “woke” than blacks themselves. For example, white progressives are significantly more likely than black people to agree that “racial discrimination is the main reason why blacks can’t get ahead.”

This presents a problem for Coates. If you believe, as he does, that the political Left “would much rather be talking about the class struggles” that appeal to “the working white masses” than “racist struggles,” then it must be jarring to realize that the very same, allegedly race-averse Left is the reason that your heavily race-themed books sit atop the *New York Times* bestseller list week after week. Coates’s ideology, in this sense, falls victim to its own success.

But a pyrrhic victory is a kind of victory nonetheless, and so, partly thanks to Coates, we must have the reparations debate once again.

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First, a note on the framing of the debate: Virtually everyone who is against reparations is in favor of policies aimed at helping the poor. The debate, therefore, is not between reparations and doing nothing for black people, but between policy based on *genealogy* and policy based on *socioeconomics*. Accordingly, the burden on each side is not to show that its proposal is better than nothing—that would be easy. The burden on each side is to show that its preferred rationale for policy (either genealogy or socioeconomics) is better than the rationale proposed by the other side. And, framed as such, reparations for slavery is a losing argument.

For starters, an ancestral connection to slavery is a far less reliable predictor of privation than a low income. There are tens of millions of descendants of American slaves and many millions of them are doing just fine. As Kevin Williamson put it: “Some blacks are born into college-educated, well-off households, and some whites are born to heroin-addicted single mothers, and even the totality of racial crimes throughout American history does not mean that one of these things matters and one does not.”

Williamson's observation holds not only between blacks and whites but between different black ethnic groups as well. Somali-Americans, for example, have lower per-capita income than native-born black Americans. Yet they would not see a dime from reparations, since they have no connection to American slavery. But should it matter *why* Somali immigrants are poorer than black American natives? Insofar as there is a reparations policy that would benefit the poor, should Somali immigrants be denied those benefits because they are poor for the wrong historical reasons? The idea can only be taken seriously by those who value symbolic justice for the dead over tangible justice for the living.

We can either direct resources toward the individuals who most need them, or we can direct them toward the socioeconomically-diverse members of historical victim groups. But we cannot direct the same resources in both directions at once. In 2019, "black" and "poor" are not synonyms. Every racial group in America contains millions of people who are struggling and millions of people who are not, and if any debt is owed, it is to the former.

Secondly, the case for reparations relies on the intellectually lazy assumption that the problems facing low-income blacks today are a part of the legacy of slavery. For most problems, however, the timelines don't match up. Black teen unemployment, for instance, was virtually identical to white teen unemployment (in many years it was *lower*) until the mid-1950s, when, as Thomas Sowell observed in *Discrimination and Disparities*, successive minimum wage hikes and other macroeconomic forces artificially increased the price of unskilled labor to employers—a burden that fell hardest on black teens. Not only did problems like high youth unemployment and fatherless homes not appear in earnest until a century after the abolition of slavery, but similar patterns of social breakdown have since been observed in other groups that have no recent history of oppression to blame it on, such as the rise of single-parent homes in the white working class.

Nevertheless, there is a sense nowadays that history affects blacks to such a unique degree that it places us in a fundamentally different category from other groups. David Brooks, a *New York Times* columnist and a recent convert to the cause of reparations, recently explained that "while there have been many types of discrimination in our history," the black experience is "unique and different" because it involves "a moral injury that simply isn't there for other groups."

I'm highly skeptical of the blacks-are-unique argument. For one thing, it's not true that blacks have inherited psychological trauma from historical racism. Though the budding field of epigenetics is sometimes used to justify this claim, a recent *New York Times* article poured cold water on the hypothesis: "The research in epigenetics falls well short of demonstrating that past human cruelties affect our physiology today." (For what it's worth, this accords with my own experience. If there is a heritable psychological injury associated with being the descendant of slaves, I've yet to notice it.)

But more importantly, if humans really carried the burden of history in our psyches, then all of us, regardless of race, would be carrying very heavy burdens indeed. Although American intellectuals speak of slavery as if it were a uniquely American phenomenon, it is actually an institution that was practiced in one form or another by nearly every major society since the dawn of civilization. As the Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson wrote in his massive study, *Slavery and Social Death*:

There is nothing notably peculiar about the institution of slavery. It has existed from before the dawn of human history right down to the twentieth century, in the most primitive human societies and in the most civilized. There is no region on earth that has not at some time harbored the institution. Probably there is no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time slaves or slaveholders.

And that's to say nothing of the traumas of war, poverty, and starvation that would show up abundantly in all of our ancestral histories if we were to look. Unless blacks are somehow exempt from the principles governing human psychology, the mental effects of historical racism have not been passed down through the generations. Yes, in the narrow context of American history, blacks have been uniquely mistreated. But in the wider context of world history, black Americans are hardly unique and should not be treated as such.

Finally, the framing of the reparations debate presupposes that America has done nothing meaningful by way of compensation for black people. But in many ways, America has already paid reparations. True, we haven't literally handed a check to every descendant of slaves, but many reparations proponents had less literal forms of payment in mind to begin with.

Some reparations advocates, for instance, have proposed race-conscious policies instead of cash payments. On that front, we've done quite a bit. Consider, as if for the first time, the fact that the U.S. college admissions system is heavily skewed in favor of black applicants and has been for decades. In 2009, the Princeton sociologist Thomas Espenshade found that Asians and whites had to score 450 and 310 SAT points higher than blacks, respectively, to have the same odds of being admitted into elite universities. (The entire test, at the time of the study, was out of 1600 points.)

Racial preferences extend into the job market as well. Last September, the *New York Times* reported on an ethnically South Asian television writer who "had been told on a few occasions that she lost out on jobs because the showrunner wanted a black writer." The article passed without fanfare, probably because such racial preferences—or "diversity and inclusion" programs—pervade so many sectors of the U.S. labor market that any particular story doesn't seem newsworthy at all.

Furthermore, many government agencies are required to allocate a higher percentage of their contracts to businesses owned by racial minorities than they otherwise would based on economic considerations alone. Such "set-aside" programs exist at the federal level as well as in at least 38 states—in Connecticut at least 25

percent of government contracts with small businesses must legally be given to a minority business enterprise (MBE), and New York has established a 30 percent target for contracts with MBEs. One indication of the size of this racial advantage is that, for decades, white business owners have been fraudulently claiming minority status, sometimes risking jail time, in order to increase their odds of capturing these lucrative government contracts. (A white man from Seattle is currently suing both the state of Washington and the federal government for rejecting his claim to own an MBE given his four percent African ancestry.)

My point is not that these race-conscious policies have repaid the debt of slavery; my point is that no policy ever could. For this reason I reject the appeasement-based case for reparations occasionally made by conservatives—namely, that we should pay reparations so that we can finally stop talking about racism once and for all. Common sense dictates that when you reward a certain behavior you tend to get more of it, not less. Reparations, therefore, would not, and could not, function as “hush money.” Reparations would instead function as a kind of subsidy for activism, an incentive for the living to continue appropriating grievances that rightfully belong to the dead.

Some reparations advocates, however, are less focused on tangible dispensations to begin with. Instead they see reparations as a spiritual or symbolic task. Coates, for example, defines reparations primarily as a “national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal” and a “full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences”—and only secondarily as the payment of cash as compensation. How has America done on the soul-searching front? As Coates would have it, not very well. For him, the belief occupying mainstream America is that “a robbery spanning generations could somehow be ameliorated while never acknowledging the scope of the crime.”

By my lights, however, we’ve done quite a bit of symbolic acknowledging. For over 40 years we’ve dedicated the month of February to remembering black history; Martin Luther King Jr. has had a national holiday in his name for almost as long; more or less every prominent liberal arts college in the country has an African-American studies department and many have black student housing; both chambers of Congress have independently apologized for slavery and Jim Crow; and just last month the Senate passed a bill that made lynching a federal crime, despite the fact that lynching was already illegal (because it’s murder), has not been a serious problem for at least half a century, and was already the subject of a formal apology by the Senate back in 2005.

If this all amounts to nothing—that is, to a non-acknowledgement of historical racism—then I’m left wondering what would or could qualify as something. The problem with the case for spiritual reparations is its vagueness. What, precisely, is a “national reckoning” and how will we know when we’ve completed it? The trick behind such arguments, whether intentional or not, is to specify the debt owed to black Americans in just enough detail to make it sound reasonable, while at the same time describing the debt with just enough vagueness to ensure that it can never decisively be repaid.

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At bottom, the reparations debate is a debate about the relationship between history and ethics, between the past and the Good. On one side are those who believe that the Good means using policy to correct for the asymmetric racial power relations that ruled America for most of its history. And on the other side are those who believe that the Good means using policy to increase human flourishing as much as possible, for as many as possible, in the present.

Both visions of the Good—the group-based vision and the individualist vision—require the payment of reparations to individuals (and/or their immediate family members) who themselves suffered atrocities at the hands of the state. I therefore strongly approve of the reparations paid to Holocaust survivors, victims of internment during World War II, and victims of the Tuskegee experiments, to name just a few examples. Where the two visions depart is on the question of whether reparations should be paid to poorly-defined groups containing millions of people whose relationship to the initial crime is several generations removed, and therefore nothing like, say, the relationship of a Holocaust survivor to the Holocaust.

Among the fallacies of the group-based vision is the conceit that we are capable of accurately assessing, and correcting for, the imbalances of history to begin with. If we can't even manage to consistently serve justice for crimes committed between individuals in the present, it defies belief to think that we can serve justice for crimes committed between entire groups of people before living memory—to think, in other words, that we can look at the past, neatly split humanity into plaintiff groups and defendant groups, and litigate history's largest crimes in the court of public opinion.

If we are going to have a national reckoning, it must be of a different type than the one suggested by Coates. It must be a national reckoning that uncouples the past and the Good. Such a reckoning would not entail forgetting our history, but rather liberating our sense of ethics from the shackles of our checkered past. We cannot change our history. But the possibility of a just society depends on our willingness to change how we relate to it.

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