

Reparations for African Americans Would Help Many

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On August 17, a contingent of thousands gathered at the steps of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., demanding reparations for 350 years of state-sanctioned slavery, segregation, and unfair discriminations suffered by people of African descent in the United States. Like last year's World Conference Against Racism in South Africa, the "Millions for Reparations" march is part of a growing international movement to dismantle the institutional racism that continues to harm people of all colors in our nation and abroad.

Many opponents of the reparations movement argue that American slavery ended over a century ago and that it would be unfair to force European Americans of today, among other groups, to pay for a horrendous crime they never committed. Yet, the fact remains that European Americans still benefit from the legacy of having enslaved African Americans. Because this country's early economy depended largely on the revenue generated by the cotton trade, present-day European Americans are the heirs of the wealth that this nation accrued through slavery.

Today, less than one in ten "whites" lives below the poverty line, while more than twice as many African Americans, nearly one in four, can say the same. "Blacks," whose ancestors were forced to work without pay for generations were, for obvious reasons, unable to pass on any economic legacy to their children. The lingering economic gap between African Americans and European Americans must be remedied. Simply because the crime that initially caused this gap happened long ago does not mean that we as a nation should turn our backs on justice. After all, there is no statute of limitations on a crime against humanity.

Despite only recent media attention, giving reparations to groups against whom our nation has committed wrongs is an old idea, and one the U.S. government has supported numerous times. For example, \$1.2 billion was paid in 1990 to Japanese Americans for their unjust placement in internment camps during World War II, and another \$1 billion plus 44 million acres of land was compensated to indigenous Alaskans in 1971. Similar repayments have been provided for the Klamath of Oregon, the Ottawa of Michigan, and many other communities.

Ultimately, the payment of reparations to African Americans would benefit not only "blacks," but all Americans. By infusing predominantly African American neighborhoods, many of them inner-city projects, with much needed funds, their residents would have the chance to bring about revitalized housing, education, health care and so on. Because of this, these residents, and especially their children, would be safer, healthier and better educated. They would be less likely to become involved in criminal activity and more likely to become working professionals who contribute to the economic growth of the entire country, including "white" America. Fewer of our tax dollars would need to go to building prisons and fighting the "drug war." Each American could be proud to know we had moved closer to the ideal of liberty, justice, and equality for all.