

Reparations: A straight Line From Slavery

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The Contribution of Slavery to American Development

We are in a period of history where morality and ethics are emphasized as the primary ingredients civil virtue. However, one of the most immoral acts in the development of the United States of America was the enslavement of the African, compounded by the failure to acknowledge that the grandeur of this country was based, in substantial part, upon the monumental resources made possible by unpaid African labor and the refusal to reward Reparations for this crime. What occurred is known by the legal concept of “unjust enrichment.” Yet, most Americans have rejected the strength of America’s slave heritage and as such, devalue the contribution of African slavery to the formation the nation’s economic strength.

Contrast this modern flight from responsibility to the words of William Pitt the Younger, Head of State, at the moment in 1807, when the English Parliament was passing legislation prohibiting the slave trade:

“I therefore congratulate this House, the country and the world that this great point is gained: that we may now consider this trade as having received its condemnation; that its sentence is sealed; that this curse of mankind is seen by the House in its true light; and that the greatest stigma on our national character which ever yet existed is about to be removed. And sir, (which is still more important) that mankind, I trust, in general, are now likely to be delivered from the greatest practical evil that ever has afflicted the human race--from the severest and most extensive calamity recorded in the history of the world!”

William Pitt the Younger did not temporize about the depth of the crime of slavery as is generally the case in so many quarters today.

And yet, America was a slave state. Elliot Cairnes in his 1862 analysis, he titled "The Slave Power," described in one chapter the economic inequalities fostered by large plantation owners, who bought up land, expanded slavery and drove their poorer whites neighbors out, reducing many of them, nearly to the poverty of blacks. The consequence, Cairnes said, was that: "The tendency of things, therefore, in slave countries is to a very unequal distribution of wealth."ⁱ He went on:

The poor whites have as has been shown, are the natural growth of the slave system; their existence and character flowing necessarily from two facts—the slaves, who render the capitalists independent of their services, and the wilderness, the constant feature of slave countries, which enables them to exist without engaging in regular work. There is no capital to support them as hired laborers, and they have the means of subsisting in semi-savage condition, without it.ⁱⁱ

Tannenbaum gave an even more expansive view of the impact of slavery:

The Negro by his presence changed the form of the state, the nature of property, the system of law, the organization of labor, the role of the church as well as in its character, the notions of justice, ethics, ideas of right and wrong. Slavery influenced the architecture, the clothing, the cooking, the politics, the literature, the morals of the entire group—white and black, men and women, old and young. Nothing escaped, nothing and no one.ⁱⁱⁱ

An example is that the factory system emerged as an outgrowth of slavery, when in 1790 Samuel Slater, an English immigrant who knew the secrets of the English textile machinery built a cotton-spinning mill at Pawtucket, R. I., for a merchant, named Moses Brown. It was the first successful American factory and contained 72 spindles. By the end of the War of 1812, hundreds of factories were in operation, the number of

spindles was estimated at 130,000 and by 1840 there were 2 million. Enslaved Africans in the South picked the cotton which fed these spindles and fueled the growth of the textile industry in New England.

This led to the genesis of a larger and more sophisticated manufacturing system, the American corporation, when in 1865, at the end of the Civil War, a group of businessmen formed what came to be known as the Boston Associates, that included Frances Cabot Lowell, Nathan Appleton, Patrick Tracy Jackson who formed the Boston Manufacturing company in Waltham, Mass. This was the first integrated factory in textiles, that performed every operation. In 1920 they shifted their operations to Lowell, Massachusetts and became the Merrick Manufacturing company and in the 1920s and 1930s they bought companies in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, making the manufacturing corporation an entrenched institution in America.

So, slavery was a national enterprise, uniting the labor of Africans in the South to the industries of the North, in the process creating commerce in America and markets for American cotton abroad.

The Linkage of Slavery to Modern Conditions

It is also currently fashionable to disconnect slavery from the modern patterns of disadvantage experienced by black Americans and to assert that they are due to the lack of "individual responsibility." Nevertheless, black people entered the role as citizens as an impoverished class. The distinguished black American intellectual, Dr. W. E. B. Dubois noted, in his study, The Philadelphia Negro, (1897) that, "everywhere

slavery was accompanied by pauperization,” that this condition of black poverty prevented blacks from establishing a black middle class, when wave upon wave of poor migrants from the South overwhelmed the fledgling black elite and defined poverty as the basic condition of the black urban ghetto. Du Bois, Professors Kenneth Clark, William Wilson and others have established a clear link between the “pauperization” of blacks and such social conditions as: high crime rates, lack of wealth, poor health, educational gaps, family social disorganization, high unemployment rates, poor neighborhoods and substandard housing and other structures.

The reasons for these conditions, which mark the characteristics of the black urban ghetto and the institutions within it even today have been mystified, but slavery is responsible for having robbed black people of the economic resources necessary to have acquired the cultural tools and institutions of the dominant group. These economic resources would have made possible the construction of schools and colleges that would have long ago closed any cultural gap in test scores and produced a large middle class blacks that would have developed companies the equal of AT&T, IBM or Morgan Stanley. This would have institutionalized a private economy which would have provide a substantial source of independence for the black community. The dimensions of this debt has attracted individuals such as Nobel Prize winning Yale Economist, Boris Bittker, to analyze this problem in his book *The Case For Black Reparations*, as early as 1973.

The Longevity of slavery

One reason given for denying Reparations to African descendants and according them

to Asian Americans and Jews is that the events which constituted a basis occurred more recently during World War II. However, it is one of the myths of American history and its historians that slavery ended in 1865. In fact, although legal slavery ended, in many places, especially in the South, the practice continued well into the 20th Century.

The National Archives contains files of the NAACP with letters written in the 1920, 1930s and 1940s, sent to the organization by blacks who were still held in slavery conditions on plantations in the South, still being forced to work, still brutalized and not paid or paid symbolic wages. Then, debt slavery was common where the share cropping system held many former slaves in legal bondage, enforced by the law, forcing them to work to pay mythical debts to land owners. Finally, the prison system was expanded in the South and utilized to administer the convict-lease system, where blacks were convicted on petty or nonexistent crimes and leased-out to work for merchants and plantation owners in slavery conditions. These variations were in many cases merely other forms of slavery, often worse than the original kind.

The length of this system carried well into the 20th Century as records of the Justice Department show. In a June 16, 1996 *Washington Post* article by Len Cooper, "Slavery Did Not End With The Civil War: One Man's Odyssey Into A Nation's Secret Shame." Cooper also cites a newspaper story that described a Justice Department prosecution for African slavery in 1954, involving the Dial brothers in Sumpter County, Alabama, who had held blacks in involuntary servitude. This means that the Civil Rights movement was the force that broke the final link to 19th Century African slavery.

The fact that some blacks were held in slavery until after World War II and that cases

of lynching also extended to that period, refutes any proposition that slavery ended in 1865, establishing a modern basis for Reparations for the descendants of Africans as legitimate as that of any other group.

Government Responsibility

We also live in an era when there is much public dialogue about “individual responsibility,” rather the responsibility of government. Yet, in this case, there is both a rejection of individual responsibility for slavery on the basis of longevity, recency of immigration, or other factors, as well as, a reluctance to acknowledge the culpability of the state in administering the past slave status of African Americans. These have combined into the feeling that since neither individual nor government responsibility was possible, the pursuit of such a public policy was “unrealistic” and used ultimately, by both blacks and whites, to successfully evade an American dialogue about this issue. Real Reparations, however, have been given to other groups. Slavery and the extermination of the Native American are the only truly American Holocausts, but whereas the Native Americans have been given land and a system of government, however flawed, black Americans have not been compensated for slavery and certainly have not enjoyed benefits beyond those available to other American citizens. And while Reparations have been informally refused blacks, descendants of Japanese American internees during World War II now receive them. In fact, it is possible to argue that the past attempts made to make amelioration for slavery have been dismantled before they could be implemented, or changed to advantage the majority, whether in the case of Reconstruction, or civil rights, or even Affirmative Action.

I refer to the responsibility of government as the main authority figure in arranging recompense for slavery because at every stage, individual Americans were permitted to practice slavery by writ of law, by the each of the Colonial territories even before there was a United States of America, but certainly by the Constitutional Congress, by successive acts of the Supreme Court, the Congress and the state governments. So, as much as individuals are sensitive to the demand for Reparations out of their own moral culpability for slavery, it is a basic responsibility of government. Similarly, the U. S. Government has paid Japanese Reparations, not the individual soldier who guarded the gates of the prison compounds nor those civilians who lived in their confiscated homes.

Conclusion

There is a deep sensitivity among African descendants in America today that a substantial part of the social distance between them and white America was created by the process of enslavement. Despite the rampant economic growth, the structural distance in economic resources has been maintained in that, blacks still have only one-tenth the wealth of whites, more than twice the poverty rate and double the unemployment rate of whites. This means that the failure to replace appropriated black economic resources as an “unrealistic” public policy, is one of the powerful factors which results in the inability of both blacks and whites to “get beyond race” because the reluctant pace of resolving the inequality continues to place an emphasis on the fact that blacks in America are the only group expected to come all the way up the rough side of the mountain - in the most economically competitive society in the

world - without the requisite resources to do so. The other factor, of course, is the persistence of racism in nearly every sector of American life, a fact which continues to transfer resources to whites, buttressed by the attempt to attribute the subordinate status of blacks to the lack of effort, or their natural inferiority, as rendered in such works as *The Bell Curve*, by Murray and Herrnstein.

So, it is obvious that the past is prologue to the project of racial reconciliation in America, just as it is in South Africa, Australia or wherever people have been dispossessed of their resources. In order to address this problem in this country, it must become an American dialogue which truly gives national legitimacy to the identity of black people as African Americans, an identity with equal force vested in both terms. At the height of the attempt to pass civil rights laws in the 1960s, those opposed argued that the key to full black participation in American life is not the passage of laws, but social acceptance. The other side of this equation is that acceptance must also come from blacks and its most pristine foundation begins with the acknowledgment of the role of the dominant culture in the crime of slavery, the equal crime of pretending that the gap between African and others is a natural condition, rather than a product of his and her enslavement and to make material recompense for the unpaid labor of those enslaved.

In the picture of that famous night in 1776 which shows General George Washington crossing the Delaware River, there is also pictured a black man in the boat at the oars. His name was Prince Whipple, the son of an African King from West Africa, who sent to the Americas for education, but enslaved by William Whipple, one

of the signatories to the Declaration of Independence, who seconded Prince to be George Washington's aide when Whipple went to war. As William Whipple was leaving to join the fight for American independence as an officer, Prince Whipple was recorded to have said: "You are going to fight for your liberty, but I have none to fight for." Resolving the debt of slavery through Reparations will help to combine what has been two different historical struggles for "freedom" into one.

i. John Elliott Cairnes, The Slave Power, New York: Harper Torchbooks/Harper and Row, 1969, p. 76.

ii. Ibid, p. 144.

iii. Frank Tannenbaum, Slave and Citizen, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 117-118.