

The Politics of Reparations for Black Americans

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Keywords

reparations, Black Americans, slavery, Jim Crow, social movements, political thought

Abstract

Although struggles for reparations for slavery and its legacies date back to the earliest period of US politics, they have received relatively little attention from political scientists. Focusing on reparations claims, I argue, can enhance the study of Black social movements and political thought. The recent resurgence of demands for redress for racial injustice, both in the United States and internationally, and contemporary divisions over the politics of memory suggest why reparations are an important indicator of the prospects for multiracial democracy. Because the language of reparations has been used to advance a range of political ends, I conclude by considering some of the dilemmas that remain unresolved in the literature.

INTRODUCTION

“Every generation of African Americans has its reparations struggle” (Nelson 2016, p. 107). Demands for redress for the crimes of the slave trade, racial slavery, Jim Crow, and their violent legacies stretch back to the founding of the United States. These struggles locate present-day racial injustice within the history of exploitation, violence, and political domination of African Americans. Although the political project of Black reparations is longstanding, only former *en-slavers* have received compensation from the federal government (Holloway 2020); payment for the enslaved and their descendants largely remains a “nonevent” (Westley 2005, p. 83). Even as the language of reparations has been used around the world to envision new political possibilities in the aftermath of injustice, reparations proposals in the United States have been derided as impractical; dismissed as divisive; or allowed to emerge, stillborn, into a polity that is not prepared to consider its responsibilities for the ongoing harms of racist policies and institutions.

Political scientists have largely mirrored the history of disregard for Black reparations. In the discipline’s leading journals, one finds little acknowledgment that reparations have been a recurrent—and controversial—feature of Black politics. Nor is there sustained inquiry into what the lack of consideration of redress for slavery and its legacies means for the realization of multiracial democracy. In a 2004 study that focuses primarily on sociology’s inattention to issues of social justice, Coates (2004, p. 847) reports that a JSTOR search of 33 political science journals (in many cases comprising their entire publication history) yielded only three articles discussing reparations for African Americans or Africans. Coates’s findings are significant because his article appeared at a time when political organizing and legal scholarship on reparations were flourishing. Since 2004, furthermore, this trend has continued. With relatively few exceptions outside journals that specialize in race or Black studies, political scientists have not treated the question of reparations for Black Americans as a significant area of research. Political philosophers and theorists have taken up the issue of historic injustice, but few have focused primarily on reparations for Black Americans (see Fullinwider 2000; McCarthy 2004; Balfour 2003, 2005, 2015). While the language of reparations circulates widely in public discourse, the study of reparations has had little impact on agendas that prioritize what Shilliam (2013) calls “the master’s science.” Indeed, the status of reparations research may be one indication that the boom in studies of Black politics has yet to reshape the field as a whole (Tate 2014).

Reparations claims are distinct insofar as they make an explicit connection between a centuries-long history of anti-Black violence, exploitation, and disenfranchisement, on the one hand, and reconstructing the polity on more egalitarian terms, on the other. As Dawson (2013, p. 197) remarks, reparations are “a demand for a conversation about justice and the way that racial oppression in the past is linked to black disadvantage today and to the continued existence of an unjust racial order.” While reparations proposals vary widely in scope and in the specific forms of redress they envision, few arguments focus exclusively on individual payments and most call for a massive investment in Black communities accompanied by public acknowledgment of the crimes of slavery and/or Jim Crow. The reparations policy platform of the Movement for Black Lives offers an important example of the way that the language of reparations is used by social justice organizations to address the broad array of economic, political, and cultural changes that a multiracial democracy would require (M4BL 2022).¹

This review explores the implications of reparations struggles for political science scholarship, traces new developments in reparations politics in the twenty-first century, situates demands for

¹References to the Black Lives Matter movement address what Ransby (2018) calls a “whole ecosystem” of national and local organizations, beginning with #BlackLivesMatter in 2012, whose aims include the end of police brutality, mass incarceration, violence against women and queer people of color, and racial

reparations for Black Americans within a global context, and suggests why research on reparations is vital to understanding the current moment in US politics. With regard to the last of these issues, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement over the past decade and the multiracial character and unprecedented scale of mass protests against anti-Black violence in 2020 created a new opening for broader political conversations about white supremacy (Woodly 2022). The study of reparations enables a deeper understanding of contemporary divisions along both racial and partisan lines and provides a language for pursuing racial justice initiatives amid the intensification of debates about historical memory—including struggles over the removal of Confederate monuments and campaigns against the teaching of critical race theory. Although proposals to compensate the descendants of enslaved persons or to pay reparations for Jim Crow remain hotly controversial, this article considers whether the time is ripe for reparations demands to go from conversation stopping to conversation changing (Balfour 2014).

REPARATIONS POLITICS FROM THE REVOLUTION TO THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Nearly every book or article on reparations includes a history of Black Americans' arguments for redress and a record of official inaction. Because the contours of that history have been sketched so ably elsewhere (see Kelley 2002, Berry 2005, Henry 2007, Darity & Mullen 2020), I focus only on a few pivotal moments and then turn to two features of reparations scholarship that are of particular relevance to students of politics: reparations as a social movement and reparations as a recurrent idea in African American political thought.

The earliest record of a demand for reparations for slavery is the 1783 petition by an African-born woman named Belinda Sutton, who sought a pension from the Massachusetts legislature after her former enslaver fled to England and his property was confiscated by the state (Finkenbine 2007). According to Finkenbine (2007, p. 103), she was not alone: “dozens” of formerly enslaved people sought payment from state legislatures and the courts during the first decades of the Republic, and reparations claims have played a role in Black political thought ever since. Action by the federal government, however, was short-lived and limited. Perhaps most famously, General William Sherman’s Special Field Order No. 15 called for the distribution of approximately 400,000 acres of confiscated lands along the Southeastern coast to formerly enslaved people in 1865 and inspired the phrase “40 acres and a mule”; but it came to an end when President Andrew Johnson returned the land to its Confederate owners later that year. After the Civil War, Congressman Thaddeus Stevens’s efforts to enact a large-scale confiscation act for the benefit of freedpeople were unsuccessful (Franke 2019, Svabek 2021). When the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Movement, led by Callie House and Isaiah Dickerson, sought compensation for formerly enslaved workers at the turn of the twentieth century, its leaders were pursued by the federal government, and House was incarcerated for fraud in 1917 (Berry 2005). Although some scholars argue that President Lyndon Johnson’s speech at Howard University in 1965 constitutes a call for the kind of compensation that reparations advocates champion (Torpey & Burkett 2010, pp. 461–62), the only example of federal payments for slavery is the roughly \$23 million (in 2020 dollars) that enslavers in the District of Columbia received through the 1862 Compensated Emancipation Act (Holloway 2020).

Focusing only on the record of governmental resistance obscures the importance of what legal scholars and reparations advocates Adjoa Aiyetoro and Adrienne Davis call “reparations as a social movement” (2009–10, p. 688). In their view, approaching reparations in this way “foregrounds

capitalism. References to specific reparations proposals are drawn from the Movement for Black Lives “Vision for Black Lives” policy platform (M4BL 2022).

different visions of ‘freedom’ and ‘redress’ and how those visions are shaped by class and ideology” (Aiyetoro & Davis 2009–10, p. 692). Reparations struggles provide a lens through which to study Black politics and offer insight into the complexity and ideological diversity of Black communities (Dawson 2001, Aiyetoro 2020). For most of the twentieth century, reparations demands were largely associated with Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist organizations. While the idea took hold among the poorest African Americans, the middle classes and mainstream civil rights groups maintained their distance (Berry 2005). Focusing on the history of reparations also illuminates the role of Black women like House and “Queen Mother” Audley Moore, who inspired the pursuit of reparations in the post–World War II era without receiving the kind of attention reserved for male leaders (Aiyetoro & Davis 2009–10, pp. 705–8). Among the groups influenced by Moore’s vision were the Black Panther Party (1966), which linked the broken promise of “40 acres and a mule” to demands for “Land, Bread, Housing, Education, Clothing, Justice and Peace”; the Nation of Islam; the Republic of New Afrika; and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (see Kelley 2002, Aiyetoro & Davis 2009–10, Dawson 2013). According to historian Robin Kelley (2002, p. 119), Moore understood that reparations must be democratically controlled by ordinary people rather than administered in a top-down fashion. Indeed, the nonelite character of the movement and the association of reparations politics with Black nationalist movements may help to account for political scientists’ relative inattention to the issue (Marable 2003, Taylor 2021).

The reparations movement did provoke a brief period of scholarly discussion in 1969, when James Forman interrupted services at Riverside Church in New York City to deliver the National Black Economic Development Conference’s Black Manifesto. Seeking \$500 million from white churches and synagogues, the Manifesto calls for a range of provisions to enhance Black autonomy, including a Southern land bank, investment in communications and education, welfare rights, and labor rights and assistance for striking workers [Bittker 2003 (1973), pp. 159–75]. Beyond its specific provisions, the Manifesto declares that Black people “have been living in perpetual warfare since 1619,” anticipating both the *New York Times*’s “1619 Project” and the Movement for Black Lives’ call to “end the war on Black people” [Bittker 2003 (1973), p. 167; *New York Times Magazine* 2019; M4BL 2022]. In response, law professor Boris Bittker [2003 (1973)] published *The Case for Black Reparations*, which does not defend reparations for slavery but lays out the legal grounds for redressing the harms of school segregation. Political philosophers, including Boxill (1972), Bedau (1972), and McGary (1977), also took up the question of Black reparations in the 1970s (Boxill & Corlett 2022). These debates continued among African American philosophers but were neglected by mainstream liberal political philosophers for decades (Mills 2007, Forrester 2019).

Investigating the question of reparations not only provides an avenue for the study of Black social movements, it also reveals dimensions of African American political thought that might otherwise go unnoted. Challenging the ostensibly race-neutral terms on which democratic politics and theory have been studied, Black abolitionists, nationalists, civil rights liberals, feminists, Marxists, socialists, and others illuminate the degree to which American political development has been shaped by the oppression of Black and other non-white people (Rogers & Turner 2021). The thinkers who comprise what Gooding-Williams (2009) calls “the Afro-modern tradition” model an approach to politics that refuses the presumption that racial hierarchy is an aberration or a by-gone feature of US political life and incorporates the history of white supremacy into an evaluation of contemporary politics.

Whether focusing on communal self-determination or aiming for full membership in a reconstructed polity, Black political thinkers often articulate a conception of redress even when they do not use the language of reparations. Abolitionist David Walker’s [1965 (1829), p. 70] blistering 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, for example, asserts that white Americans “have to raise us from the condition of brutes to that of respectable men, and to make a national

acknowledgment to us for the wrongs they have inflicted on us” and insists on immediate emancipation and the full entitlement of African Americans to citizenship. A century later, W.E.B. Du Bois’s retelling of the history of Reconstruction likewise lays out the basis for a claim about what was owed to the enslaved and their descendants [Du Bois 1998 (1935), Balfour 2003]. Careful readers can discern multiple versions of such arguments across the past two centuries of Black political thought.

Martin Luther King Jr. is an illuminating figure through which to approach the question of reparations. As scholars investigate his political philosophy more closely and public debates about his radicalism intensify, tracing his understanding of the relationship between material redress and the realization of democratic principles offers a critical vantage from which to assess his political philosophy (Shelby & Terry 2018). In *Why We Can’t Wait*, which appeared shortly after his “I Have a Dream” speech, King [2010a (1964), p. 163] makes the case that compensation for slavery is an essential part of realizing a democratic future:

Few people consider the fact that, in addition to being enslaved for two centuries, the Negro was, during all those years, robbed of the wages of his toil. No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro down through the centuries. Not all the wealth in this affluent society could pay the bill. Yet a price can be placed on unpaid wages. . . . The payment should be in the form of a massive program of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law.

King develops these ideas further in later speeches and in *Where Do We Go from Here*, which moves beyond the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s to envision “the abolition of poverty.” Crucially, King grounds his arguments in US history, tracing the “white backlash” of his own times to the earliest days of the Republic, linking the racial inequality of the 1960s to unredressed harms of slavery and its aftermath, and concluding that “America owes a debt of justice which it has only begun to pay” [King 2010b (1968), p. 116].

REPARATIONS POLITICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Movements for Black reparations multiplied and earned new attention at the close of the twentieth century. Most commentators point to two developments as pivotal: (a) legislative and judicial resistance to race-conscious policies that rendered traditional civil rights approaches increasingly ineffective; and (b) the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which acknowledged the harm of internment and paid reparations to Japanese Americans. With affirmative action and other remedies for racial injustice under attack, lawyers developed new reparations litigation strategies, and debates about redress for slavery and Jim Crow captured the imagination of legal scholars and philosophers (see, e.g., Matsuda 1987). In 1989, Representative John Conyers introduced H.R. 40, a bill to establish a commission to study the ongoing effects of slavery and evaluate reparations proposals in each Congress until his retirement in 2017. The National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA) and other groups organized around the issue (Kelley 2002); the Reparations Coordinating Committee pursued legal cases; and the publication of Robinson’s (2000) *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* spurred a broader public debate (see also Brophy 2006). Assessing this resurgence of reparations demands at the turn of the century, Walters (2003, p. 2) saw an opportunity to move beyond discussions of “slavery in an accommodationist mode to the creation myth of America” and promote new critiques of anti-Black oppression; alternative forms of public history; legal challenges; internal development within Black communities; and political conversations at the local, national, and diasporic levels.

The opportunity Walters (2003) identified had to wait. The election of President Barack Obama and the contention that the US had entered a postracial era help to account for a lull

in national attention to reparations (Gooding-Williams & Mills 2014). With growing coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement and the appearance of Coates's (2014) "The Case for Reparations" in *The Atlantic*, however, the possibility of new conversations about reparations reemerged. That several Democratic candidates in the 2020 presidential race endorsed some form of reparations suggests a possible party-wide shift in attunement to issues of racial justice (Herndon 2019, Tate 2022). Whether or not H.R. 40 (which was introduced by Representative Sheila Jackson Lee after Conyers's retirement) becomes law, it was voted out of committee in 2021 and now has nearly 200 cosponsors; this marks a dramatic change from the years when it was more likely to receive about 30 cosponsors, and white legislators largely declined to support it (Tate 2022).

One area in which scholarship has persisted across several decades is the study of Black political economy, which has investigated the value of enslaved labor and traced how postemancipation practices continued to exploit African Americans while obstructing their access to property, opportunity, and security (see Browne 1972, America 1990). In *From Here to Equality*, Darity & Mullen (2020, p. 263) identify the racial wealth gap as "the most robust indicator of the cumulative economic effects of white supremacy in the United States." They argue that the federal government should attempt to eliminate that gap by making substantial payments to US citizens who meet two criteria: They can demonstrate that they are descended from at least one person enslaved in this country after the founding, and they can show that they have self-identified as African American (or of African descent) for at least 12 years before the establishment of a national program or a commission to plan for such a program (Darity & Mullen 2020, p. 258).

Darity and Mullen's argument is both ambitious and narrowly tailored. The distinction between individuals who can trace their lineage to slavery and other Americans of African descent separates their proposal from broader visions like the Movement for Black Lives policy platform; and, while their plan calls for a massive investment in Black communities, it is articulated within a capitalist framework. They envision a "portfolio of reparations," loosely modeled on German payments after World War II, that would supplement individual payments with investment in historically Black colleges and universities and other institutions and the establishment of a trust fund to support "asset-building projects" by eligible recipients (Darity & Mullen 2020, pp. 264–65). Yet recent research on slavery and capitalism and the revival of Robinson's (1983) concept of racial capitalism indicate the limitations of a platform that focuses on transforming the descendants of human property into property owners (Baptist 2014, Beckert & Rockman 2016, Issar 2020). This line of scholarship suggests why expanding opportunity without questioning systems of production and exchange that have depended on racial categories to produce winners and losers could undermine the insistence of reparations advocates that Americans must learn from history; and it sidesteps questions about whether regimes of private property can be made compatible with racial egalitarian objectives.

These concerns may help to account for critiques of reparations by a number of Black scholars on the left. While Reed (2000) notes that "there can be no doubt" about the connections between slavery and the persistent disadvantages confronted by Black Americans, he contends that reparations are the wrong answer insofar as they provide no clear remedy for such disadvantages and are unlikely to animate a broad political movement that engenders solidarity across lines of identity. In a response to Ta-Nehisi Coates's criticisms of Senator Bernie Sanders, Johnson (2016) argues that "the reparations argument is rooted in black nationalist politics, which traditionally elides class and neglects the way that race-first politics are often the means for advancing discrete, bourgeois class interests." A key issue for discussion, then, is whether the reparations movement is primarily an elite project or whether it exemplifies what Ransby (2018) calls "a Black-led class struggle" (see also Taylor & Reed 2019).

As arguments for reparations have gained new traction in the twenty-first century, opinion remains divided. In a landmark study of attitudes toward reparations and apologies for slavery and the internment of Japanese Americans in 2000, Dawson & Popoff (2004) found that, while 67% of African Americans supported material compensation for slavery, white respondents were nearly unanimous (96%) in their opposition. At that time, the authors showed, talk of Black reparations was so unpopular that white Americans were more opposed to an apology and compensation for Japanese Americans if they were asked about compensation for African Americans first (Dawson & Popoff 2004). Most Americans—and a substantial majority of white Americans—continue to oppose the idea of payments to the descendants of enslaved persons (Scott 2021). Nevertheless, new research indicates more variability. In their analysis of 2016 survey data, Reichelmann & Hunt (2021) find that white opposition to reparations is shaped by age (being older), ideology (being more conservative), and attentiveness to racial issues (being less attentive).

The national stage is not the only arena in which reparations politics are playing out. State and local governments have undertaken their own initiatives to study the legacies of slavery and to repair the harms of racial injustice. In 2022, for instance, the California Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans (2022) issued an interim report on the effects of slavery and its afterlives, both nationally and in California. Its “preliminary recommendations for future deliberation” include reparative policies in housing, voting rights, the environment, education, the legal system, and employment. Other institutions—most prominently, universities, seminaries, and religious institutions—have also begun to examine their own implication in slavery and its legacies (see Brown Univ. Steer. Comm. Slavery Justice 2006, Delbanco 2022). In 2015, the City of Chicago established a \$5.5 million reparations program for the survivors of police torture. The product of years of grassroots activism, this program is noteworthy for its forward-facing initiatives in job placement, psychological services, educational access, and a mandatory high school curriculum. As Ransby (2018, p. 133) remarks, “This creative and far-reaching settlement was an important landmark in the struggle to hold police and city officials accountable and to reimagine what reparations might look like.” However, the persistence, and even exacerbation, of police brutality, gun violence, and deep economic inequality in the city of Chicago since the reparations program was passed offers a clear indicator that no form of reparations is a panacea (McLeod 2019). Considering efforts taking place on these smaller scales might enable political scientists to evaluate different forms of repair and ask how well reparations functions as a language through which democratic aspirations are articulated and at least partially realized.

THE GLOBAL POLITICS OF REPARATIONS

The politics of reparations has never been confined to the United States. Just as Black political actors and movements have long participated in transnational networks, movements for reparations in the United States both draw inspiration from and inform political struggles elsewhere (Biondi 2003, Henry 2007, Araujo 2017). Further, debates about reparations for slavery and its legacies are taking place amid global efforts to hold governments accountable for historic injustice (see De Greiff 2006). Recent literature reveals how the question of reparations exceeds the boundaries of the state in at least three ways:

1. US-based social movements often situate their critique of the injustices of the slave trade, slavery, and their legacies within a larger system that includes racialized forms of colonial and settler-colonial rule.
2. Reparations campaigns outside the United States have influenced and been influenced by arguments about redress for African Americans.

3. International critics of white supremacy and the unaddressed legacies of slavery have called on the United States to take reparative action.

Reflecting the diasporic imagination and transatlantic affiliations of many Black political movements, reparations advocacy has looked beyond the United States since its early articulation in the nineteenth century (Aiyetoro & Davis 2009–10). According to Johnson (2007, p. 58), this orientation informs the Black Manifesto, where the use of the word “we” to refer to enslaved and colonized people, Africans, and “black brothers and sisters” erases differences of time and space to link all Black people to the labor that developed the modern West. Biondi (2003, pp. 7–8) adds that “the use of global solidarity networks and international forums to define national racisms as a violation of international human rights protocols” is a longstanding feature of Black reparations politics and has shaped contemporary agendas. Organizations such as N’COBRA hold that reparations must be understood “in global terms” and that the African American struggle is connected to African efforts to obtain reparations for the crimes of colonialism and the slave trade (Kelley 2002, p. 129). Henry’s (2007) study of reparations history identifies the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa, as a turning point, because the involvement of human rights and civil rights organizations alongside longstanding supporters of reparations signaled new opportunities for alliances within and beyond the United States. Although the US government refused to participate in WCAR or the conferences preceding it, the Durban Program of Action both acknowledged the devastating consequences of the slave trade, slavery, and colonialism and called for reparative action and other measures to prevent the repetition of such harm (Henry 2007, pp. 123–63). It also set the stage for more recent international gatherings like the National African-American Reparations Commission’s 2015 National/International Reparations Summit (NAARC 2015).

In an age in which remembering and redressing historic injustice has become a fundamental issue in democratic politics, calls for reparations have sounded on both sides of the Atlantic. When the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) established a Reparations Commission to address the legacies of slavery and native genocide in 2013, for example, it called on European governments to finance an array of measures, including improvements to health and education, a development program for Indigenous peoples, and technology transfers as steps toward reconciliation (Beckles 2013, CARICOM 2014, Bhambra 2021). Craemer (2018) situates the CARICOM demands within a history of indemnification for European enslavers and proposes that German payments after the Holocaust offer a precedent for indemnifying the descendants of enslaved people in Africa and the Western Hemisphere. Political theorists have also looked abroad to ask whether transitional justice efforts can inform reparations claims in the United States. Valls (2003) argues that they can and that regimes that have undergone a political transition from authoritarianism or military rule to more democratic forms of government can serve as resources for analyzing the unfinished work of eliminating the effects of slavery and Jim Crow in the United States. Page & King (2022) extend this approach to consider reparations for unjust policing and imprisonment. In their view, reparations programs have the potential to play a role in a “regime change” in the United States; a regime is understood in American Political Development terms as an “institutional order” (p. 222). Lu (2017), by contrast, raises questions about the capacity of transitional justice approaches to redress the ongoing effects of colonialism and urges the development of frameworks that go beyond remedying specific wrongs to envision forms of structural transformation that address the responsibilities of actors who are neither perpetrators nor victims.

Critical evaluations of the United States by international organizations indicate a third way in which reparations for African Americans exceed the domestic sphere. The United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (2016) explicitly connects contemporary

practices of police brutality and impunity for state violence against Black Americans—as well as disparities in almost every measure of well-being—to the slave trade, racial slavery, and their afterlives. These crimes, they conclude, call for “reparatory justice” (2016, p. 19). In 2019, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance issued a report that included examples from the United States to illustrate both the ongoing effects of slavery and resistance to reparations. It recommends that the United States and other member states implement a “comprehensive” and “intersectional” approach to reparations (Achieme 2019).

The publication of Táíwò’s *Reconsidering Reparations* (2022) may signal a new phase of reparations scholarship by bringing together several existing strands of national and global concern. Táíwò identifies contemporary racial disparities as the cumulative result of centuries of global empire and conceives of reparations as a “worldmaking” project in the sense articulated by Getachew (2019). Noting that modern racial categories were constructed through global capitalism, Táíwò (2022) contends that their undoing must likewise entail the transformation of institutions, distributive structures, and norms that perpetuate the vulnerability of Black people around the world. Among the innovations of Táíwò’s argument is his attentiveness to the racially disparate effects of climate change. By arguing that “climate justice and reparations are the same project,” Táíwò (2022, p. 147) advances a forward-looking demand for a vision of repair on the same scale as modern slavery and colonialism.

THE FUTURE OF REPARATIONS? POLITICAL AND THEORETICAL CHALLENGES

Two images crystallize the state of racial politics in the United States today: the image of multiracial crowds in large cities and small towns insisting that “Black Lives Matter” in the summer of 2020 and the image of a white man carrying a Confederate flag inside the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. While the former suggests that the time for serious discussion of reparations may have finally arrived, the latter reminds us of the intensity of opposition such discussion will engender. Despite the unprecedented scale of the 2020 protests, a Pew Research Center study conducted a year later found that only 42% of the white adults surveyed believe that “a lot more needs to be done to ensure racial equality,” compared with 77% of Black respondents; and the percentage of white respondents who think that greater attention to the history of slavery and racism is a bad idea (32%) outstrips the percentage who say that it would be “very good” for society (Pew Res. Cent. 2021, pp. 5–6). In an era of heightened partisanship, furthermore, the Pew report documents a deep division between Democrats (78%) and Republicans (25%) on the issue of whether more attention to the history of race and racism would be beneficial (pp. 4–5). In this light, it is difficult to conceive a national program of reparations that would be sufficiently robust to provide meaningful redress for slavery and its legacies. Yamamoto’s (1998, p. 520) warning about the “underside” of reparations politics still rings true: “Without attitudinal and social structural transformation of a sort meaningful to recipients, reparations may be illusory, more damaging than healing. No repair. Cheap grace.”

The longstanding character of Black reparations claims and the episodic history of public attention to the issue in the United States indicate the importance of new research on the issue. A key point of contention is whether racial equality is better served by “universal” policies or those that target African Americans specifically. As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama famously opposed reparations and argued instead for redoubling the commitment to enforcing antidiscrimination laws (Coates 2017). Such an approach has broad appeal among racial egalitarians who worry that reparations demands will be viewed narrowly as a form of “identity politics”

(Balfour 2005, 2014). As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor emphasizes, however, struggles for universal programs and for reparations are distinct but not mutually exclusive; political movements need to fight for a broad range of social programs and for the tools to address the legacies of racial slavery (Taylor & Reed 2019). Along similar lines, other scholars note that material reparations should be understood as part of a project of “epistemic justice” that changes how the past is understood in relation to the present (Bhambra 2021). Indeed, some have connected the reparations movement to a broad vision of “abolition democracy” that insists on the interdependence of political, economic, and social transformation [Du Bois 1998 (1935), Davis 2005, McLeod 2019]. The Movement for Black Lives policy platform articulates a conception of reparations as connective, rather than divisive, and advances an account of repair that encompasses gender- and sexuality-based violence, disability, harms to other non-white communities, and the damaging effects of racial capitalism (M4BL 2022, Woodly 2022). According to Bhabha (2021, p. 6), “across a diverse range of political, geographic, and ethnic constituencies, and for disparate reasons, significant civil society movements unused to collaboration across identity-defined silos now invoke reparations for harms suffered as a key component of their common advocacy toolkit.”

Although reparations demands are often interpreted expansively in social movement literatures, the language of reparations has also been used to promote an orientation toward closure or settlement. Law professor Robert Westley (1998, p. 476) argues that, unlike traditional civil rights remedies, “reparations contain within them at least the promise of closure. The closure afforded by reparations means that no more will be owed to Blacks than is owed to any citizen under the law.” Similarly, Darity & Mullen (2020, p. 2) conceive of reparations as “a program of acknowledgment, redress, and closure for a grievous injustice.” Looking to the international context, Nobles (2008, pp. 139–44) indicates why reparations might be a poor mechanism for political transformation; insofar as they are treated as “settlements,” she notes, reparations efforts are unlikely to contribute to ongoing conversations about how to reshape policy in the future. One question for continued research and debate, then, is whether reparations programs will open the door to broader consideration of ongoing racist practices and institutions, or whether they will function as a form of *foreclosure* that shuts down such consideration.

The status of the United States as a democratic state is thrown into question by the reparations literature. Many arguments for reparations focus on realizing a version of what Darity & Mullen (2020, p. 245) call a “national redemption.” This approach identifies the federal government as an active perpetrator of racial slavery and the anti-Black policies that followed formal emancipation and contends that the United States has a responsibility to live up to the ideals enshrined in its founding documents and self-description. One finds a similar premise in Coates’s (2014, p. 71) view that “more important than any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America’s maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders.” That conservative commentator David Brooks (2019, 2020) has taken up a more modest version of this approach in the name of integration indicates its potential appeal across racial and ideological lines. At the same time, other scholars present the reparations efforts of ordinary people as a political project that decenters the nation and challenges the legal and economic violence inherent in state power (Thomas 2011). Reparations debates, in other words, expose a tension between what Hanchard (2008) calls “black memory” and “state memory.” Will a national program of reparations for Black Americans effect the political transformation its advocates seek, or will it, by reaffirming the righteousness of the American experiment, serve as an alibi for continuing racial injustice?

The recent resurgence of antiracist activism indicates why reparations, long a feature of Black freedom struggles, provide a vital and contested language for expressing political dreams. Speaking of reparations provides one way of framing demands and envisioning a wide range of policies that

will (a) make the connections between present conditions and their historical antecedents and (b) take steps toward remaking the polity politically, economically, and culturally. There is, of course, a danger that stretching the concept of reparations to incorporate all forms of racial injustice and their remedies will render it meaningless. Equally, the expectation that reparations will serve as a panacea or offer a justification for ending conversations about slavery and its legacies reveals the dangers of reparations politics. Yet this is precisely where political scientists have a role to play, using (and, indeed, stretching) the tools of the discipline to study what reparations have meant in the past, how activists are using the term today in the United States and abroad, and how different programs of repair might be designed and enacted and to what effect. Until the conditions of Black life in the United States are fundamentally transformed, writes poet Claudia Rankine (2020, p. 175), “we remain demanding a little R&R: Reparations and Reconstruction.”

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