

Living It; The Need for Reparations in an Ongoing System of Oppression

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The term reparations is infamous for provoking emotions, and those emotions can vary. There is often a sense of discomfort, in the way many people disagree with the idea of directly giving someone else a “thing” to make the world more equitable. The word carries so much influence, even initiatives aimed at implementing reparations won’t use the word, but we need to say it!

Reparations are defined as “the making of amends for a wrong one has done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged.” One thing this definition does not touch upon is the action of having to *give up* something, which is what makes many people turn their heads at the idea of reparations. This could be giving up money, opportunities, status, and arguably most important, giving up power. As humans, we built our society and ideologies on the concept of hierarchy, and when we are presented with the idea of *giving up* something, to many it is an immediate no.

Aside from those who would have to give up something, there are arguments against reparations from those who identify with the communities that are fighting for reparations. A common argument I hear, from all races regarding reparations and/or the severe impact of oppression on today’s society, is “but *that* was so long ago”. ‘*That*’ refers to slavery, civil rights, Jim Crow, and so on. It may seem like it was so long ago, considering it’s almost unfathomable for most people, especially in the United States, to imagine experiencing something as cruel as slavery.

As our minds can’t imagine that degree of forced labor, we default to “well that must be ancient history”, but it’s not. While slavery was a major contributor to the

oppression of Black Americans, that oppression did not end there, and this group's status today was built on more than just chattel slavery and forced labor on plantations. It is not by chance that many Black Americans are facing disproportionate struggles in terms of basic needs, but the results of unending oppression, based on the social construct of race.

A few other controversial topics ...

- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Initiatives
- Black Lives Matter Movement
- Police brutality
- Scholarships for minorities
- Diverse hiring programs
- Affordable housing
- Cannabis
- Affirmative action

The similarity between them? Giving Black Americans the opportunity to climb the ladder and removing the barriers that were built to suppress them for hundreds of years.

One example of oppression that came post-slavery and still impacts many today is the criminal justice system. It's not that Black Americans are criminals, but they are seen as valuable to a system created with them as the target. In 1969, Corrections Corporation of America refined its concept for prisons, which had contracts with the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Immigration Naturalization Service. They had

“guaranteed occupancy” in prisons, and while it found that most drug offenders are white, Black men were sent to prison at rates 12 to 26 times greater than white men, using people who were already at a low to meet their quota and continue in free, forced labor.

This is only one example of forced labor/enslavement after slavery was ‘abolished’. For some perspective, I’m 23 years old and live with my grandmother. In 1969, my grandmother married my grandfather, meaning she was old enough to remember this time and understand the climate of the world around her. People that experienced this aren’t ancient or long gone, they are still here and can remember these instances.

Taking it back a few years further, I consider the convict leasing system, which essentially was a copy of slavery, that sent people to private companies rather than individually owned plantations. It would be assumed that convict leasing was less dangerous than slavery, but convict leasing had a higher mortality rate than slavery. This system lasted for about 80 years, until the 1940s.

The oppression Black Americans face today isn’t solely attributed to the inhumane acts during slavery, these patterns existed even after slavery was abolished and go further into the 1900s, showing a closer link between the status of Black Americans today and the implications of a longer history of oppression than just slavery.

This pattern continues in higher education, where black students face psychological, financial, and physical barriers. Black students are less likely than any other racial or ethnic group to complete any credential or certificate. Below are some statistics on why that’s the reality.

- *21% of current Black students say they feel discriminated against frequently or occasionally at their institution. Black students were more likely to say they were discriminated against at private for-profit schools (34%), short-term credential programs (32%) or less diverse institutions (31%) . (Gallegos, 2023)*
- *59% of Black bachelor's students say they need greater flexibility in their work or personal schedule to stay enrolled in their degree or credential program. (Gallegos, 2023)*

Harvard was established in 1636, being the first institution of higher education in the English colonies. It wasn't until 1799 that a black person was admitted, and until 1823 a black person to graduate earning a bachelor's degree. Whereas White Americans have generations of quality education, many Black families do not have the same experience in these institutions, resulting in many of the struggles they face.

As many common forms of oppression start with legislation, oppression is evident in terms of selecting who we want to represent us, adding to the cycle of remaining in a hierarchy. Anti-protest laws are creating a barrier between Black people and voting. The skyrocket in protests was due to increased police violence from the misconception that Black men especially are a threat or dangerous. These direct killings of Black men, women, and children created an uproar, leading to protests. And conveniently enough, once people begin to protest there are laws against voting rights for someone arrested when protesting. It's like setting up the bait, aggravating the pond, and watching all the fish fall into the trap.

To wrap up the examples of continued targeted oppression of Black Americans as it relates to the necessity of making amends, I consider one of the biggest head starts to a financially stable life, which is generational wealth. Not only are the reasons why it can be difficult to attain generational wealth important to understand, but understanding the generational impact in terms of dollars can emphasize how valuable this is.

The lack of an inheritance pushes people of color back, and reparations could fill that gap and change the narrative for people going forward building an equitable world. More than 60% of US wealth inequality can be accounted for by how much people inherit. This is emphasized when considering how this money is taxed, or lack thereof. Below is an excerpt from the Washington Post, which explains just how fast money can grow when inherited.

“Now you’re dead. The taxable basis of your stock immediately steps up from \$1,000 to \$1.15 million. If your heirs sell it, they’ll pay no taxes. If the value of the stock rises to, say, \$1.151 million, they would owe taxes only on that extra \$1,000.

Now multiply that loophole by the millions of homes, businesses, equities and other assets being handed down each year. Goldwein and his colleagues estimate that closing the loophole could reap as much as \$204 billion in revenue over the next decade, depending on how aggressively it was taxed.” (Van Dam, 2023)

According to statistics from 2019-2022, on average, almost 30% of White Americans have received an inheritance, while right under 10% of Black Americans have.

While there are so many examples of ways Black Americans are unable to escape their situations because of systematic oppression, I hope these few help to begin to build the case of why reparations are due. Financial reparations are important and would move the needle, but this isn't the only form of reparations that would have major benefits for the recipients.

If we were to undo the damage done to the Black community by tracing back actions that could be considered direct impacts, reparations could look like -

- *Land grants*; much of this land was stolen, or by law made unable to be attained by Black people through rules that made it only accessible to white Americans, AKA those who did not come from a slave background. Access to land can create generational wealth and reduce common stressors like home security which can often lead to further issues, commonly impacting mental health
- *Cannabis laws*; Cannabis usage rates are not far between White and non-whites, however, Black Americans are arrested for cannabis offenses at a rate of almost 4:1. This goes back to the prison system, and the need to keep bodies, Black bodies, behind bars to create profit. Lowering restrictions and removing these offenses from one's record can keep them out of the cycle of prison, and open opportunities for better jobs and more secure financial futures
- *Filling the education gap*; White 25 to 29-year-olds were 160% more likely than their Black counterparts to have a bachelor's degree or higher. This gap has begun to close, going from 196% in 2005, but the gap should not be this large. Again, this can be explained historically by the limited number of generations

with families who have attended higher education institutes that are Black American, considering the restrictions toward them because of race, and now factors like cost, inclusivity, and access. Providing scholarships and preventing legislation that can restrict directing scholarships, particularly for these groups would make significant strides toward closing this gap, and seeing more representation in leadership with quality education

- *Truth Telling*; The education many of our children and young adults receive is not inclusive of the full truth and does not expose them to the true realities of our inequities. Beginning at a young age, students should be learning real and complete history, to better understand the role everyone plays in our progress and be better equipped to make real change. Banning books that contain the truth we want to suppress is not 'protecting' students, but misleading them and preventing them from the opportunity to learn and become change agents for positive change

Whereas reparations does not erase or heal generations of trauma that many Black Americans face, it will alleviate the added stress that results in these compounding traumas. We are hundreds of years into a system that has made every effort to place barriers on people of color, why is the idea of redistributing opportunity that has been robbed from these communities so outrageous?

Works Cited

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