Reparations: Calculating the incalculable

From the Editors in the October 25, 2000 issue

When *Washington Post* writer Colbert King invited readers to respond to the idea of paying reparations to the descendants of African-American slaves, he got a mailbox full of opinions. “I’m all for reparations for blacks,” said one. “By the way, as a descendant of Anglo-Saxons, I’ve been deeply traumatized by what the Normans did to us in 1066. How about some for me too?”

Said another: “Blacks are already getting reparations. What do you call federal school lunch programs and Section 8 vouchers?”

Another writer wondered whether the descendants of African slave-sellers should pay a larger proportion of the reparations. And what about the descendants of the white Union soldiers who died fighting against slavery in the Civil War—shouldn’t they be excused from paying reparations?

“We should forget about reparations and concentrate instead on getting young blacks to compete successfully in the job market,” declared another.

“If there had been no slavery,” wrote still another, “African-Americans today would be fighting intertribal wars in Africa.”

Though some of these opinions trivialize the issue, or approach it with unwarranted scorn, they do show that the idea of making reparation for events that happened generations ago has a mind-boggling complexity. How can one begin to calculate levels of guilt and innocence after more than 200 years? And how can one make comparative judgments about levels of suffering, or determine what kind of payment is an adequate response? The enslavement of African-Americans was indeed unique among the world’s atrocities—but so was the experience of Native Americans and no doubt of other groups in American history. Where is the group which has no experience of suffering?

Victoria Barnett argues in this issue that the question of reparations to African-Americans must be taken seriously, because it forces white Americans to confront their complex legacy of guilt and their complicity in decades of racial discrimination and oppression. She grants that it is not clear how the question should be answered.

One problem we see with the reparations strategy is that it relies on the rhetoric of victimization. It deals with the past by sorting out the victims from the victimizers. While there are indeed real victims and real victimizers in history, it's rare that such roles can be neatly distinguished. Especially at this point in the racial history of the U.S., which contains remarkable advances as well as horrific injustices over two centuries, we think those terms are more mystifying than clarifying.

Furthermore, any attempt to specify the nature of reparations must at some point confront a pragmatic question: What specific strategies and programs promise to "repair" the country's social divisions, enabling blacks and all other groups that have been excluded from the full range of opportunities and resources of U.S. society to share in those opportunities and resources? Should there be a renewed focus on funding education? Voucher programs for inner-city schools? Stepped-up affirmative action? Targeted investments in black entrepreneurs? Those specific questions are complex and challenging enough to absorb Americans' attention and energies.