

# Payback? Racism, reparations and accountability: Racism, reparations and accountability

by [Victoria Barnett](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

In 1969, I dropped out of college, moved to Racine, Wisconsin, and worked for a community action program and then for a welfare rights organization. The focus of my work was tenants' rights—helping tenants negotiate with landlords over things like rent and housing violations. Among my many indelible memories from that year was the situation of a family with six children. A large part of their welfare check paid for the worst housing conditions I had ever seen. The stucco house looked reasonably sound on the outside; inside, however, parts of the floor were rotten, pipes and wires were exposed, and the infestation of roaches was so great that there was literally a moving carpet of them on the floor. The landlord said that “these people” were “animals,” and that fixing the house up would be a waste of time and money. The landlord was white; the family was African-American.

When I went to Racine, I idealistically thought of myself as color-blind. Most of the families with whom I worked were African-American, as were all of my colleagues, and for a time I naïvely believed that I had somehow become part of that community. But if I learned anything that year it was that there is no such thing as color-blindness in this society and that the dividing line I had temporarily crossed is not easily erased. The first day I worked for the welfare rights organization I was told by its director, a black ex-welfare mother, that I might as well know that I was in a foreign country. She was right. Although I didn't like to think about it, I came from the same country—the white middle class—as the slum landlord.

After leaving Racine I returned to college and to that country. It proved impossible to maintain several close friendships I had formed. Black America was once again out of my immediate view, and as a result the acute sense of anguish and outrage I had once felt diminished. In 1985 I drove back to Racine and found the neighborhoods where I had worked looked exactly as I remembered. The stucco house was still

there, and there were still people living in it.

I think about that house in Racine when I listen to discussions these days about granting reparations to African-Americans. The call for reparations is not new; it began as soon as slavery ended. But it has gained steam in recent years, fueled by growing historical scholarship about the details of slavery, an increased worldwide readiness to call societies to account for their pasts, and an eloquent and passionate debate within the African-American community. In 1993 the Organization of African Unity called for some form of restitution from the U.S. and from those European countries that were involved in the slave trade. That same year, Representative John Conyers (D., Mich.) introduced a bill (which never made it out of committee) to establish a commission to study the effects of slavery.

Some precedents already exist. In 1994 Florida paid \$2.1 million to descendants of the African-American victims of the 1923 Rosewood massacre. Earlier this year, the Tulsa Race Riot Commission recommended that reparations be paid to the survivors of the 1921 race riot in that city, in which as many as 300 African-Americans were killed. The issue is relevant for other groups as well. The 1988 Civil Liberties Act, for example, paid \$20,000 to each Japanese-American who was incarcerated during World War II. State and federal courts and mediators are dealing with hundreds of Native American land claims, and indigenous tribes in the U.S. and Canada have filed suits demanding reparations for various crimes, such as the abuse of students in parochial and government-run schools.

Reparations are a form of compensation for past injuries. Yet, particularly with respect to the African-American and Native American populations, we are not just looking at past injuries, because the original injustices have been compounded by decades of discrimination. For that reason, discussion of reparations for slavery touches on a number of deeper issues. Proponents contend that the destructive legacy of slavery continues to hinder many African-Americans from achieving equal status in this society. In measurable ways—infant mortality rates, unemployment, incarceration rates, etc.—African-Americans are at a disadvantage. Racism remains an ugly reality in our society. This summer, the *New York Times* concluded a lengthy series on the perceptions of race among Americans by saying: “The series has portrayed a stubbornly enduring racial divide, and the poll suggested that even as the rawest forms of bigotry have receded they have often been replaced by remoteness and distrust in places of work, learning and worship.”

Proponents of reparations point to this reality and say that the descendants of slaves are owed some form of monetary settlement. In *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, Randall Robinson contends that slavery's legacy of injustice and disadvantage is "structural," continuing to benefit whites "whose assets piled up like fattening snowballs over three and a half centuries." As a result, Robinson charges, even those African-Americans who have achieved some level of economic security still lack real political power. More ominously, they "are emotional defectors from a society whose white majority long ago smothered to death any notion of cultural co-ownership."

The only genuine way to change this, Robinson writes, is for the U.S. government to pay reparations—an act that would finally acknowledge, in concrete form, the damages that slavery inflicted. Some form of reparations is necessary before any meaningful discussion about race can occur. In effect, he is arguing that reparations might eventually force white America to put its mouth where its money is. It would signal that whites are serious about changing the structures of racism.

While agreeing with Robinson's account of the situation, others contend that reparations are not the solution. Glenn Loury of the Institute on Race and Social Division at Boston University argued in the *New York Times* that money wouldn't solve the problem: "We need some reckoning with the racist past, but reparations encourage the wrong kind of reckoning. . . . As in South Africa, the deepest and most relevant 'reparation' would entail constructing and inculcating in our citizens an account of how we have come to be as we are—one that avoids putting the responsibility for the current problems of African-Americans wholly on their shoulders."

There are other voices in the debate. While some proponents advocate a flat monetary settlement to every descendant of a slave, others seek a social or political settlement—a percentage of the U.S. budget that would be allotted to improving schools with large minority populations, for example, or set aside for job training programs. Indeed, many whites and blacks view existing social programs and political attempts to redress past injustices, including programs like affirmative action, as a form of reparations.

As even this brief description of the debate indicates, the demand for reparations raises issues that cannot be resolved entirely by courts or legislators—issues involving relationships and tensions between groups divided by ethnicity and class.

Some people think that social or political solutions to these issues are impossible, and that the change of heart necessary for a real end to racism will not come about through legislation.

When I was growing up, it was often said with reference to civil rights: “You can’t legislate morality.” On one level, this is true. It may be one reason why the so-called Great Society programs and other social programs did not go to the heart of the problem. I suspect, however, that a central factor is that whites tend to view slavery’s legacy of racism, poverty and injustice as social problems “out there,” not as inherent components of our own lives as citizens of this society. We may be outraged by these realities, but (as I discovered in Racine) we remain part of them. We cannot step outside the system we live in. But we have not as a collective confronted the nature of the crime of slavery and its ongoing legacy. It is precisely this task that a serious discussion might achieve.

Slavery was not perpetrated just by traders and slaveholders. It created patterns of complicity that extended throughout U.S. society and still affect each one of us. Complicity in such cases does not consist of a singular sin; it becomes an ongoing pattern of individual behavior that is interwoven with predominant social patterns. In the long term, complicity is about the continued social effects of individual and communal misdeeds.

It is this ongoing aspect of complicity that makes reparations (and all attempts at apology, restitution, reconciliation or forgiveness) so complex and controversial. When injustice is perpetrated against an entire group, when it persists over a long period and its effects permeate society, no one is untouched. The dividing lines that result— religious, ethnic or economic—warp public and private relationships. The longer such dividing lines exist, the more difficult it is to have genuine and honest dialogue between those on opposite sides. Even the best-intended attempts to change the situation remain part of a much greater process that steadily undermines them. The ensuing moral paralysis, rationalization and defensiveness hinder us from getting further. This is why individual attempts to address the racial divide in this country so often hit a stone wall. We are confronting a social sin, and the problem and its possible solutions cannot be addressed apart from the larger issues.

Recent history has included a number of such attempts, not all of which entail actual reparations; the post-World War II response by Germany to the Holocaust is only the

most prominent example. South Africa, Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Northern Ireland, Cambodia and Rwanda have attempted to deal with issues of individual and collective complicity. These are new and hopeful developments in human history. It is a sign of progress that history now includes the victims' voices. We recognize now that "settling" matters without doing justice or paying attention to the victims doesn't settle them at all.

Addressing this task in a politically viable way, however, raises difficult questions. Can individuals be held accountable for political and social injustice that occurs on a massive scale? Are later generations accountable for the sins of their forebears; if so, how can this be instituted effectively? In addressing past injustice and its legacy, how do we create a different foundation for the future? What factors give such attempts the legitimacy and fairness that are crucial if they are to be accepted by individual citizens with differing political viewpoints? Most important, how do victims, bystanders and perpetrators—or their descendants—speak to one another about these questions?

The complexity of these questions becomes clear when we consider what can and cannot be dealt with by a court of law. Legal redress for those who suffered injury and are still living (Holocaust survivors, Japanese-Americans imprisoned during World War II, African-Americans who are not hired or cannot obtain housing due to their race) is a difficult and politicized process, but as long as the plaintiffs and defendants are still living it is somewhat straightforward. It is possible to put war criminals on trial, demand that Swiss banks return money to Holocaust survivors or their descendants, and require corporations that profited directly from Nazi forced labor camps to pay compensation for that injustice.

Even in these cases, however, "justice" will seem incomplete, and the amount of monetary compensation will be symbolic. What amount of money could ever "compensate" victims who have been tortured, lost family members, or been forcibly deprived of their homes and livelihoods? These limitations are magnified in dealing with an issue like slavery. What kind of compensation is due and who, precisely, is liable? We confront these issues several generations after the original crime. It is no longer possible to bring the slave owners and traders to justice—yet the legacy of their crimes continues to benefit those who inherited the power and privileges that emerged from that injustice.

Thus, while proponents of reparations present their case in the clear-cut language of a legal claim for damages, the issue is really political and moral, and this sets certain limitations. As Martha Minow writes in *Beyond Vengeance and Forgiveness* (Beacon Press, 1998), reparations do not offer “tidy endings.” They are not a way out or a means of settling accounts. They can’t enact the kind of justice that many people would like to have. The key to understanding their potential is the root word *reparare*—to repair something, which in this case is the political body and society as a whole.

Restitution and reparations are primarily symbolic acts that serve as catalysts for a very different—and much longer—political process. The demand for reparations calls us to think in a different way about the enduring legacy of racism and to articulate possible solutions in ways that are both relevant and reasonable to individual citizens. Where successful, this process can create a foundation for reconciliation. Part of this process is ongoing reflection about the moral nature of how we confront the past. As the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa illustrated, religious people can raise such questions in the public sphere in a particular way.

This task may seem obvious, but experience shows that such questioning is precisely the work that often falls by the wayside. The tendency of many religious groups is to take sides and clear stands. While such moral leadership is crucial, especially in acute situations marked by violence, deeper theological and ethical reflection on these issues is just as crucial for the long term. In particular, there are two ways in which churches can serve to expand on the more traditional roles of mediator or advocate.

The first is that religious communities can help their members talk about the truth. If this is to be recognized as a truth that shapes our present reality, it must include the voices of as many groups as possible. The real test in our society will be whether these voices can be brought into a genuine conversation with one another, a conversation that moves beyond political posturing. Because the topics of reparations and racism are connected, ethical and religious perspectives could be brought into the public discourse on how prejudice functions, and how racism and injustice reflect different levels of complicity. We need to understand the history of slavery as a very central part of our history and our consciousness as a nation; tourists who visit the White House or the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C., for example, should know that those buildings were constructed, in part, with slave

labor.

Second, we need to confront this history in its entirety. Historical denial takes many forms. One form is the denial of the injustice, the silencing of the victims' voices, the refusal to acknowledge that our ancestors played a role in the original oppression. Another form of denial is ignorance about past attempts to address the issues we wrestle with today. Part of any conversation about race includes the history of the civil rights movement and the various interracial and interfaith attempts to do things differently. These efforts, even where incomplete and unsuccessful, are also part of our common history. Because the religious community has been a central part of this history (and because so many leading activists are still among us), it has a special contribution to make here.

There are very pragmatic reasons why we should confront this matter with more honesty and long-term commitment than we've done in the past, but the main reason goes beyond self-interest. It has to do with the fabric of our society, with who we are as individuals in our private and public lives, with the mental and moral compromises that enable us to tolerate the intolerable. Visitors to the Holocaust Museum in Washington often come (and leave) with the question: how could people let this happen? But the human capacity to disclaim responsibility for the suffering of those who are not "like us" shouldn't be that hard for anyone in this society to understand.

I saw things in Racine years ago that continue to haunt me, for they were outrageous, and showed that many people in our democracy are viewed and treated as less than human. As citizens, we need to figure out how to change such things in a public way, precisely because our involvement as individuals has to be part of any social solution. Germans, South Africans and others throughout the world have learned that dealing with the past is the only means toward creating a different kind of future. If we want a different relationship among races in this country, we will have to find some way of addressing our past. And that means talking about reparations.