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Reparations for Modern Day Inequalities

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English 101

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Reparations for Modern Day Inequalities

Mostly known for its prominence in the U.S South, slavery was unjust as well as physically, emotionally, and mentally abusive to African Americans. In exchange for such abuse, the labor of the African American slaves gave whites and America great wealth and a lot of profit. It is no question that the treatment of African Americans throughout history, not just during the time of slavery, was beyond wrong and immoral. Due to the injustices enacted on African Americans, discussions of reparations have been going on for decades. With the exception of a few cases, reparations have not been approved or given out to African Americans due to many unanswered questions. However, a few people who have tried to tackle the questions of reparations include Ta-Nehisi Coates, Michael Sandel, and scholars from Harvard Law. One particular question that comes about in the discussion of reparations is, what modern-day inequalities might reparations address?

Ta Nehisi-Coates addresses the debate of reparations by bringing up disparities that African Americans have faced after slavery was abolished. Some of the topics that Coates talks about are the discriminatory actions of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the wealth and education gap amongst whites and African Americans. As Coates explains, the Federal Housing Administration was created in 1934 in order to help returning war veterans be able to afford housing. However, the FHA played a major part in discrimination and segregation. The FHA excluded blacks from moving in to houses in specific areas: areas that happened to be predominantly white. The FHA

even went as far as to redline neighborhoods where there was a high population of Blacks, so white home buyers would look elsewhere. Coates also mentions that there has always been a significant wealth gap between whites and blacks. Blacks were inhibited from building their wealth because they were often over charged for such luxuries (i.e homes). A headline included in Coates article states, “Black families making \$100,000 typically live in the kinds of neighborhoods inhabited by white families making \$30,000” (25). Even with a 70,000 dollar difference in income, blacks were still living in the same areas as whites who were making significantly less; this was because African Americans were often overcharged for their homes. The extra \$70,000 that they should have had could have been used in more beneficial ways such as investing in stocks and savings, but instead they were robbed by two thieves, more commonly known as discrimination and injustice. Matty Lewis, introduced by Coates, speaks of the home she bought in 1958 compared to the homes of her white co-workers. Lewis reinforces the claim of being over charged when she gives a personal account saying, “I could see where we were just getting ripped off...I would see things and I would say, ‘I’d like to do this at my house.’... but I would think, ‘I can’t, because it costs us so much more’” (Coates 45). It is evident that a wealth gap would emerge when blacks had to pay significantly more for the exact same products purchased by their white counterparts-- one of the many injustices African Americans faced.

Education was also an issue that blacks grappled with after slavery. Schools in African American neighborhoods were poorly funded and, oftentimes if African American children did have the opportunity to go to a school with a good education program, they were eventually taken out. This holds true in an example Clyde Ross, the

subject of the main testimonial in Coates' article, gives about his kids. He says that due to lack of finances, he eventually had to take his children out of one of the best schools in the neighborhood because it was private (Coates 42). African American students lost educational opportunities and never had the same level of education as whites did.

Although Coates' article is focused on the past inequalities, all three disparities-- housing, wealth, and education-- still exist in today's society in similar forms.

In today's society, many cities are still very segregated by race. According to the Huffington Post, "Based on our index, more than a third of residents in nine U.S metro areas live in homogeneous zip codes, segregated from other racial groups" (N. Pag.). Time and time again, we see images in the media of African Americans being accused or charged with some sort of crime. A very viable reason for this is that cities that are predominantly black tend to be poverty stricken and as a result, are filled with violence, drug use, and desperation. When comparing neighborhoods that are more affluent to those of poverty, there is a significant difference in the amount of violence and dangerous activities that take place. Not so coincidentally, whites, and possibly other non-blacks, live in these affluent neighborhoods. This split amongst race and affluence is the result of institutionalized segregation and discrimination carried down throughout the years. The current difference seen in white and black neighborhoods is very representative of the discrimination faced during the years that the FHA was being used.

In order to fix the inequality that still remains in today's society in terms of housing and poverty stricken neighborhoods, a review from Harvard Law suggests that reparations should "...invest in institution-building in black communities and in grass

roots organizations...” (1698). This option suggests that reparations should go to making African American communities more affluent and creating programs that will act as alternatives to drugs or violence. A positive outcome of this choice would be that the inequality seen in comparisons of black and white neighborhoods would decrease. African American neighborhoods would become more affluent which seems to be correlated with less violence and criminality. Building organizations that are in support of African Americans and are there to help youths grow to be successful, or even just provide an opportunity for them to do something they love, would deter kids in such poverty riddled neighborhoods from partaking in illegal and criminal-like lifestyles. Although this seems like a good idea to help address this modern day inequality, a few questions still emerge. There is no guarantee that such programs will be taken advantage of, and how will these programs help when there are already so many people involved in such a dangerous lifestyle? Also, making neighborhoods more affluent is a great gesture, but these people live in poverty which means paying for these new, nicer houses will be extremely hard. The idea of reparations giving back to the community is great and has a lot of potential, but still leaves some concerns about reparations unresolved.

The wealth gap was a major inequality back in the time of Jim Crow and, still exists today with white families having seven times more wealth than African American families (Urban Institute). A significant factor in the wealth gap is inheritance; Blacks have to earn what many whites receive without labor. Inheritance gives whites a head start on acquiring wealth including ideals that are non-monetary. Blacks often do not learn critical skills, such as investing, from older generations because these generations

either did not know how to invest or did not have anything to invest. Another factor in the wealth gap is African Americans have lower paying jobs (Urban Institute). There can be a number of reasons that play into why that is, but, either way, the fact remains. Reparations may be a way of helping create some sort of solution to the current wealth inequality.

As a way of making up for the wealth gap, the Harvard Law Review suggests that reparations should help with job training and support black-owned businesses (1690). The review goes on to say that support for black businesses should specifically come in the form of money given by the government. The benefits of having such reparations will help African Americans acquire more money. By supplying job training, African Americans will gain more skills that were not passed down through generations. This would work to their advantage because, in a sense, it would be making up for lost time. By the government giving subsidies to black businesses, it will help many people remain employed without having a heavy burden.

As with any suggestion as to how to go about reparations for African Americans, a few concerns come up regarding this specific approach. One concern would be that job training would be a helpful tool in helping blacks obtain job skills; however there is already a significant number of blacks who have a considerable amount of skill and still have lower paying jobs or are unemployed. Discrimination and prejudice is still very apparent in the job sector of the world. That is something that cannot be helped through job training and therefore would not be helpful in the attempt to close the wealth gap. Lastly, a large part of society already believes that African Americans receive an undeserving amount of handouts: will tensions increase on this topic if the government

decided to give out grants to businesses? Both the positive and potentially negative impacts of reparations in closing the wealth gap must to be considered.

Another modern day inequality amongst blacks and whites is education. During slavery, African Americans were kept illiterate for the sake of keeping them inferior. When Blacks were finally allowed to attend schools, they were segregated and were given a much lower quality of education compared to that taught in white schools. During this time black schools lacked many resources such as adequate teachers, textbooks, and other basic necessities. These inequalities of education are still prevalent in modern society. Primary schools in African American neighborhoods still have poor education impacting the amount of knowledge students gain, their self-assurance, and their motivation to attend college. The named results of poor education systems in black neighborhoods can explain why there are fewer African Americans in college than whites. Also, another factor that can be attributed to this is the cost of tuition. Many students cannot afford to pay for collegiate education and do not have the resources to find out there are ways to compensate that. The education gap is one that seems to be closing since the times of Jim Crow, but still remains significant.

In order to speed up the process in closing the education gap, one possible solution would be reparations going towards making schools in African American neighborhoods more adequate and, supporting affirmative action. If reparations could go towards the betterment of education for African Americans, it seems that that would be a sufficient way in closing the education gap. There would, hopefully, no longer be any inequality in education and school systems amongst the two races. Also, supporting affirmative action will help more blacks to attend college. This is beneficial because

college is a major stepping stone in life and, in today's society, is a necessity in most career fields if not all. Bettering education and creating more opportunities and resources for African Americans is a sufficient way of helping in more than one area of their lives; education is a powerful tool that is applied in all aspects of life. However, one question that may come up, that is already asked of affirmative action is, does affirmative action mean that blacks will be recruited and accepted into schools because of their skin color and not because of their grades? All sides have to be looked at thoroughly before answering if these reparations can help combat this modern day disparity.

The case for reparations is a very controversial topic that constitutes many unanswered questions. Some of the dilemmas, as mentioned in *Justice* by Michael Sandel, include taking blame and responsibility for the actions of one's ancestors, a possible increase in tensions, and logistics such as where the money would come from and who exactly fits the criteria of receiving reparations (211). This essay gives possible solutions to questions in this debate pertaining to how reparations can be dealt out and more specifically, what modern day inequalities these reparations can help fix. There is no question that slavery and the Jim Crow Era left many African Americans at a disadvantage; that is evident in today's statistics. However, more research needs to be done on the effects and logistics of reparations in order for any decision to be made.

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