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Forty Acres and Unfulfilled Promises

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Forty Acres and Unfulfilled Promises

The issue of reparations for the injustices committed against African Americans has been a controversial topic in American media and amongst social justice advocates. While compensation for slavery has often been presented as an unprecedented idea, reparations for slavery have been in consideration since the Civil War. After the emancipation of slaves in the post-Civil War era, an order was issued promising African Americans “forty acres and a mule” as reparations for their plight of slavery and to help them begin prosperous lives in freedom. However, the government failed to execute this promise and African Americans suffered as a result (McCurdy). While the implementation of this order could have significantly reduced racial inequality issues throughout history, the United States is instead faced with a looming unfulfilled promise for reparations. By re-evaluating and quantifying this historical order, America may have a feasible solution to how it can fulfill this promise and provide reparations for the injustices committed. If America chooses to make reparations in the name of executing this historical order, the moral question remains as to whether it is our obligation to fulfill the promises made by our ancestors.

In order to assess the possibility of reparations, it is important to examine the history of proposed reparations in the past. According to American economist William Darity in his work, “Forty Acres and a Mule in the 21st Century”, the idea of land distribution to former slaves was discussed by abolitionists even before the Union succeeded in winning the Civil War and was

supported by President Abraham Lincoln (660). As Darity explains, the plan for land distribution proposed that the land would be confiscated from the Confederates and given or sold to freedmen as reparations for their years of unpaid labor. On January 16, 1865, General Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15, stating that forty acres of tillable ground would be designated for the settlement of slaves who had been freed by the war and the resulting proclamation (Darity 661). These lands would consist of the low-country rice coast south of Charleston along the rivers for thirty miles and the lands by the sea (Darity 661). It is important to note that this was fertile farming land previously owned by the Confederate leaders. Special Field Order No. 15 commonly became known as the historical “forty acres and a mule”.

As part of this effort for reparations, the Freedman’s Bureau Act was established in 1865. As Charles Henry, a professor of African American Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, explains, this was a separate act that authorized the Bureau to “divide abandoned and confiscated land in forty-acre plots for rental to freedmen and loyal refugees” (42). The hope of this act was to allocate the confiscated Confederate land to the former slaves. They would be charged reasonable rent so that could eventually purchase the land and begin prosperous farming lives. It is not clear whether these acts were simply a practical means to finding the freed slaves land or if there was a component of moral obligation. Regardless, these acts were excellent examples of compensatory efforts, as they were created in collaboration with black leaders and provided land that would allow the freedmen to be independent and prosperous.

Today, few people have heard of these reparative efforts because they were never implemented, causing economic consequences that have spanned centuries. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated soon after the orders were put into law and was succeeded by a Southern sympathizer, Andrew Johnson. President Johnson overturned these orders and returned much of

the confiscated land back to the white Southern owners (McCurdy). One can imagine betrayal felt by the former slaves who had to find other ways of survival while their promised lands were being given to American traitors. William Darity makes the claim that if these orders had been implemented, then “the vast current differences in wealth between blacks and nonblacks would not exist” (661). Due to the lack of programs or legislation to compensate the slaves, many were forced into poverty. While some former slaves were able to acquire small portions of land on their own, it is clear that they would have been more prosperous in the post-emancipation years had these promises been kept.

The economic implications of how slavery has affected African Americans is complex and difficult to quantify, though many have tried. Is it possible to quantify the value of slavery reparations in the present time? In his article, “The Case for Reparations”, Ta-Nehisi Coates emphasizes the wealth that Southern Americans accrued at the expense of the slaves. Due to the unpaid labor and selling of slaves as commodities, white Southerners attained fortune and affluence. Therefore, many argue that reparations should be a quantification of the racial wealth gap, as it would be smaller had reparation programs been implemented at emancipation. Coates quotes a prominent Yale Law professor, Boris Bittker, who has argued that reparations could be calculated by multiplying the wealth gap by the number of African Americans in the United States (54). Charles Henry in his book, *Long Overdue: The Politics of Racial Reparations*, cites other calculations. In 1969, James Forman, a civil rights leader, asked for only \$500 million for reparations. This prompted a response from economist David Swinton, who calculated that the value of reparations was more than double the request. (Henry 171). Regardless, it is clear that the debt owed to African Americans is a topic of controversy and the value of slavery far too complex to calculate.

Some advocates for reparations have suggested that a re-evaluation of “forty acres and a mule” should be used to calculate slavery reparations. This idea is supported by William Darity, who believes that “the present day value of 40 acres and a mule can provide the foundation for the calculation of the magnitude of reparations owed to black Americans” (656). This method of calculating reparations is more likely to be accepted by the American public, as it would be a repayment of debt, rather than the creation of entirely new legislation. Land and animals were the most valuable form of payment in the nineteenth century, but today, compensation is valued differently. One estimate of the value of “forty acres and a mule” considers the monetary value of forty acres in 1865. As there were about one million slave families at the time, the value of land would be \$400 million. Therefore, this allocation in the present value, given to the approximate 30 million descendants would amount to slightly more than \$400,000 per recipient.

This value is exclusive of the reparations many believe are due to compensate for the suffering, poverty, and discrimination experienced by the descendants of the freed slaves. Without considering the complex issues of wealth gap and lost opportunities, economists agree the debt alone owed to African Americans amounts to about 1.3 trillion (Darity 661). In the past, agreement on the monetary value of reparations has never been reached. However, by using this historical debt, a concrete, agreed-upon payment valuation can be calculated for reparations to former slaves for the unfulfilled promises of land distribution. However, the real value of the debt is too large to possibly pay at one time. Therefore, some economists suggest lower payments to descendants over a much longer period of time --generations, in fact--to reach this amount. Perhaps more important than the value is that America would be making a genuine effort to keep the promises that it made in the past and acknowledge its failure that that caused devastating economic inequality.

It is clear that, with sufficient research and calculation, an economic plan can be accomplished for America to pay off its debt to former slaves, even if it must be paid over generations. However, the question remains, do we have a moral obligation to fulfill the promises made by our ancestors? Regardless of how “forty acres and a mule” is paid off, it will cost America either in taxes or by increasing the national debt. America made this promise over 150 years ago, and it is difficult for many to see why this debt should be paid now or at all. Yet, others feel that America is morally obligated to pay its debts, especially to its own citizens. William Darity, in support of reparations, claims that “three objectives can be ascribed to a program of reparations: acknowledgment, redress, and closure... Closure refers to a settling of accounts, a healing process brought to fruition” (656). With these outstanding debts resulting from failed land distribution orders, there is a lack of closure. America cannot begin to move forward from the injustices committed against slaves if it refuses to take any responsibility for their suffering after emancipation. Darity states that, if “forty acres and a mule” had been instilled as promised, “one can readily imagine a completely different U.S. history unfolding over the course of the subsequent century, a history in which race did not intertwine with dense inequalities” (Darity 661). Repaying the promises made by this order would, at the very least, begin to acknowledge the consequences that resulted and begin to redress the issue.

Many activists for justice, such as Michael Sandel and Ta-Nehisi Coates, discuss the moral obligation America has to make reparations. They believe that America should feel a moral guilt for its failures and forsaken promises. Ta-Nehisi Coates summarizes the idea well when he states that it is more than just a moral pressure; America cannot escape its history. He follows by quoting his interviewee, Clyde Ross, who states that ““the reason black people are so far behind now is not because of now...It’s because of then.”” (Coates 62). Coates makes it clear

that America should take moral responsibility for its mistakes that caused suffering and poverty for its own people. Furthermore, he believes all Americans should support slavery reparations, as the consequences of historical actions are passed through generations. Michael Sandel takes a similar perspective in his book, *Justice*, when he claims that “[y]ou can’t really take pride in your country and its past if you’re unwilling to acknowledge any responsibility for carrying its story into the present, and discharging the moral burdens that may come with it” (Sandel 235). Politicians, and the American public in general, often have the perspective that promises can be made without consequence. However, as Sandel demonstrates, part of being American is carrying the moral burden of its past and making efforts for the future.

After the Civil War, thousands of slaves suffered from the abandoned promises of land and a prosperous future. As William Darity states, the phrase “forty acres and a mule” “has been cloaked in the mists of African-American folklore” (660), but it is a real promise that, if implemented, could have significantly decreased the inequality that is seen today. America still holds this liability to its former slaves and their descendants, which has prevented closure on the issue. Quantifying the present value of “forty acres and a mule” as reparations would not only provide a feasible value for reparations, but allow for America to fulfill the promise it had made to the freed slaves long ago. Despite the fact that a price to repay this debt can be formulated, there is the question of whether we are responsible for the unfulfilled promises and debts made by our ancestors? In being an American, one must share in the country’s guilt and be willing to address its faults. It is the sense of moral responsibility and apology that distinguish these efforts from being monetary settlements to being true, reconciling reparations.

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