

California's Reparations Proposal Is Deeply Flawed and Racist



by Theodore Dalrymple

Countries and civilizations aren't killed: They rot to death from within or commit suicide. They do so by tearing themselves apart or by questioning their right even to exist.

The proposal that every black person in California of slave lineage or with ancestry in the United States before the end of the 19th century should receive "reparations" has a suicidal quality to it. The proposal doesn't come from a madman who stands ranting on a soap box at a street corner, but from a commission set up by the governor of the state—there being, of course, no easier way to feel righteous

than to give away other people's money.

When Karl Kraus, the Austrian satirist who published millions and millions of words in his lifetime, was asked what he thought of Hitler, he replied that he couldn't think of anything to say: By which he meant that Hitler was so bad that even to criticize him was to grant him too much credit. So it is with this proposal: It's so bad that it's worthy only of contemptuous silence.

The problem, alas, is that no proposal these days is too self-evidently foolish to be taken seriously and implemented by at least a part of the political class, and the silence of critics would be taken for agreement, or at least acquiescence. Thus, people who should be devoting their efforts and intelligence to more worthwhile matters find themselves obliged to argue against what Bertrand Russell called intellectual rubbish.

I think a whole book could be written against the proposal, or rather against the suppositions, philosophical, factual, and practical, upon which it's based. I will make only a few points.

In the first place, the proposal is deeply racist. It treats people not as individuals equal under the law but as members of a group, in this case, a racial group. It's no better to claim that a person has a right to "reparations" by virtue of belonging to a racial group than that a person should be de jure denied access to a benefit for the same reason.

"Reparations" would have to be paid from taxation of, or expropriation of capital from, huge numbers of people who had no personal responsibility for slavery or any other form of oppression of black people. If it's alleged that they have nevertheless benefited from the economic development of the country in which slavery played a part, elementary principles of double-entry bookkeeping would suggest that contemporary

blacks in the United States, too, have benefitted from slavery, insofar as their levels of income, comfort, life expectancy, and so forth, are incomparably higher than those they would have had if their ancestors had not been taken forcibly from Africa.

For example, their per capita income is roughly 15 to 20 times what it would have been had they still resided in the West African country of Benin; but no one, I suppose (and hope), would suggest that they therefore owed some kind of debt toward the descendants of former slave-owners and traders, or to the descendants of the black chiefs who co-operated with them and indeed made the trade possible.

Perhaps the most dispiriting aspect of the proposal is its probable effect on the way of thinking of the eligible black population. It will reinforce the view that the solution to the problems that black people undoubtedly face in America is to be found in politicking and the consequent attempt to extort money from others. This is not how Indian or Chinese immigrants to the United States became so prosperous, no matter what individual instances of prejudice they may have faced. Indeed, they have become more prosperous per head than the native population. Incidentally, this is true not only in the United States, but in Britain and France, too.

With the right attitudes and culture, that the blacks once had before the Great Society helped to extinguish it, it takes a generation, or at most two, for any group to prosper in an open society such as the United States. Alas, it's the hustlers, the mountebanks, the political quacks, the charlatans, who hold things back, in part because their power depends upon holding things back. They are to their electorate what the Pied Piper was to the children of Hamelin, who promised the children a delightful future:

"For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,
"Joining the town and just at hand,

“Where waters gushed and fruit-trees grew,
“And flowers put forth a fairer hue,
“And every thing was strange and new;
“The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,
“And their dogs outran our fallow deer,
“And honey-bees had lost their stings,
“And horses were born with eagles’ wings ...”

It goes almost without saying that reparations and compensation rarely satisfy: They are never enough. Indeed, a voice has already been raised that \$1.2 million was not enough, that \$200 million was nearer the mark! The man who said this even managed to work himself up into a fury, as if his proposal were serious.

The question of “reparations” is already likely to have had a disastrous effect upon the mentality of many black people who, because of propaganda in their favor, have come to feel entitled to them, though no such thought would have entered their head but a few years ago. If they, the reparations, fail to materialize, as is likely, there will be another reason for such people to feel aggrieved: for they will think that have been deprived even of that which would have been insufficient had they received it. An unassuageable attitude of grievance is rarely a good launching pad for success in life.

There’s much more to be said, of course. The effect of sudden access to a large unearned and undeserved sum of money by millions of people (assuming that inflation has not destroyed the value of the sum by the time it’s received) is unlikely to be edifying, either for them or for others.

I once saw this happen, admittedly on a small scale, on the Pacific island of Nauru. The people there suddenly became very rich in 1968 after independence thanks to the mining of phosphate rock on their tiny island. For a time, Nauru had one

of the highest GDPs per capita in the world. The wealth destroyed their way of life, but when the money ran out, they were left the fattest people in the world with the highest rate of type II diabetes in the world. They have never recovered since.

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