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EC 137: Racial Inequality
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Lecture Note on Black Reparations

1. Should African Americans, in keeping with an idea of trans-generational justice, receive reparations for the historical crimes of slavery and Jim Crow segregation? That question is being asked with growing intensity across America.
2. If one understands “reparations” as receipt of financial transfers as compensation for historical crimes, my answer is a resounding, “No.”
3. If, on the other hand, one intends with such advocacy to urge upon the American people a sober reflection on, and reinterpretation of, those aspects of our history which gave rise to the current extent of unequal social and economic standing between racially defined subgroups of American society, my answer is a tentative, hopeful, “Yes.” (Historiography in the style of Katznelson or Sugrue, e.g.)
4. Despite my skepticism about the wisdom and moral necessity of race-based compensatory financial transfers, I leave room for the possibility that some claims arising from specific racial injustices (lynching; racial pogroms (Tulsa, OK.) e.g.) against blacks perpetrated over the course of U.S. history can be sustained. But, my view is that black reparations can and should not be more than a marginal part of the effort to deal with our troubled racial past. Here’s why:
5. *[Conceptualizing Harm]* Consider the complex character of the harm. To repair the consequences of historical crimes we need to begin with an understanding of what has been lost. Depriving the ancestors of current-day African Americans of the fruits of their labors was not, I argue, the gravest injury done them. Rather, it was the relegation of the black slaves and their progeny to a status of social pariahs, which constituted the severest harm. This harm, I claim, will not be reversed, and may indeed be reinforced, by the successful advocacy for slavery reparations.
6. *[Political Challenges]* Consider the demographics. When it comes to race in America, "them times, they are a-changin'." We are no longer, and will never again be, a nation of blacks and whites. Some 30 million immigrants, mostly of non-European origins, have arrived on our shores since the height of the civil rights movement. These new Americans and their children have a claim to the national narrative no less surely than do blacks. It is their country, too. Of course, new citizens of this republic are obligated like the rest of us to shoulder their share of national responsibilities, including the discharge of any debt the country has incurred as a result of historical wrongs. But, a racial reform movement built around the theme of paying reparations to blacks is unlikely to

- engage these newcomers, making the construction of political coalitions in support of progressive public policies that are essential for black flourishing less likely to occur.
7. *[Epistemological Problems]* Consider that there is no intellectually defensible way to put a price tag on slavery. Any sum mentioned is arbitrary. This is because the tort-law model underlying reparations advocacy – he who harms another must make the injured party whole – is hopelessly muddled when applied here. How would one even begin to demonstrate in quantitative terms the nature and extent of injury? Given the wide economic disparities to be observed among white Americans of various ethnic groups, who can know how blacks would have fared but for the wrongs of the past? Who can say what the out-of-wedlock birth rate for blacks would be, absent chattel slavery? How does one calculate the cost of inner-city ghettos, of poor education, of the stigma of perceived racial inferiority? The damage done by slavery and its aftermath is at once too subtle and too profound to be evaluated in monetary terms.
 8. *[Issues of Interpretation]* Consider the symbolic tone of reparations advocacy. At the deepest level, it seems not even to be the money that animates most advocates. [See Randall Robinson, 2000, for an example of this rhetorical posture.] The deeper demand seems to be that America, by making amends, should fully acknowledge its wrongful past. While I agree with this sentiment, I also think that it is rather late in the day for African Americans to be satisfied with a politics of symbolism. Substantive political gains for today's descendants of slaves require forging coalitions with those non-blacks who can see the need to extend greater opportunities to every American now being left behind. This means appealing to people on the basis of universal ideals, and proposing programs the benefits from which are available in principle to all who need them. I can see no way to fight black poverty, black imprisonment, inadequate black health care or deficient black education without, at one and the same time, fighting the poverty, imprisonment, poor health care and failed education that afflicts non-black Americans as well. Nor can I see any real justification for doing so.
 9. *[Civic Construction Goals]* Reparations advocacy invites the majority of Americans to see the problem as one where “we” do something for “them.” What is needed, however, is to construct a “we” – meaning all Americans – capable of righting whatever social injustices plague our society – for “our own sake” in this country, so that our moral pronouncements on the world stage will not be made into a hollow mockery. No doubt, the construction of this “we” will be more readily achieved to the extent that citizens are made aware of the nature and extent of historical misdeeds undertaken by their government, or with its acquiescence. So, the concern expressed here about civic construction goals ought not be understood as precluding a vigorous, sometimes unsettling discourse about the past. Nevertheless, slavery's consequences will be minimized only when we have established a regime of social provision that affords every

American the chance to live a full and satisfying life. For blacks to gain reparations without attaining this goal would be to win a false victory. For then, when the horrible consequences of our troubled racial past persist in the blighted lives of millions of poor black people, skeptical onlookers will be able to say, "We'd love to help, but you Negroes have already been paid."