

Social Justice and Economic Reparation: African-American Struggles for Equal Opportunity Around the Turn of the Century

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Introduction

In the history of the United States, one could point to a number of times the country has undertaken restorative measures to right past wrongs. Immediately after the Civil War, Congress, led by radical Republicans, not only abolished slavery but, also ensured freedmen's full participation in society with the Fourteenth and the Fifteenth Amendments. The Civil Rights Act of the 1960's attempted to undo the injustice imposed by the post-Reconstruction South that relegated blacks to second-class citizenship. Affirmative action was another policy aimed at restoring social justice. However, what has been missing throughout the entire period is an economic base that would allow black Americans to take full advantage of these measures.

Racial equality, reparation advocates claim, is still not a reality today because an economic gap between the races still exists.¹ That gap, they claim, can be traced back to the brutal lynchings and whitecappings of the turn of the century that allowed Southern whites to take away black-owned properties by the use of violent force.

Why wasn't there any economic aid to the four million newly freed slaves immediately after the war, nor economic reparations in the following decades? I argue that while black leaders sought political and social justice seriously, they did not seek economic justice because of the precarious position they were in, and because they felt black people needed to claim success in their new role as a free people. But first, I will take a look at modern reparation movements in the United States, and one in particular that can be thought of as a model.

II. Reparations Movement Today

In 2008 the United States Congress officially acknowledged the wrongs of slavery and offered apologies; this act came after a decade of what Roy L. Brooks identifies as the "Age of Apology"—apologies coming from all corners of the world—and the decisions of several states (Alabama, Florida, Maryland, New

Jersey, North Carolina, and Virginia) to admit remorse over slavery. While lawmakers made clear that this congressional “apology” would not lead to any monetary reparation, it, nevertheless, is significant because such a public expression of remorse decreases the likelihood of the country repeating the same mistake. Perhaps we can see the fact that Japanese Americans, the victims of the World War II internment, quickly and loudly denounced the anti-Muslim atmosphere of post 9-11 America, as a sign of hope.

Melissa R. Michelson claims that an increasing number of people approve the idea of paying reparations to slave descendents these days, thanks to increased media coverage. There is heated debate surrounding slave reparations and they are increasingly focused on monetary compensation, more than on other means. Many questions arise. If reparations are to be paid, then who should benefit from the compensation? How do you identify the “descendents of victims”? Should compensation be to individuals or to the group? If to the group, should it be some sort of scholarship or fund? And how much is enough? There are, in fact, numerous books and articles exploring the possibility of reparation and how that might be accomplished.

For the reparation advocates, official apologies generate mixed responses. While admitting past wrongdoings and apologizing for them is a way to show one’s sincerity, some feel that apologies might mean the end of the story, and thus no compensation. However, apologies can only go so far to heal wounds and facilitate reconciliation.

A number of historians agree that the compensation to Japanese American internees offers a model for various reparations movements in the United States. The Civil Rights Act of 1988 not only acknowledged the injustice of the World War II internment of Japanese Americans, but also promised \$20,000 compensation for each surviving internee. In other words, the act set the standard for apology by including monetary reparation. However, the act also set a limit on reparations since the government made payments only to former internees who were still living in 1985, forty years after the internment. The message the decision sent was: reparations will be made only to those who can claim direct harm from the former injustices. In most cases this would also limit the period in which to make reparations to a few decades after the incident. And, cynics might add, the reparations for Japanese Americans also made the point that it is much easier to offer monetary compensation when there are not so many living claimants.

Based on this logic, the turn of the century might have been the best time to claim slavery reparations. However, there was little movement then to demand any money. In fact, as we know now, this period was a nadir for African Americans, a time when their civil rights were systematically curtailed.

III. Thaddeus Stevens' Failed Confiscation Act

There were attempts at economic compensation immediately after emancipation. Established in 1865, the main purpose of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (known as the Freedman's Bureau) was to provide material relief to former slaves. This federal organization helped ex-slaves with land-leasing as well as education. The architect of the Freedmen's Bureau Act, Thaddeus Stevens, led the radical Republicans in attempts to ensure the rights and livelihood of freedmen based on the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution.

Stevens was also an advocate of confiscating land from Southern planters and distributing it among ex-slaves to provide an economic foothold. His plan targeted former slaveholders who owned more than two hundred acres. This included around 70,000 planters and an area totaling around one tenth of all Southern landholdings. Landowners holding less than two hundred acres were not affected by the Stevens' confiscation plan. The confiscated land was to be distributed among freed adult males, forty acres each; the rest would be sold as small farms to raise money—approximately four billion dollars (assuming ten dollars an acre), a vast amount of money for that time. The great bulk of the money, over three billion dollars, would be used to pay the national debt, while smaller portions were to be invested in government bonds, thus creating more pension money for Union soldiers or the families of the dead; it would also be used to reimburse both Southern and Northern loyalists whose property had been destroyed (Korngold 282).

Steven's plan may seem noble to some, but it was unrealistic, in that it would surely have completely brought down the aristocratic class in the South. What Stevens intended was indeed a sweeping "reconstruction" which would have changed the Southern economic landscape from aristocracy to full democracy. Indeed, for Southern planters Steven's plan seemed outrageous; in fact, they felt they were the ones who were entitled to "compensation." After all, hadn't they been forced to free their slaves, causing incredible financial damage, since each slave was worth five hundred dollars or more? The loss of labor was one thing, but it was the loss of their property—the slaves—that especially upset them. Should not the government compensate them for the loss? Freedom, during the time of slavery, had a price. Former slaves could literally buy their loved one's freedom—if they could save enough money. Freedom had been worth a lot—former slave owners felt it should still be worth something. Rayford W. Logan argues that, "The uncompensated emancipation of the slaves added to the humiliation, bitterness and impoverishment of the former slave-holders who had constituted a closely-knit ruling class" (4). And now Stevens was suggesting that slave holders should give up their land as well.

For Stevens, it was a question of angering seventy thousand Southern

landowners or forsaking four million freedmen. For a man who believed passionately in social equality the choice was clear—leave the landed aristocrats less wealthy. However, this radical plan did not win enough support to be put into action, either in the South or in the North.

IV. Concerns of the African American Leaders

Noticeable at the turn of the century was the emergence of several influential black periodicals. These were born out of necessity; that is to say, African American intellectuals who had expressed their views in leading periodicals—such as the *Independent*, *Forum*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *North American Review*, *Saturday Evening Post*, to name few—increasingly found it difficult to do so. They literally lost their voice in society, so they had to create their own outlets. *Colored American Magazine* started in 1900, *Voice of the Negro* in 1904, *Alexander's Magazine* in 1905, to name few. In these, black leaders not only responded to the verbal attacks of extreme Southerners but also criticized seemingly “liberal” Southerners and Northerners for their failure to stop racial segregation and disfranchisement, black people’s most urgent concerns.

Because of this increasing racial segregation and disfranchisement during this period, it was crucial to black leaders that they point to the “rags to riches” success of blacks as a whole. Ex-slaves had nothing when they were emancipated, but worked extremely hard to amass wealth. Such proof of success legitimized their “Americaness,” their status as citizens. The post-Reconstruction violence against blacks was particularly heinous because the perpetrators aimed to take this hard-won property away.

There are numerous articles that testify to this post-emancipation success. In his article, “Debit and Credit,” in *Voice of the Negro* (1905), W. E. B. DuBois summed up the year 1904 in two categories. In the “debit” category, he listed the persistent disfranchisement of black voters in the South, the spread of Jim Crow car legislation across the South, more than 100 lynchings of blacks, small amounts of crime, poverty, and ignorance remaining in the black community, etc. On the “credit” side, the list was much longer; DuBois noted that “the Negro” now owned 12 million acres of farm land and that blacks as a group had amassed at least \$350 million in wealth (that would be \$8 billion in today’s economy). He also mentioned the rise in the rate of literacy, the increase in economic prosperity (he used fewer working mothers as the indicator), fewer farm laborers (because they had become farmers), and the increase in the number of black professionals. DuBois asked for people’s courage and patience to fight against racism; he also asked them to “work, work, work.” Black leaders were adamantly trying to refute the accusation that blacks had made little progress since the emancipation, and worse, that they were becoming criminals.

W. E. B. DuBois headed the famed department of sociology at Atlanta University, which annually organized a conference of distinguished black

economists, sociologists and educators. In its report we again see the emphasis on black achievements: a decrease in mortality, an increase in the number of homes, and business enterprises, a decrease in the number of crimes, etc. (“Atlanta University,” 448).

DuBois also used statistics to counter the assertion of Southern white supremacists like James K. Vardaman. For instance, DuBois, in his 1906 article, “Vardaman,” broke the demagogue’s claims down into six categories, then refuted each of them, one by one, with numbers. The first claim DuBois cited was, “the Negro is dying out.” Using population statistics, DuBois asserted that the black population had increased and was still increasing, quickly. The second assertion was that “the Negro will not save.” DuBois pointed out how much property blacks had amassed. When Vardaman claimed “the Negro cannot be educated” DuBois argued that their illiteracy rate had dropped and that there were many black college graduates. For every claim, DuBois had a rebuttal, backed up with statistics.

DuBois was not the only black intellectual who publicly noted how much ex-slaves had accomplished in such a short time. In 1905, Kelly Miller, who taught mathematics and sociology at Howard University, pointed out in “Achievements of the Negro Race”: “The bare fact that a race, beginning at the zero point forty years ago, has been able to produce a professional class some fifty thousand strong who are able to administer according to approved European standards to the requirements of the body and to the highest needs of the soul, is an indication of progress and of promise more striking than any other people have ever manifested in the history of human culture” (614). In the same article, Miller lists and describes the accomplishments of a number of African-American geniuses: Phyllis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, Lemuel Haynes, Ira Aldridge, Col. George W. Williams, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Henry O. Tanner, Dr. Daniel H. Williams, Charles W. Chesnutt, Prof. W. S. Scarborough, Prof. W. E. B. DuBois, Granville T. Woods, and Elijah T. McCoy.

Like DuBois and Miller, Booker T. Washington was eager to compile data on black accomplishment. At Tuskegee, Monroe N. Work, a renowned sociologist and a Niagara Movement participant, conducted extensive research and catalogued all sorts of information on the black experience. The result was the *Negro Year Book*, published in 1912 and continued periodically until 1937. Work associated with and was respected by both DuBois and Washington, probably because the materials he had collected revealed black achievements. Washington, in a letter dated August 8, 1911, thanked Work for preparing statistics on “property accumulation, agricultural production, and business opportunities for blacks” in the South, noting “how very valuable I consider [these figures]” (“To Monroe Nathan Work”). Washington needed such data—he called them “these great truths”—to make his annual speech at the National Negro Business League. While Washington and DuBois may have disagreed on what issue should be considered first—economic advancement or full

citizenship—they seem to agree on this: that for forty years after the war, blacks worked hard (and accumulated wealth), earning their rights as citizens.

By 1905, white critics in the South were claiming it was a mistake to give ex-slaves education and the right to vote. W. S. Scarborough, a renowned African-American scholar and professor of Latin and Greek at Wilberforce University, denied those charges in “The Emancipation of The Negro,” and insisted blacks had made incredible progress. He wrote: “It was no mistake. The forty odd years have proved it. It was a necessity of the time of the ballot and the unconditional emancipation. Those opportunities which were afforded, coupled with the eagerness for learning, have been at the root of the progress of the race—have in fact brought the Negro where he is today” (122–123). What is important in his argument is that blacks were not given the rights to be citizens but won that right through hard work. When the slaves were freed they faced insurmountable obstacles; as Scarborough explained, these obstacles provided the opportunity for forging a new identity for blacks: “[The Negro] had before him the making of a race—the setting up of ideals, the formation of homes, the overcoming of superstition, ignorance and degradation and supplanting these by enlightenment, by education, by a general uplift. With this he had to work, to learn self-support and support of others, and he had to learn to save” (123). The forty years after emancipation, then, were crucial in the establishment of black identity. Just as Frederick Douglass wrote his way into mainstream American society (with his autobiographies), Scarborough (and other black leaders) suggested that freedmen had worked their way into the mainstream; and they cited numerous statistics to prove it.

Scarborough concluded the article with: “Forty-two years ago our papers of citizenship were issued but we have had to fight every inch of the way to the present. The fighting has not been in vain. It has developed our manhood and caused a settled determination in our breasts to live free or die like freemen and not like slaves” (124). If this was the common perception shared by black intellectuals, then it is understandable they did not demand any reparation for slavery. They needed to show the American public their accomplishments and not their needs. They did not want to seem to be begging, or even asking, for anything.

V. George White’s Call for Equal Opportunity

By the turn of the century African Americans had made great progress in a number of arenas, including politics. Obviously whites sought to disfranchise blacks because of their success. Abel P. Caldwell, in 1905, asserted that blacks in the South were disfranchised for the purpose of reducing black representation, since at that point black elected officials came from majority black districts.

Were any black federal officials influential? Let’s consider George H. White, a congressman from North Carolina, who served two terms. White often spoke as

a representative of his people; he repeatedly stressed he was speaking for all blacks, because he was the only black in Congress. For instance, he spoke on the floor on January 26, 1899: “I know that you will pardon me if I do not address myself to the question before us when you recollect that I am the only representative on this floor of 10,000,000 people, from a racial standpoint. They have no [sic] else to speak for them, from a race point of view, except myself” (*In His Own Words* 100).

George White’s contemporary Abel P. Caldwell lauded White for writing several laws that defended the rights of blacks: “Mr. White was an unswerving champion of his race, and was the author of several measures” (554). And, according to historian Joel Williamson, White was quite militant as he “made it his special business to press aggressively for the appointment of blacks to postmasterships in his district, patronage traditionally attached to his office, and to concern himself with the appointment of blacks to federal offices generally in North Carolina” (191). Such aggressiveness resulted in what to white residents was an alarmingly large number of blacks appointed to government positions in eastern North Carolina towns. Williamson explains that it indeed appeared that blacks were “rising” (191). The whites were uncomfortable—they were worried about having their wives and daughters associated with black postmasters and clerks—and they voiced their concerns. Black office holders ironically engendered distrust in white people, and an influential politician like White was deemed dangerous. Despite strong opposition, George White spoke against lynchings, and what is more, attempted to make lynching a federal offense, punishable by death. He worked on the bill for months in 1899.

George White not only presented himself as a representative for all black people but also reminded American people that he wanted no condescending support. In one of his speeches to Congress, he declared: “We do not ask for domination. We ask and expect a chance in legislation, and we will be content with nothing else” (*In His Own Words* 102). A year earlier in 1898, White reminded the audience at Charles Street A. M. E. Church in Boston, they must seek full rights as an American citizens: “I am here not for the purpose of pleading for special privileges for my people, but for protection, for the full enjoyment of all the privileges of an American citizen. With that we will be content; without it we shall forever contend. Justice, not charity, is what we want, and what we have a right to demand” (*In His Own Words* 84).

Like other black leaders of the period, White noted the capability of blacks, and further claimed that they were thus genuine Americans: “When the black man, through toil and economy, shall have acquired property and wealth and all those things that make a good American citizen, and when all the barriers of legislation now in the way shall disappear, he will be taken by the hand as a man. I believe the time will come...” (*In His Own Words* 101). What White says afterward is also quite interesting, “We can not live on the dead ashes of the past. Slavery and its institutions, racial distinctions and wrongs will come to an end.

We are going forward; we are looking out; we are stretching out our arms all over the United States” (*In His Own Words* 101). White’s emphasis on renewal, of recreating one’s (black) self is significant here. This was, White seems to point out, how they became Americans. According to White, slavery was something ex-slaves had to overcome, and its wrongs must be proven wrong by working hard to become equal in economic, social and political arenas.

That is why White described “redress” or reparations in terms of official appointments. In December 1898, White spoke at a public meeting of blacks in Boston—the speech was reported in the *Boston Globe*—and explained how because blacks wholly supported the Republican party, Southern blacks were ill-treated, and indeed hated, by Southern white Democrats. While it was the black votes that carried the Republican win in the South, White pointed out, the same Republicans were slow in granting African Americans federal positions. Therefore White questioned the benefits of affiliating with one party: “Must we look to that party for protection and redress of our wrongs?” (quoted in *In His Own Words* 85). White seemed to equate “redress of our wrongs” with appointing African Americans to federal positions.

This does not mean White was silent on monetary issues. For instance, he demanded the United States government to compensate those who lost their hard-earned money when the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company collapsed due to bad management (Edmonds 86). According to Helen G. Edmonds, White was responsible for “transferring \$100,000 unclaimed by Negro soldiers to the establishment of a home for aged Negroes in Washington, D. C.” (86). Historian August Meier has explained White’s philosophy as “a combination of protest and emphasis on rights along with self-help and economic advancement” (249). White would point to the Constitution and the rights it guaranteed to every American, and he insisted on the fair treatment of blacks.

George White’s argument may be a key to one of the problems black leaders had with the idea of redress, or reparations, for slavery: by demanding payment for the free labor slaves were forced to offer, reparation advocates might end up nullifying the great efforts and the amazing progress blacks had made during the Reconstruction era. White himself was a testament to this kind of remarkable achievement. Educated within the African American community, he was nevertheless successful as the sole black congressman, always determined to enlighten his white colleagues about the true conditions of black people in the South. This kind of success infuriated less successful whites in the South, inducing them to violence (although their anger was incited by a group of opportunist leaders). Apparently, in this kind of situation, most blacks did not want to seek redress; the quieter they were the better off they were. They felt that any form of federal monetary support would incense the already dangerously angry whites. It is no wonder that reparations were not mentioned by black leaders during this period.

During that period, many people agreed that if reparations should be paid,

then they should be to those who had lost their hard-earned properties and wealth to the angry white mobs. These people had worked very hard to attain some wealth but were then violently deprived of their properties. Some had their houses burnt, and some were even driven out of their towns and cities. This, many agreed, was unfair, especially since they have proved themselves to be good “American citizens” by starting from nothing and attaining their dream. Yet reparations were not made.

Hard-working African Americans were angry not just about the loss of property but because of the suppression of opportunity for African Americans that swept the nation during this period. They were no longer able to get involved in politics, they no longer held official positions, they could no longer work as professionals, they were treated as second-class on trains, in hotels and restaurant, and in every other arena of life. In other words, it seemed there was no longer any “American dream” possible for blacks; they lost most of what they had worked so hard to gain. No matter what, it seemed that now they would always be below whites.

George White’s “farewell speech” summarizes the black leaders’ concerns, again stressing that he is speaking for his race: “I want to enter a plea for the colored man, the colored woman, the colored boy and the colored girl of this country” (*In His Own Words* 201). White began his speech by giving details of the achievements of blacks since the emancipation. Like DuBois, he cited statistic after statistic in his attempt to prove the strength and resourcefulness of the black race:

Since that time we have reduced the illiteracy of the race at least 45 percent. We have written and published near 500 books. We have nearly 300 newspapers, 3 of which are dailies. We have now in practice over 2,000 lawyers and a corresponding number of doctors. We have accumulated over \$12,000,000 worth of school property and about \$40,000,000 worth of church property. We have about 140,000 farms and homes, valued at in the neighborhood of \$750,000,000, and personal property valued at about \$170,000,000. We have raised about \$11,000,000 for educational purposes, and the property per capita for every colored man, woman, and child in the United States is estimated at \$75 (*In His Own Words* 203–204).

He continued to cite the numerous examples of black success. All these were accomplished despite enormous obstacles, he stressed, and asserted that all they wanted was to be treated fairly. He ended the speech with: “The only apology that I have to make for the earnestness with which I have spoken is that I am pleading for the life, the liberty, the future happiness, and manhood suffrage for one-eighth of the entire population of the United States” (*In His Own Words* 206). Here again White was stressing American values. His tactic was always the same: to remind his audience that “the race problem” was a national problem and that it was the government’s responsibility to protect all its citizens. While there was a movement in the South to relegate blacks to second-class citizenship, White

stood in the gap, refusing to be treated as anything but a citizen, while he called for full citizenship for all black people. For black leaders, attaining justice was the goal, and as they claimed they had every right to it because they had achieved so much since emancipation.

Conclusion

Mary Frances Berry unearthed the story of Callie House, an African American woman who, with others, campaigned for and actively carried out reparations at the turn of the century. The news was quite exciting as history proved there was indeed a turn of the century grass roots organization that demanded redress. With Isaiah Dickerson, Callie House organized the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association in 1894; at one point, the association had 300,000 members all over the South (Berry). They collected monthly dues to provide for burial expenses for members and care for the sick and disabled. The nationwide organization also aimed for the passage of congressional ex-slave reparation legislation. The bill, they hoped, would provide monetary compensation for slave labor prior to the Civil War. While the bill failed to pass, in 1915 an undaunted Callie House sued the Treasury Department for \$68 million in cotton taxes, which she traced back to slave labor between 1862 and 1868. The organization was later accused of fraud—because the reparations bill was never approved by the Congress—and Callie House was sent to a federal prison for a year. What House attempted was very courageous. One wonders what other black leaders were doing then. According to Berry, the movement did not receive support from leaders like Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois.² While it is easy to say they were concerned with other—more pressing—issues like education, lynching, or disfranchisement, we cannot forget the fact that they also did not want to focus on slavery by demanding reparations, because they felt very strongly that it was the post-slavery achievements of blacks that could best justify their inclusion in American society.

For many today, including the first African American president, Barak Obama, reparations are not a top priority. Some feel the issue could anger non-blacks, as many Americans feel that slavery, and now, with the election of Obama, racial discrimination itself, are bygone problems the country has worked hard to overcome. Yet, by looking back and exploring why reparation for slavery was never realized, we can see the complex history of African Americans, whose achievements were denied and nullified again and again by racist policies and by violence. But who nevertheless attempted to use the forty years of hard work after the emancipation as leverage for earning American citizenship. It took another sixty plus years of often deadly struggle to win back their civil rights. And now another forty years down the road, America has elected its first African American president—a significant achievement, but the struggle is not over. Any African American, indeed, any person of color in America, can attest to the

ongoing prejudice, and sometimes outright hatred, that they have to contend with every day.

Perhaps the current reparations movement should be about the systematic racism of the twentieth century and not about slavery. There are, in fact, such moves. In 1923 the small black community of Rosewood, Florida was totally burned down by a white mob. In 1993 the Florida State Legislature passed a bill to compensate the Rosewood massacre survivors who sustained emotional trauma, and also the families who suffered loss of property. However, other similar movements have not been so successful. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, where a large-scale race riot erupted in 1921, destroying the thriving black district of Greenwood (the “Black Wall Street”), neither city nor state has yet to pay reparations—this despite a recommendation from the Tulsa Race Riot Commission that was presented to the Oklahoma State Legislature in 2001. The lawsuit brought forth by the survivors of the riot, too, was dismissed by the federal district judge in 2004. A similar commission in North Carolina suggested in 2006 that the black community should be compensated for the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898, but as of yet, nothing has come of that recommendation.

Blacks have proven themselves to be first class citizens in all facets of private and public life, invaluable to the development of progress in America. To have everything taken away over the course of decades by Jim Crow, disfranchisement, violence, and utter disregard for basic human rights offers clear ground for reparations, in my opinion. This concept of reparations would also fit better within the model offered by government reparations made to Japanese internment camp survivors.

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Notes

- 1 Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro reveal in *Black Wealth/White Wealth* (1995) that blacks have much less in savings and fewer assets compared to whites.
- 2 Berry states in her note: “No mention has been found of Callie House or the association by Booker T. Washington, but he opposed any activity that differed from his advice to blacks. In September 1900, at a Tuskegee conference where he reiterated his ‘Stay in the South and

cooperate with your former masters' admonition, he warned blacks against paying attention to ex-slave pension or emigration agents who would seduce them from these views" (284).