

## Race and Human Race

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Professor Okuda presents a convincing study of the heroic struggles of African Americans for equal opportunity and economic improvements around the turn of the last century. We can see how bravely they rose up from slavery with determination and self-respect. To respond, I would like to first move further along the course of history to review the significant achievements of African Americans in the 20th century.

### I. Historical Advancement in the 20th Century

The racial situation quietly began to change during the Second World War. A decade later, in 1954, the Supreme Court announced a momentous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, overturning the “separate but equal” doctrine espoused by the same court in the 1896 *Plessy* decision and declaring it “inherently unequal”. Thus started the desegregation process in the 1950s. Nor could the intense resistance it met in the South stop the impetus of history thus related events broke out one after another. The 1955 Montgomery bus boycott, the 1960 waves of student sit-ins, the 1961 Freedom Rides, the 1963 Marches on Washington and Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, the 1964 Freedom Summer.... All these breathtaking moments formed the great Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, attracting national and international attention and winning substantial white support and participation.

With many milestone victories won, history now took another dramatic turn. The 1964 Civil Rights Act, the first important civil rights law enacted since the post-Civil War constitutional amendments, outlawed segregation and racial discrimination. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed and Lyndon Johnson ordered the implementation of affirmative action to help disadvantaged minorities move ahead. Various social welfare programs were also started to help the poor. As a result of such government measures as well as individual efforts, a black middle class began to emerge. More African Americans began to succeed as professionals and to be elected to political offices. As the world moved into the present century, we witnessed the first African American Secretary of State and in 2008, the first African American President was elected. No doubt, all these intimations of equalities were hard-won, but they are undeniable facts. Looking back, one can see clearly that America is a country transformed. African

Americans have reason to feel proud of their achievements.

## II. Reasons for and against Reparation

Now let's come to the reparation issue. Professor Okuda concludes that "perhaps the current reparations movement should be about the systematic racism of the 20th century and not about slavery" and cites as a model the reparations made by the U.S. government to Japanese Americans interned during the Second World War.

In order to give my comment, I first asked my fellow Chinese for their opinions. The answers that came back were almost always filled with surprise, "How can reparation be done?" I think this is partly due to the different sense of history the Chinese have from the Americans. China has a long history, and to the Chinese, history often seems a maze, within which it is impossible to settle every account clearly or right every wrong. For instance, during the period of time African Americans have been in America, the course of history has changed so drastically in China that it is difficult to retrieve every cause or effect. In 1619, when the Dutch ship carried the first 20 Africans to North America, China was still in her last Han dynasty. The Han people were yet to be conquered and ruled by the Manchus for over 260 years. With the fall of the Manchus, more upheavals followed in the past century. In all, three forms of government, or indeed three entirely different systems, have succeeded one another: an absolute monarchy, a national republic and a communist state. So how can we expect to settle accounts with history?

Thanks to the internet, I also had access to many writings and debates by Americans. As in most things, there are two sides, each with its own reasoning. The proponents of reparation point out that even today African Americans are victims of slavery and Jim Crow laws, whose effects have lingered long past their formal repeal and abolishment. Whether in education, employment, or wealth, blacks are falling disproportionately behind. Because African Americans are unjustly disadvantaged and whites unjustly rich, African Americans should be entitled not only to an apology but also to monetary payments as reparation. Some value this Redress Movement so highly that they claim it is just as important if not more so than the Civil Rights Movement. Those who disagree give various reasons, which fall mainly into three categories.

A. The Rationale for Reparation.—Slavery was uprooted a century and half ago. At least five generations have come and gone since then. All legal restrictions on African Americans have now been removed. Every American is taught that slavery and racial discrimination is wrong and evil. In 2008, the U.S. Congress officially apologized for it. As for compensation, affirmative action is already a form of compensatory remedy. Being equal before the law, individual African Americans should be more responsible for their own lives. There is no legal basis for reparation.

B. *Nulla Poena sine Lege*.—Moral standards change all the time. Something unacceptable now might not have been so in the past, and vice versa. Laws reflect the moral standard of the time. When moral beliefs change, laws change accordingly. That is why there is the legal concept of “*nulla poena sine lege*”—penalty should not be imposed on actions that were legal when taken.

C. Social Justice.—Some ask: does reparation accord with social justice? Justice requires on the one hand that reparations be paid only to victims of slavery and segregation. However, not all African Americans today are victims, or even the offspring of victims. On the other hand, most non-African Americans today did not participate in either slavery or segregation; why should they pay for what they have not done? Moreover, social justice does not dictate equal distribution of wealth. Economic disparity exists within every race. Since some African Americans have successfully moved into the middle class, the cause of poverty must lie elsewhere. If the cause is not diagnosed correctly, the cure may never be found.

### III. Three Possible Ways to Deal with the Issue

We can see that this is a rather complicated issue, raising many questions of Why, Who, Whom, When, Where, What, How, etc. To me, this issue seems more political than one for historians. And since it is a purely internal affair for America, I am afraid an outsider like me does not have the right or the necessary background to pass judgment. Yet I cannot avoid my duty here. So I venture to say there may be three possible ways to deal with it, depending on how you see the issue.

A. If you see it as a moral issue, then take an opinion poll to find out the moral standard prevailing today among Americans. If they approve it, then make reparations. If not, wait until the majority of Americans change their mind.

B. If you see it as a political issue, then convince the people of your views and mobilize them to take political actions to achieve your goal.

C. If you see it as a legal issue, then proceed according to the law: define the victims and the alleged perpetrators and bring actions. There have already been such successful lawsuits at the state level and against private companies. In this way the problem may be solved piecemeal.

### IV. Transcend the Past and Move Forward

When I read the internet material on this issue, I sensed a considerable amount of tension. In a race-sensitive society like the U.S., no matter how the race problem will be solved, the country must transcend the past and move ahead. We all have certain distinctive group identities, but I hope we do not forget that we all belong to the human race. There is something common to us all and we are all interdependent. So we should not allow any classification to harm and divide us.

This is a truth we humans have learned gradually, maybe only recently, and at great cost. China, for example, waged class struggles for decades. And the result? I am sure I do not need to tell you here. Now in China, the call for “a harmonious society” has replaced the slogan “class struggle”. Let me conclude with the famous words of Martin Luther King: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will be not judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” I hope his dream will be fully realized soon.