

Reparations

I am in favor, in principle, of reparations. What that means in practice, I'm not so sure. We, as a society, need to have that conversation. I am aware that I have benefited from my heritage, and that part of that benefit has come at the expense of disadvantaged people.

In a now-classic [2014 article](#)³ in The Atlantic, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote an appeal for us to discuss reparations. Although his focus was on "black Americans" (i.e. African-Americans), I believe his arguments should be applied with equal force to all marginalized groups, such as Native Americans and disabled people. As an autistic person, I am particularly aware of how, for many generations, autistic people were locked away in institutions, ignored by the outside world, abused and neglected; left to die an early death. Echoes of this prejudice and misunderstanding live on in today's world.⁴

The beauty of Coates's appeal, to me, is that he does not express an opinion as to *how* reparations are to be made; rather, he asks that there be a serious national discussion on the issue; something that clearly has not yet happened.

Coates writes:

With segregation, with the isolation of the injured and the robbed, comes the concentration of disadvantage. An unsegregated America might see poverty, and all its effects, spread across the country with no particular bias toward skin color. Instead, the concentration of poverty has been paired with a concentration of melanin. The resulting conflagration has been devastating.

and

The kind of trenchant racism to which black people have persistently been subjected can never be defeated by making its victims more respectable. The essence of American racism is disrespect.

Even Coates, with all of his elegant writing, falls into the trap of using racist language. He writes of "black" people as if "black" were a thing, instead of a made-up category of skin color with no biological usefulness. There is no scientific way of drawing a dividing line between "whiteness" and "blackness" – and even if

³ Coates (2014) [The Case for Reparations](#)

⁴ see <https://www.facebook.com/michaelforbeswilcox/posts/10223960238368046>

there were, it would be meaningless (except in the service of racism⁵).

Coates does allude to the connection between skin color and poverty in the first quotation above. He may have used the word "conflagration" as a tribute to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, or perhaps he was, more directly, referring to the many "race riots" that have ensued over the years.

Some other conflation words would fit here as well:

- connection
- conflation (combining into one)
- concatenation (linking together)
- correlation

People have a way of *conflating* or *concatenating* skin color ("race") with such things as poverty. "Communities of color" might be more accurately called "communities of poverty." To be sure, poverty is highly *correlated* with skin color, since our culture of caste privilege relegates many people to subservient roles in ways that shut off economic opportunity.

We statisticians⁶ have a mantra, "correlation does not indicate causality!" The fact that skin color and poverty, for example, are highly correlated does not mean that one causes the other. It is not a person's skin color that causes them to be poor or otherwise disadvantaged; that comes from society's attitude toward the person. And that is, as Coates has noted, one of disrespect.

This same complaint, it should be noted here, also applies to the treatment of other groups, as I have stated in my opening paragraphs.

In discussing the case for reparations, Coates makes the following observations:

One cannot escape the question [of reparations] by hand-waving at the past, disavowing the acts of one's ancestors, nor by citing a recent date of ancestral immigration. The last slaveholder has been dead for a very long time. The last soldier to endure Valley Forge has been dead much longer. To proudly claim the veteran and disown the slaveholder is patriotism à la carte.

and

5 one well-known attempt is the widely discredited claim in *The Bell Curve* (1994) by Charles Murray that "race" and "intelligence" are connected

6 If I may be so bold as to call myself a statistician: my formal education and my professional experience are in economics and finance, but one cannot practice these trades without being heavily steeped in the science of statistics.

There has always been another way. “It is in vain to alledge, that *our ancestors* brought them hither, and not we,” [Yale President Timothy Dwight](#) said in 1810.

We inherit our ample patrimony with all its incumbrances; and are bound to pay the debts of our ancestors. This debt, particularly, we are bound to discharge: and, when the righteous Judge of the Universe comes to reckon with his servants, he will rigidly exact the payment at our hands. To give them liberty, and stop here, is to entail upon them a curse.

Note the connection here with Stockbridge: President Dwight's maternal grandfather was Johnathan Edwards. This particular reference relates to slavery, but the same logic applies to wrongs perpetuated upon other disadvantaged peoples as well.

Coates argues that ending discrimination and prejudice is not enough.

To ignore the fact that one of the oldest republics in the world was erected on a foundation of white supremacy, to pretend that the problems of a dual society are the same as the problems of unregulated capitalism, is to cover the sin of national plunder with the sin of national lying. The lie ignores the fact that reducing American poverty and ending white supremacy are not the same. The lie ignores the fact that closing the “achievement gap” will do nothing to close the “injury gap,” in which black college graduates still suffer higher unemployment rates than white college graduates, and black job applicants without criminal records enjoy roughly the same chance of getting hired as white applicants *with* criminal records.

This, I think, is the essence of the debate. How do we address past wrongs? And how can we even do that unless we, at the same time, create a society in which these mistreatments no longer exist? It will be a formidable undertaking, and at the moment it seems quite beyond our grasp.⁷ Yet, it is essential if we are to live in a world where all people have the opportunity to live up to their full potential.

⁷ <http://www.mfw.us/blog/2021/10/09/the-origins-of-critical-race-theory/>