

Against Reparations

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Why African Americans can believe in America

The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks by Randall Robinson

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I can buy a big house in an exclusive neighborhood.

I can buy a fancy car or two.

I can send my kids to private school.

I can work hard and empower myself.

Oprah Winfrey pulled herself up by the bootstraps. So if I work hard, someday I, too, can achieve the American Dream.

The fundamental problem with this rugged individualist dogma is that I would still be black.

Those sentences were written by a young black woman in an undergraduate newspaper at the University of California at Berkeley, as part of a response to David Horowitz's notorious anti-reparations advertisement that appeared in several campus newspapers a few months ago. They are an eloquent distillation of what it is that has rendered the American debate about race an eternal stalemate. Our debate is going nowhere; and the latest development in this holding pattern that is masquerading as a "dialogue" is the reparations movement, which in recent years has gathered alarming momentum in the African American community.

For this reason, Randall Robinson's best-selling book is genuinely useful. A close examination of his book can help us to understand why so many African Americans, many of them neither poor nor close to poor, feel strongly that they are owed money denied to ancestors whom they never knew; and why they feel that the payment of this guilty cash will somehow represent a moral triumph for them. In a broader sense, *The Debt* is an important document of the belief, which is more and more widespread among blacks, that a true "dialogue" on race has yet to happen. You might say that Robinson's *cri de coeur* has much to teach by negative example.

The idea of reparations has been kicking around black intellectual and political life since the beginning of the twentieth century, but it has acquired a certain cultural influence in the years

since the Black Power era. The first extended treatment of the idea appeared in 1973, in *The Case for Black Reparations* by Boris I. Bittker, a law professor and a white man. Since then, there have been some books on the subject by blacks, most of them not widely distributed and hence not widely influential, or, in the case of Sam E. Anderson's documentary comic book *The Black Holocaust for Beginners* (1995), lacking the gravity necessary to spark a movement. But Robinson's book has overcome both those obstacles, and so it has become the manifesto for a movement recently revived by Representative John Conyers and pored over by black readers and reading groups across the country.

Robinson's title faithfully conveys the tone of the new reparations movement. Bittker ended his book by saying that "I have sought to open the question, not to close it," but Robinson, while he initially claims "to pose the question, to invite the debate," clearly considers the moral urgency of reparations a closed issue. Bittker made a case for reparations, but Robinson's theme is "the debt," the definite article dogmatically implying the existence of the bill that is owed us. In the face of such righteous certainty, those who question whether there is merit to the idea of reparations are certainly not welcome to join the discussion. What is being described as an exploration is in fact a call to arms. Robinson presents his position as representative of the race, and he sets things up so that the failure of America to heed his call can be explained only by the eternal hostility of white people toward black people.

Yet to say that the foundations of Robinson's argument are questionable is to put the problem lightly. In truth, to embrace Robinson's assumptions about race in America would have the consequence only of perpetuating the very alienation that his book was written to dispel. The Nation not long ago promoted Robinson as "a worthy heir to W.E.B. Du Bois," but his book is just another fevered expression of the misguided ideology that the radical left foisted upon black America in the 1960s, a cluster of beliefs that continues to hobble our progress today.

The first of Robinson's assumptions is the denial that there has been any real progress at all.

"America's socioeconomic gaps between the races remain, like the aged redwoods rooted in a forest floor, going nowhere, seen but not disturbed, simulating infinity, normalcy. Static." He penned those pessimistic lines six years ago, at a time when almost fifty percent of black families were middle-class (defined by Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom in *America in Black and White* as twice the poverty line), in contrast to only one percent in 1940 and thirty-nine percent in 1970. In 1990, one in five blacks were managers or professionals. In the three decades prior to 1990,

the number of black doctors doubled and the number of black college graduates between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine tripled. Static? Hardly. And there are many other indicators of real social, economic, political, and legal advancement.

But Robinson is not really interested in social-scientific indicators. He prefers to deliver his arguments in the form of allegorical "stories," in the vein of his fellow bard of data-shy pessimism Derrick Bell. A "story" that Robinson uses as a leitmotif in his book involves a certain black boy named Billy. He is being shown around the Mall in Washington, D.C. by a mentor, who is increasingly embarrassed to find that there is no monument on the Mall "about" black people with which he can inspire Billy. Needless to say, Billy is from Southeast, the inner city: the middle-class half (yes, half) of black America is just a lifeless statistic, but poverty-stricken blacks, who in fact represent less than one-quarter of African American families, are what's really goin' down. Nowhere is Robinson's misconception of the economic condition of his race more poignantly clear than in his assertion that, since there are proportionately more poor blacks than poor whites, poverty defines black America. Most black writers decry such a "racialization of poverty" as stereotyping; but after reading Robinson's passage three times, I concluded that he really does accept the terrible equation between "black" and "poor."

In his fable about Billy on the Mall, Robinson revealingly describes "a black woman wearing thick owlsh glasses, strolling hand-in-hand with a bookish-looking white man, and two black men with white women." In his tale, all the blacks on the Mall except Billy are "attached to white people." The implication is that all black people who did not grow up like Billy--except, we presume, Randall Robinson--are sell-outs who live and marry outside their race, and are probably homely besides. So the problem for Robinson's picture of the world is not merely that black is indistinguishable from poor, but that blacks who are not poor are disloyal and inauthentic. In Robinson's account, poor blacks are admirable victims, while middle-class blacks are suspect.

He has his peculiar reasons for this sentiment; but he is hardly alone in his basic insistence that the growth of the black middle class is somehow "beside the point," leaving the poor minority as the "essence" of black America. The Debt is symptomatic of a general implication in most arguments for reparations that even in 2001 "black" is essentially a shorthand for "poor," when this has not been true for decades. Of course, many of the people who are most fervently in favor of reparations are quick to condemn the tendency for whites to think that all black people are

poor. And so we are brought up against a savage irony: the reparations movement is founded in large part upon a racist stereotype.

Robinson has another justification for reparations. It is that racism remains "unbowed" in modern America. He makes this claim about a country in which, as of 1993, more than one in ten blacks were married to non-blacks--an important fact even if the black women in question favor "owlsh" glasses. Is racism "unbowed" when housing segregation among blacks is now documented to be largely voluntary, and when anti-discrimination cases are regularly and successfully filed on behalf of black plaintiffs by white officials? Of course we have some distance to go: nobody can deny that racism still exists in America. But when the backcountry whites of Jasper, Texas turn out in droves for the funeral of James Byrd Jr., we must also question the notion that whites are poised to turn the hoses on us again at any moment.

To be sure, phenomena such as the Jasper mourners and assorted statistics and personnel lists may seem more symbolic than substantial. But the signs that racism is abating in America are everywhere. "It's the little things," as Lena Williams instructs in the title of her black victimology primer. Starbucks now includes "Strange Fruit," Billie Holiday's wrenching ballad about lynching, in one of its music mixes, in the understanding that its latte-drinking white customers would consider this heartbreaking song a worthy interruption of their musical routine. Movies for teenagers increasingly depict a world in which, with no particular attention called to it, blacks and whites co-exist in easy harmony despite the black students' remaining identifiably "black." (She's All That is a recent example.) Black-white romances are becoming downright ordinary on television and in film, and not used as sensational ploys. (In *Save the Last Dance*, a willowy blonde teen falls in love with a black boy as he teaches her how to dance hip-hop style: the Astaire-Rogers trope for a new America.) As I say, we are making progress.

Robinson most likely does not catch these movies, and does not seem to cock his ear to the background music; but the fact remains that this is the America upon which he is fatalistically pronouncing. Unfamiliarity with what's really goin' down is what makes Robinson scoff at the efficacy of African American initiative. Thus he imputes all black poverty to the perdurability of racism:

Modern observers now look at the canvas as if its subjects were to be forever fixed in a foreordained inequality. Of the many reasons for this inequality, chief of course is the seemingly

incurable virus of de facto discrimination that continues to poison relations between the races at all levels.

Note that "of course," and its assumption that no reasonable person could allow that today a significant portion of today's black poverty is owed to self-defeating handout policies in the 1960s that denied people the initiative to strive upwards. I do not mean to deny that black despair is real; I mean only to challenge the historical analysis that keeps it alive, and to contest the insistence that social inequity is a sentence of doom rather than an impediment that can be overcome.

II.

Robinson's argument is also predicated upon a fervent Africanism. In his view, I am at heart an "African" person, more intellectually and spiritually akin to Nigerian immigrants than to anyone born in the only country that has ever been home to me. Never mind that I grew up comfortably middleclass in Philadelphia speaking nothing but English: I am to consider it a denigration of "myself" when The New York Times downplays a story about a lethal pipeline explosion in Nigeria, because in such cases "we don't know what happened to us and no one will tell us." Robinson the proud Africanist weirdly overlooks the fact that "Africa" is not a single culture. This sense that being dark-skinned and speaking a language unlike English somehow renders all the groups in Africa the same is rather similar to the view that "All Coons Look Alike to Me," as the troublesome old song went. (The song happens to have been written by a black composer.) If a newspaper headline reads "Asians Found Adrift on Raft," most of us spontaneously recoil at the notion that Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Cambodian peoples have been grossly lumped together. Yet throughout *The Debt* we are taught--by a black man--that the residents of four dozen countries speaking over one thousand languages are all simply "Africans."

There is an ideological reason for this lumping tendency. If we treat "Africa" as a single culture, then we can claim the literate and technologically advanced societies of ancient Egypt and Mali as "our ancestors." Thus Robinson devotes another one of the allegories in his book to a hypothetical forebear of ours from the civilization that built libraries in Timbuktu. But what about the societies from which the ancestors of black Americans actually came? It is safe to say that not a single African American is descended from an ancient Egyptian, and only a very small proportion of slaves were brought to America from as far north as present-day Mali. The English

and American slavers drew the vast majority of their slaves from Senegal down through present-day Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, Congo, and Angola: pre-literate societies with little technology, in no sense comparable in material or intellectual advancement to Europe or even to the Mayan cultures of Central America. As the founder and president of Trans-Africa, Robinson is surely aware that there is a profound difference between the history of Ghana and the history of Egypt.

One cannot avoid the sense that Robinson considers the actual cultures from which most American slaves were taken as insufficiently "advanced" to serve as a basis for a case of aggrieved deracination. But current work in anthropology demonstrates that the reason most West Africans (and many other of the world's peoples) had not created the kinds of "civilizations" that Europeans and some other groups had created was largely an accident of geography. The plants and the animals that thrived at a particular temperate latitude were uniquely amenable to cultivation, and thus yielded a surplus that swelled populations, which in turn facilitated the emergence of densely hierarchical societies in which certain classes had the leisure to create technology as less fortunate others worked the land. Findings such as these--they are masterfully presented in Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*--leave me with no sense of "shame" that my West African ancestors most likely lacked libraries, pyramids, and muskets. To marginalize our actual ancestors in favor of Alexandria and Timbuktu is to base the case for reparations upon a false conception of our history, and to abase the people whose lives were ruined to create us.

But the most glaring omission in Robinson's uplifting depiction of my alleged African homeland is the fact that Africans themselves were avid and uncomplaining agents in the selling of other Africans to whites. Instead Robinson depicts the slave trade as having been based primarily on "catching" individual slaves unawares: in his Africa allegory, an aging African dismayed at the decay of his society at the hands of white predators bemoans that "our young people cannot sit still and listen to tales of glory from a dying old man while they fear being caught."

Robinson is hardly alone in this misconception: *Roots* and *Amistad* and other mythmaking artifacts of popular culture have intimated that whites acquired most slaves by lassoing people while they were out walking. The sad reality is that this method would hardly have netted Europeans enough slaves to furnish dozens of colonies of plantations, with each plantation often requiring as many as several hundred workers. (Wouldn't Africans have stopped going for

walks?) The primary sources on the slave trade demonstrate with painful clarity that slaves--not some slaves, but most slaves--were obtained by African kings in intertribal wars, and were sold in masses to European merchants in exchange for material goods. This is an incontrovertible--and not exactly unknown--truth of history. Not once in his book does Robinson so much as mention it, since it would get in the way of his portrait of Africans as a preternaturally perfect people.

The historical truth about the origins of slavery also undercuts Robinson's notion of "African" as a single cultural identity from which we were brutally wrested. Traditionally, Africans were just like other humans: they, too, regarded people who spoke other languages and practiced different customs as alien. Indeed, the monolithic notion is a construction of the very essentialist worldview that Robinson considers to have gutted black America's soul.

Essentialism, after all, is a form of dehumanization, as Robinson is well aware; and for him few things better indicate the extent to which African Americans have been stripped of their humanity than the alleged suppression by America of their history as an African people. For example:

Since this nation's inception, taxpayers--white, black, brown--have spent billions on museums, monuments, memorials, parks, centers for the performing arts, festivals, and commemorative occasions. Billions have been spent on the publication of history texts, arts texts, magazines, newspapers, and history journals. Formulaic television and large-screen historical fiction treatments virtually defy count.

Almost none of this spending, building, unveiling, and publishing has been addressed to the needs of Americans who are not white.

Such melodrama requires an almost staggering indifference to reality. Robinson's grievance here is empirically outrageous. The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have long had an outright bias toward funding projects oriented toward the African heritage of black Americans. Moreover, this portrait of an America in which blacks' origins in Africa is invisible is made possible only by deftly restricting one's purview to projects funded by federal taxes. The America in which I have spent my life is a country in which museums in large cities frequently have exhibits of African art and performances by African dance troupes. Just a few years ago the media was abuzz with reviews of Hugh Thomas's *The Slave Trade*, a dense tome whose publication was feted as a national event; and Basil Davidson's

brief and more readable *Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade* has been in print since its appearance in 1961. (Robinson includes both of these books in his list of sources.) Again, consider "the little things." *Scientific American* has a page on which it prints excerpts from past issues. Most of these citations are naturally about science, but in a recent issue the magazine chose to feature a quotation from March 1851, giving it the headline "Open Sore": "The population of the United States amounts to 20,067,720 free persons, and 2,077,034 slaves." This suggests a spontaneous consciousness of our country's racial history in the editors of a journal neither dedicated to social and political issues nor aimed at a black audience. Examples could easily be multiplied. No literate American can help regularly stumbling across small but real signs that mainstream America is quite aware that a portion of its population was brought here in chains.

III.

Robinson draws a certain conclusion from this presumed concealment of our African roots. He believes that the poverty and the despair in which many black Americans are mired is a direct result of our sense of rootlessness, of having been plucked from our African homeland. Robinson notes often that a people must have a sense of belonging to a particular "culture" in order to thrive. One might then investigate how blacks will embrace the culture of their homeland, but Robinson is making a different point. He claims that belonging to American culture is impossible, because "the armaments of culture and history that have protected the tender interiors of peoples from the dawn of time have been premeditatedly stripped from the black victims of American slavery." *Shepherding Billy around the Mall*, Robinson's "mentor" sees the monuments as a statement from whites: "This is who we are. This is who we are." But there are no statues of African kings on the Mall, and so Billy is bedeviled by the question: "Who am I? Just who the hell am I?"

The italics are Robinson's: Billy always speaks a little hysterically. And this argument, central to Robinson's presentation, is the most dangerous one in his book. Never mind that it is not exactly obvious that most whites interpret the Washington Monument as a lesson in who they are. (Americans are not known for being a historically minded people.) More problematically, Robinson's position comes close to an advocacy of ignorance for blacks. In his anger and his sarcasm, he panders to the very sense of separation from "learning for learning's sake" that is the prime source of the gap between black performance and white performance in American schools.

More than once Robinson takes potshots at what he mockingly describes as "Punic this, Pyrrhic that." In his book he repeatedly dismisses Hegel on the basis of a racist statement that was, after all, typical of a man of Hegel's day. His readers may be forgiven for believing that racism was the entire substance of the philosopher's work. But turning his readers away from Hegel (and I am not suggesting that Hegel has any particular light to shed on the racial question in America) is a fine way of turning them away from other "dead white male" thinkers whose ideas are central to the philosophical heritage of the only society that most black Americans will ever consider home. It is a short step from this to the observation of the Berkeley undergraduate who bemoaned that so much of what she is expected to learn on Berkeley's "racist" campus is "white." Robinson predictably falls in with those who attribute all of the problems of black students in school to social inequalities. He pauses to note that black students are lagging severely in school performance in Prince George's County, Maryland, owing to "grinding, disabling poverty," when in fact Prince George's County is a notoriously well-funded district in which the persistence of low grades and low scores even among black students of comfortable backgrounds has been well covered by the local media for twenty years. It is widely documented, moreover, that much of this problem may be traced to the feeling of many black students that school is a realm fundamentally separate from the essence of being "black." A study by Clifton Casteel notes that where white adolescents tend to say that they do their schoolwork to please their parents, black students tend to say that they do their schoolwork to please their teachers.

This awful situation is a product of a race-wide pull away from the integrationist ideal. In the 1960s it may have made sense to define ourselves against "whitey"; but in those militant days few could foresee the awkward results that this ideology would have as time went by, and one of those results is an ingrained sense in black peer culture that school is something that "whitey" does. "Punic this, Pyrrhic that": this sentiment has a lot more to do with black students' problems in Prince George's County schools than the "poverty" of their middle-class suburban existences. Finally Robinson's argument is crippled by the fallacy that it would make a whit of difference in Billy's psychological well-being to be taught that his essence is that of an Igbo boatman in the seventeenth century. I have rarely read a book by a black writer that demonstrates so little pride in the heritage of black people right here on these shores. "Far too many Americans of African descent," Robinson observes, "believe their history starts in America with bondage and struggles forward from there toward today's second-class citizenship." Hear, hear--but Robinson's

assumption that redressing this means harking back to African villages is mistaken. For the purpose of black uplift, nothing could be less promising than the view that we will lack inner pride until we studiously equate ourselves with people who do not talk, eat, move, dress, or see the world the way we do.

Ultimately the Swahili lessons and the rest are merely a kind of theater, self-affirming in some ways, but largely in a gestural sense. Most black Americans see themselves neither as "African" nor (obviously) as "white." The truth is that black Americans think of themselves as a new race altogether. For Robinson, of course, this amounts to an obliteration of the self, the working-class black man in Cincinnati denying his primal urge to get back to Lagos. But this only demonstrates that the old "one drop" rule is now more fiercely wielded by blacks than by whites, which is not exactly "progressive."

"What about us?" Billy moans as he is trotted around the Mall, as if he were a Ghanaian village boy. One might make this reply to the poor lad: it was "us" who worked the American system against great odds and survived, who appealed to its philosophical foundations in sparking a civil rights revolution that few blacks could have imagined even a decade before. But this is not what Robinson wants the Billys of America to hear. He would be even less enthusiastic to have it said within earshot of Billy that our ultimate ideal is for Americans of all colors to consider the monuments on the Mall to represent the history of "us." There is still a long way to go before we reach that blessed moment, obviously; but it is the only direction in which we can set out if we seek true interracial harmony.

IV.

And what about recasting our vision of what happened after we were brought here? What "far too many Americans of African descent believe," in no small measure because of books such as *The Debt*, is that blacks have never been able to accomplish much of anything in America, except for the likes of Frederick Douglass and Colin Powell, who are portrayed less as ideals of African American history than as freaks of African American history. Robinson's analysis cannot account for the thriving black business districts in certain cities just two generations after Emancipation, or for the revolution of American popular music that African descendants sparked, or for the fact that in the late 1800s black university students were well known for taking top prizes over white students not in athletics or music, but in oratory. Indeed, in classical oratory: Pyrrhic this and Punic that!

All of this is marginal for Robinson, because he is operating according to a studiously defeatist paradigm that restricts his view to a limited body of data. He enthusiastically subscribes to the orthodoxy of so many black writers today: that individual initiative is a matter of luck or a matter of extraordinary ability, and that it will remain so until American society presents no obstacles whatsoever to advancement--until there is no longer any racism in any white person's heart. This notion would have perplexed most of the civil rights leaders of the past; but its appeal is that it offers a balm for the insecure by providing an everlasting explanation for adversity that will distract one from the examination of one's own inadequacies.

We are hollow chocolate bunnies, beached in an alien culture: blacks have embraced this view out of pain and doubt, and Robinson teaches us not to conquer it, but to cherish it. In the end *The Debt* is founded on a paradigm of black existence rooted in shame. Robinson's view is that imperfect conditions render black success meaningless, and never mind the pride and the resilience that are common features of African American experience. Robinson actually offers a rare example of this destructive philosophy made explicit:

There are always those special few who achieve (or fail) against all odds. There are those, like me, whose families successfully defy mainstream society's low expectation of us. The exceptions, however, would not be numerous enough to allow the closing of the income gap, even if the coarse and tangible old brand of discrimination were to go tomorrow into some period of long-term miracle remission. This is so because a static, unarticulated, insidious racial conditioning, to which all Americans are subject, lifts the high-expectation meritless ... and, more often than not, locks down in a permanent class hell the natively talented but low-expectation black.

This sense of racism as rendering all black success "accidental" is ultimately the *primum mobile* of the reparations movement. Thus the black scholars Robert Chrisman and Ernest Allen Jr., arguing the case for reparations, proclaim that "racism continues as an ideology and a material force within the U.S., providing blacks with no ladder that reaches the top."

This belief that there is no path for blacks to the top accounts for Robinson's sour attitude toward blacks making progress. He can only see self-advancement as a kind of self-abnegation: to gain passage into the world of the gatekeepers one must become one of them. One of the most appalling passages in *The Debt* describes Robinson at a commencement ceremony at Howard University. He records that he was appalled when a black undergraduate speaker said "thank

you" in French, German, and Italian, rather than in Swahili, Chichewa, and Wolof. "She was not a European American of any variety: She was an American of African descent. Why on earth was she iffing herself European?" No, sir: this woman was "iffing" herself a new race entirely, one with a heritage as richly Western as African. Indeed, since no slaves were brought to America who spoke Swahili or Chichewa, the study of Swahili or Chichewa would no more return her to her roots than the study of European languages. Our new Du Bois might recall that the old Du Bois was fluent in German, and would have had choice words for anyone who told him that such cultivation was not a "black" thing.

In his contribution to the "Who's got the bigger Holocaust?" competition, Robinson has it that slavery "has hulled empty a whole race of people with inter-generational efficiency. Every artifact of the victim's past, every custom, every ritual, every god, every language, every trace element of a people's whole inherited identity, was wrenched from them and ground into a sharp choking dust." As often in *The Debt*, the music has a certain pull--but this is a grievous insult to four centuries of black Americans. Could Robinson look Denmark Vesey, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Mary McLeod Bethune, Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Ralph Ellison, Jacob Lawrence, and Martin Luther King Jr. in the eye and tell them that they were hulled empty? Could he even say this to the middle-aged black woman of a certain age working at the post office, or to the black middle manager at Pacific Bell with a house and family, or to Condoleezza Rice, or even--looking in the mirror honestly, for once--to himself?

V.

Which brings us to the money. There are many obvious retorts to the notion of reparations as a practical matter. They include: that many whites in America today arrived after Emancipation; that many whites owned no slaves; that racial mixture would render the very question of who qualifies as a "black" person tricky at best and arbitrary at worst. I feel uncomfortable with the idea of taking money meant for someone I never knew. I feel "black American," but I do not feel African, and I certainly do not feel that I am just a few steps past being a white person's property. My connection to my ancestors six generations back, about whom I know nothing, feels more academic than spiritual; and I would feel the same way if my ancestors were wealthy white barons. So I for one could not take the money.

But Robinson does not dwell long on the "back pay" angle. He and the reparations crowd have their responses to these objections, but they recognize how unlikely it is that we will reach a consensus that will extract huge sums of money from the national government. For this reason, the discussion of reparations has moved toward appealing less to slavery than to the effects of slavery, specifically to segregation and disenfranchisement. In this regard, the movement has returned to the position advocated in 1973 by Bittker, who emphasized the effects of *Plessy v. Ferguson* as grounds for reparations.

But here we run up against another objection to the argument for reparations: that for almost forty years America has been granting blacks what any outside observer would rightly call reparations. When Robinson grouses that "once and for all, America must face its past," one wonders what he thinks of the War on Poverty that Lyndon Johnson launched, with Adam Clayton Powell Jr. dedicatedly steering sixty bills through Congress in five years as chairman of the Education and Labor Committee. For surely one result of that new climate of the 1960s--of the official recognition that America owed its black citizens some sort of restitution--was a huge and historic expansion of welfare.

As begun in the 1930s, welfare policies were primarily intended for widows. Chrisman and Allen get this right, adding that at the time more whites than blacks received welfare. (They could have added that through the 1950s institutional racism ensured that black widows often got lower payments than white widows.) Yet they sail over the fact that in the mid-1960s welfare programs were deliberately expanded for the "benefit" of black people, in large part due to claims by progressive whites that the requirements of the new automation economy made it unfair to expect blacks to make their way up the economic ladder as other groups had. Federal and state governments have since poured billions of dollars into welfare payments. None of this was termed "reparations," in the technical sense; but it certainly provided unearned cash for underclass blacks for decades (as well as jobs for the many others who staffed the bureaucracy that the policy created).

It is now plain that this policy was not successful in pulling significant numbers of blacks out of poverty. But still America has not given up on the effort: today welfare programs are being recast as temporary stopgaps, with welfare mothers being trained for work. The governor whose version of this program was the most successful is now the head of the Department of Health and Human Services. Time will tell how successful this revision of welfare will be, but the signs are

good as I write, and the advocates of reparations have yet to propose any more realistic solution. The funds and the efforts devoted to welfare-to-work, then, represent a concrete acknowledgment of the effects of "structural" poverty. A society with no commitment to addressing the injustices of the past would restrict welfare payments to the temporarily unfortunate, 1930s-style. It would have no welfare-to-work programs aimed at poor blacks. And there is also the policy of affirmative action--a reparative policy if ever there was one, designed to address the injustices of the past. Chrisman and Allen snap that "so-called `racial preferences' come not from benevolence but from lawsuits by blacks against white businesses, government agencies, and municipalities, which practice discrimination." This is nonsense. Lyndon Johnson was a white man the last time I checked, and it was he who entered into the history books the famous remark that "you do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line in a race and then say, `you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." Affirmative action was initiated as a call to recruit and to hire and to admit qualified blacks. It quickly transmogrified into quota systems, with lesser-qualified blacks often given positions and slots over better-qualified whites--but then we cannot help but suspect that many reparations advocates would laud these preferments as their just deserts.

"Once and for all, America must face its past": has Robinson noticed that whites are often as horrified as blacks at the prospect of any contraction or alteration in welfare or affirmative action? It was Peter Edelman and Mary Jo Bane who resigned from the Clinton administration in protest over welfare reform; but no black members of that administration are on record as having considered taking down their own shingles. Many whites in elected office are fiercely clinging to the policies of affirmative action--so fiercely, indeed, that Republican pols have backed away from their opposition to affirmative action for fear of offending white women voters. It was two white men, William Bowen and Derek Bok, who produced the most serious defense of the policy in their book *The Shape of the River*, and it was University of California president Richard Atkinson who recently suggested working around the outlawing of racial preferences in California by eliminating the SAT. The most strident student organization seeking to reverse the ban on racial preferences in California, *By Any Means Necessary (BAMN)*, has barely a black person in it. Surely all of this demonstrates that the analysis of black poverty in terms of its "root causes" is now a central element of white thinking about race. A significant and powerful

contingent among whites now considers it a moral imperative to compensate blacks through set-asides.

If I were assigned to develop a plan for black reparations, here is what I would do. I would institute a program supporting poor black people for a few years while stewarding them into jobs--which is currently in operation. I would have the government and private organizations channel funds into inner-city communities to help residents buy their homes--which is what Community Development Corporations have been doing for years, working under-publicized miracles in ghettos across the country. I would give banks incentives to make loans to inner-city residents to start small businesses--which is what the Community Reinvestment Act has been doing since 1977. I would make sure that there are scholarships to help black people go to school--which are hardly unknown in this country. I would propose that affirmative action policies--of the thumb-on-the-scale variety designed to choose between equally qualified candidates--be imposed in businesses, where subtle racism can still slow promotions. Most importantly, I would ensure that black children had access to as good an education as possible. I do not believe that blacks should be left simply to pull ourselves up by the proverbial bootstraps. Our grim history is real. Yet so, too, are the reparations that we have already secured in the form of all these government programs and government monies.

VI.

Robinson and the reparations crowd do not regard all these momentous changes as worthy of address, because their true interest is less in helping blacks than in assuaging the sense of inferiority that gnaws at the black soul. For them, all the payments, all the grants, and all the set-asides that have been directed to their people do not count as "reparations," because they did not come explicitly labeled as an apology for four hundred years of black suffering, and as an acknowledgment that whites are responsible for anything that ails anyone black in America. Robinson ardently hopes that we can "wear the call as a breastplate, a coat of arms." But he prefers the call for change to change itself. There is no other way to explain the most stunning aspect of Robinson's book, namely, that he devotes less than three pages to a discussion of the actual form that reparations might take.

This is what Robinson proposes, concretely: a trust fund dedicated to education; the recovery of funds from companies that benefited from slave labor; continuing support for current civil rights advocacy (onward and upward...!); and the making of financial amends to Africa and the

Caribbean. That's it. More than two hundred and fifty preceding pages are devoted to Robinson's fantastical portrait of an America not a millimeter past *Plessy v. Ferguson*, plus desultory recountings of Robinson's trips to Cuba and Africa. Bittker devoted several chapters of his book to careful legalistic argument exploring how Section 1983 of Title 42 of the United States Code might be applied to obtaining reparations for blacks; but Robinson-- a graduate of Harvard Law School--announces only that "my intent is to stimulate, not to sate," having, "by necessity, painted basic themes with a broad brush."

Once again, the tragedy of what passes for "civil rights" in our moment stands out in sharp relief. Hooked on the satisfactions of victimhood, too many black "leaders" today have forgotten that the protests of the late 1950s and the early 1960s were driven by a commitment to forge a new paradigm, to build new programs and new institutions, to work towards interracial harmony. For thirty years now, it has been considered "authentically black" in many circles to indulge in year after year of ceremonial agitprop while whites developed almost all of the policies--successful or not--that have attempted to improve the lot of the race. Enterprise Zones or Empowerment Zones, the Community Reinvestment Act, the reform of welfare, and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and the Enterprise Foundation, which shunt combinations of grants into inner-city communities: these have been mainly white creations. And so it is no wonder that the most influential treatment of the case for reparations written by a black person devotes itself almost entirely to the rhetoric of inflamed identity, to the revival of Malcolm X's bared teeth and upraised fist.

What kind of leading black thinker is one whose message for the black youth of America is that black success is marginal regardless of its prevalence; that we will find peace only by identifying with people of another continent who are largely alien to us; that the measure of our strength as a group is how articulately we can call for charity? Its popularity notwithstanding, it is hard for me to accept that *The Debt* is really representative of my brethren's thinking on the subject of their place in America. Surely black people in all walks of life are increasingly realizing that pity has never gotten a race anywhere, and that many groups in history have risen despite the power of prejudice.

It is instructive to compare Robinson with Bittker. Writing when the Black Power movement flourished, Bittker soberly based his prescriptions upon a conception of black Americans as a people holding a diversity of opinions. "Who is to decide," he asked, "whether a group that

claims to be the vanguard is really only a body of stragglers because the army is moving in the opposite direction?" He came to the conclusion that reparations ought to be paid only to blacks who endured segregated schooling, this being in his view the only case that could be productively argued on a principled legal and moral basis. He rejected the distribution of payments on the basis of "blackness" alone, on the grounds that it would encourage a revival of the arbitrary conceptions of race that were used to justify slavery; and he distrusted the distribution of funds to any particular set of black organizations, on the grounds that it was difficult to know which groups could justly claim to represent all blacks. Bittker was struck by the diversity of African American life: "Among American blacks today, differences in economic status, geographical origin and current location, outlook, organizational ties, and educational background are powerful centrifugal forces that black nationalist groups have not succeeded in neutralizing."

Robinson, by contrast, offers an allegory in which all blacks are given a card listing twenty policies "favoring blacks": "instructions on the back of the card would oblige a bearer, as a matter of honor, to vote for the candidates who'd scored highest and against any who'd flunked." Robinson blithely assumes that the composition of the "the card"--presumably an agenda made up of variations on the very handouts and set-asides that have so slowed the dissolution of "the color line" for decades--would be self-evident to all blacks. (What about the ones in the ugly glasses?) It is here that Robinson reveals himself and those of his ideological ilk to be precisely the "body of stragglers" to which Bittker referred.

The closest Robinson comes to acknowledging that there might be more than one legitimate way to think as a black American is in one of the oddest passages in his book, in which he dismisses the black radicals of decades ago:

For reasons that were never clear to me, they elected to set themselves apart from those they presumed to lead by dressing and talking differently, using an unfamiliar idiom and cadence, leaving their voices up at the end of their sentences....They seemed deeply suspicious, often with good reason, of those blacks who had received from white institutions a liberal arts education, which I think they viewed as rather closer to indoctrination.

Does Robinson really not see that those people were animated by exactly the ideology that animates his own book? Those people favored dashikis and exaggerated their black dialect out of the same estrangement from America and identification with Africa that Robinson sees as the

salvation of the race. "Punic this, Pyrrhic that," dissing the black girl who deigns to learn Italian: those are precisely the separatist prejudices of the era of Stokely Carmichael.

One hundred years from now, the marvelous inevitability of interracial mixture will have created a deliriously miscegenated America where hundreds of millions of cafe au lait Tiger Woodses and Mariah Careys will be quite secure in knowing that American is "who they are." For those new Americans, ancient essentialist tracts such as *The Debt* will stand as curiosities. They will turn to historians to explain how it was that such a book was ever regarded as an urgent manifesto for the uplifting of a race. For now, however, pity is the only feeling that can be summoned for the man pictured on the cover of *The Debt*, this affluent and poised black American gentleman sitting grimly indignant that his government does not acknowledge his essence as a Mandingo tribesman, that the compensation that his race has received for almost forty years has come without a groveling apology, and that all black Americans, including himself, are eternally "lost" as a result.

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