

Walter Williams essay to answer a question at quora.com

Since the economy of the US South was founded on slavery, should the South be forced to pay reparations to the decedents of slaves? Should all of the US share the financial burden of these reparations were it decided yes?

In the census of 1860, just before the Civil War, well over 90% of all African Americans lived in the slaveowning Southern states, most of them as slaves. In the census of 1910, there was not much geographic change, and still well over 90% of all African Americans continued to live in the South. What this means is that both during the slavery era and during the era of Jim Crow discrimination, most racial oppression occurred in the South. Therefore, it should be the state governments in the South, not the U.S. federal government, that should pay 90% of reparations.

There is a very practical way that reparations should be paid: in land. Each descendant of slaves should be given a plot of land in the public lands of one of the former slave states. Those who are related should apply together in order to get adjoining land plots. Similar to the Homestead Act, which distributed free land to white settlers in the 19th century, they should receive title to the land after ten years of occupancy, in which they must have erected a house in which they lived on that plot of land. Though awardees should be able to exchange their land plot for another land plot with another descendant of slaves, they will not be permitted to sell or lease the land to another person for ten years. This is done to encourage them to settle in one of the Southern states that so benefited from slavery.

James W Clarke

Why should people living now pay reparations to people living now, none of whom are or have been either slave owners or slaves? Also what about African Americans who are the descendants of African American slave owners, such as those recorded in Virginia? Are they also to pay reparations?

Walter L. Williams, Ph.D.

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If my great grandfather had stolen a house from your great grandfather, would you be justified in asking for the house to be returned to you, even though it happened many years ago? If you could document such a theft, courts would give a decision in your favor. I think they would be right. Even if a wrong happened many years ago, it is never

too late to try to at least partially right such a wrong. We are all inheritors of the past, and we must take responsibility for what we have inherited.

I am not saying that you personally should pay reparations. I think it is the responsibility of state governments in places where slavery was abolished in 1865, after a horribly expensive Civil War, to turn over state public lands to be divided up and granted as homesteads to descendants of slaves. This would not apply to immigrants who came from Africa in recent decades, but it would at last give an overdue inheritance to those families whose ancestors worked for many generations without any payment for their work.

White Americans were offered free land by the Homestead Act. It is time for African Americans to be given a similar offer by those states that benefited so profitably from the unpaid work done by enslaved persons.

Xuanzi

Africans americans are almost by definition partly descendent of CW African slaves and the anglo-american slaveholders.

African Americans however do not include recent migrants from Africa who were not imported slaves, such as Ethiopian Americans.

Financially, everyone in said state is taxed. From that budget the reparations would be given.

Why should people now? To right past wrongs. There are clear socioeconomic issues from that period which continue. You can get more into it than that. Generally, you want all of your members of society to become more functional. This is especially the pervue of the government which gets exponential returns on well-off productive members of society.

Xuanzi

I have doubts about giving away stolen land to anyone but say those who suffered in the Trail of Tears...

But otherwise, it seems reasonable.

Walter L. Williams, Ph.D.

My advocacy for land to be given as homesteads by Southern state governments, to descendants of slaves, does not in any way negate the efforts of Indigenous Americans to regain control of their native lands. I published a book *SOUTHEASTERN INDIANS SINCE THE REMOVAL ERA* (University of Georgia Press, 1979) that has been used by Native Americans in the South to document their land claims. The South, of which I am a native, was built on land stolen from its original indigenous owners, and with the unpaid labor of people stolen from Africa. Both of these historic thefts need to be rectified, without further delay.

Before 1840, almost 100% of lands in the West belonged to the Indigenous nations. But after over two centuries of land theft, today's Indigenous people own only about 1% of those lands. Since most Indigenous Americans alive today live in the Western States, those states should take a similar lead in returning their state public lands to tribal government control. Since the federal government took a more active role in stealing lands from Native people in the West, federal lands should also be returned to tribal control.

Reply