The Case against Reparations
A reply to Ta-Nehisi Coates.

By Kevin D. Williamson

Ta-Nehisi Coates has done a public service with his essay “The Case for Reparations,” and the service he has done is to show that there is not much of a case for reparations. Mr. Coates’s beautifully written monograph is intelligent and sometimes moving, and the moral and political case he makes is not to be discounted lightly, but it is not a persuasive case for converting the liberal Anglo-American tradition of justice into a system of racial apportionment. Mr. Coates and those who share his views would no doubt observe that the Anglo-American practice, despite its liberal rhetoric, was a system of racial apportionment, and a brutal one at that, for centuries, with real-world consequences that continue to be large facts of American life to this day — and they would be correct. But the remedy Mr. Coates proposes would not satisfy the criterion of justice, nor is it likely that it would reduce or even substantially eliminate the very large socioeconomic differences that distinguish the black experience of American life from the white experience of it.

The most valuable aspect of Mr. Coates’s essay is as a corrective to the tendency to treat the systematic political and economic repression of black Americans as though it were a matter of distant history and a question that had been for the most part settled at Gettysburg, with a few necessary legislative reforms in the following century. The process of extirpating effective racism did not end in 1868 or in 1964; even assuming a zero racial handicap on a forward-going basis, we would expect it to take decades before the average economic differences between blacks and whites were to disappear. (If, indeed, we should expect them to disappear at all.) And the economic disadvantages imposed on African Americans did not end with slavery. Mr. Coates recounts, among other abuses, how black workers leaving the South for such communities as Chicago’s North Lawndale were systematically excluded from the formal banking system, in no small part by federal housing policy that denied FHA mortgage insurance to neighborhoods into which blacks had moved or were moving, leaving black would-be homeowners with few options other than the “on contract” purchase, essentially a rent-to-own scheme that was rife with abuse and dishonesty.

Upwardly mobile blacks were fleeced by similar schemes for many years, and blacks remain to a disproportionate extent outside the traditional financial institutions — for instance, a quarter of unmarried black men have no bank account, and fewer than half of black households invest in stocks or similar financial instruments. The relatively hard time blacks have dealing with financial institutions has some truly perverse outcomes: Whites have more college degrees but less student-
loan debt; white women are more likely to be homeowners than are black women, but they have smaller mortgages; blacks are less likely to be approved for credit cards, and they have more credit-card debt. While the median black household income is about a third lower than the median white household income, blacks’ median net worth is radically lower: about 5 percent of the median white net worth. The median net worth for a single white woman in her prime earning years is about $43,000; the median net worth for a black woman in her prime earning years is about $5.

There is probably a vicious circle at work here: Even controlling for income, blacks are financially risk-averse compared with whites, which probably has something to do with the history that Mr. Coates cites; but this risk aversion has the long-term effect of leaving them worse off as they forgo higher returns on their savings, which is one reason, though not the only one, that black households are likely to have less wealth than white households with identical incomes. In the matter of savings and investment, it is very likely that skeptical attitudes and relatively poor outcomes feed on each other. A similar dynamic characterizes the investment decisions of white women relative to white men.

Blacks probably should extend that skepticism, or even transfer it, to the welfare state. Mr. Coates does not spare the New Dealers, who enacted a raft of progressive policies that were in many cases designed to exclude or disadvantage African Americans. Contrary to the convenient myth related by our contemporary liberals, there was no substantial conflict between Democratic liberals and Democratic segregationists on most of the progressive agenda — the progressives and the segregationists were, in the main, the same people, and the so-called conservative Democrats in the South were very enthusiastic about federal regulation of businesses, the minimum wage, social insurance, and welfare programs, so long as they could be structured in a way that would not benefit blacks very much. But Mr. Coates does not give much consideration to the possibility that a similar dynamic still is at work among our 21st-century progressives — not in the sense that white progressives see their own interests being in direct competition with those of black Americans, but in the sense that programs run for the theoretical benefit of the poor, who are disproportionately black, are in fact run for the benefit of the largely white upper-middle-class bureaucrats who are employed by them. The teachers’ unions’ steadfast and occasionally hysterical opposition to school-reform programs intended to help the overwhelmingly black population of Washington, D.C., is a dramatic example of that, the full import of which does not seem to have settled upon the mind of Mr. Coates, who is himself a product of the backward Baltimore public-school system.

If the enduring disparities in economic outcomes were the only concern, or even the main concern, at issue here, then our policy menu would be relatively straightforward. Blacks are disproportionately poor, and policies that encourage economic growth and robust employment, which is the only meaningful long-term anti-poverty program, should benefit blacks with roughly the same disproportion. Indeed, that has been the case for some periods in the past: Black households saw stronger income growth than did white households during the Reagan boom, and from 1990 to 2000, Census figures report aggregate growth in the black median household almost
twice that of white households, 23 percent in constant dollars for blacks vs. 12 percent for whites. Had those trends continued, the racial difference in median income would have been wiped out in about 40 years. But if there were a policy or a set of policies that could be enacted guaranteeing the economic growth of that unusual decade, then they already would have been made permanent. The path from policy to outcome is a crooked one.

It is true, as Mr. Coates argues, citing Lyndon Johnson, that “Negro poverty is not white poverty,” at least as measured by many critical metrics — concentration, mobility, various life outcomes controlled for income, etc. But though he spends a great deal of time documenting economic issues, those are not, in the end, Mr. Coates’s interest here: “Reducing American poverty and ending white supremacy are not the same,” he declares. That there is some question-begging going on there — whether “white supremacy” really describes a significant motive force in American public life — goes without saying, but it shouldn’t.

Mr. Coates does not make the case so much for reparations as for a South Africa–style truth-and-reconciliation commission. “The crime with which reparations activists charge the country implicates more than just a few towns or corporations. The crime indict the American people themselves, at every level, and in nearly every configuration. A crime that implicates the entire American people deserves its hearing in the legislative body that represents them.” The purpose of a debate on a reparations bill of the sort being offered by John Conyers Jr. is not so much to construct a program of economic compensation as it is to have another verse of that Democratic hymn, an honest conversation about race. (As though we ever talked about anything else.) And this gets to the real defect in Mr. Coates’s approach. The purpose of public policy in this area can be one of two things. The first is a program focused on trying to improve in real terms the lives of those who are poorly off and those born into circumstances that are likely to lead to their being poorly off adults, proceeding with the intellectual honesty to acknowledge that such programs will disproportionately benefit black Americans, as they should. The second option is a symbolic political process designed to confer a degree of psychic satisfaction on relatively well-off men and women such as Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Mr. Coates engages in what certainly feels like a little misdirection. Responding to the very fair criticism that public policy designed to help the disadvantaged should distinguish between, say, the Obama daughters and those without their advantages, Mr. Coates is having none of it: “In the contest of upward mobility, Barack and Michelle Obama have won. But they’ve won by being twice as good—and enduring twice as much.” The truth or untruth of that claim can only be ascertained by asking the question that Mr. Coates is committed to ignoring: “Compared with whom?” Did Barack or Michelle Obama inherit disadvantages that forced them to perform twice as well, and bear twice as much, as a white woman born into horrific poverty in Appalachia? A white orphan? A white immigrant escaping the Third Reich? A racial disadvantage is only one of many kinds of disadvantages that can be inherited — why should it be the one around which we organize ourselves? Mr. Coates himself comes from a fairly modest background, but he, a man without an
undergraduate degree, is a visiting scholar at MIT, one of the most exclusive academic institutions in the world, a position he enjoys as part of a program that excludes whites. ("The Program is open to individuals of any minority group, with an emphasis on the appointment of African Americans.") There are, of course, many programs of that sort, and it is possible that poor whites resent them more than they should — the view from Owsley County, Ky, or from Lubbock, Texas, might make it difficult to see the so-called white supremacy that is so unmistakably obvious to Mr. Coates. But dealing with that reality inescapably entails treating people as individuals, and treating people as individuals makes reparations morally and intellectually impossible — even if we accept in toto Mr. Coates’s argument that the brutal imposition of white-supremacist policies is the entire basis for the relative social positions of blacks and whites in the United States in 2014. Which is to say: Even if we accept the facts of *aggregate* advantage and disadvantage with their roots in historical injustice, the aggregate cannot be converted into the *collective* inasmuch as neither advantage nor disadvantage is universal on either side nor linked to a straightforward chain of causality. Some blacks are born into college-educated, well-off households, and some whites are born to heroin-addicted single mothers, and even the totality of racial crimes throughout American history does not mean that one of these things matters and one does not.

Once that fact is acknowledged, then the case for reparations is only moral primitivism: My interests are inextricably linked to my own kin group and directly rivalrous with yours, i.e., the very racism that this program is in theory intended to redress. Mr. Coates also, I think, miscalculates what the real-world effects of converting our liberal conception of justice into a system of racial appropriation might mean. There are still, after all, an awful lot of white people, and though many of them might be inclined to make amends under some sort of racial truce following the process Mr. Coates imagines, many of them might simply be inclined to prevail. The fact is that the situation of African Americans in the United States has improved precisely to the extent that whites have begun to forgo tribalism and to genuinely commit themselves to the principles of liberalism, the long march toward a more perfect Union. The alternative — a system of exclusive interests in which black and white operate effectively in opposition — is not only morally repugnant, but likely to undermine the genuine political and economic interests of African Americans.

It may very well be the case that African Americans will never, no matter what policies are enacted, catch up economically with whites. Even assuming that invidious racism were an entirely negligible factor, it is likely that economic development will tend to proceed along broad racial channels if, for example, people of various ethnicities tend to largely marry within their ethnic group, live in neighborhoods largely populated by co-ethnics, and engage in other social-sorting behavior that is racial at its root but not really what we mean by the word “racism.” If that is the case — and it seems that it is — then initial conditions will be very important for a very long period of time.

And that would be true even if there had been no slavery and no discrimination. Imagine, for example, that rather than having been brought to the colonies as slaves, the first Africans to arrive in the New World had come as penniless immigrants in 1900. If their incomes grew in the subsequent
century at the same rate as those of white natives, then a century later they’d still be as far behind as they were when they arrived. Income gaps have been closed and closed quickly by some immigrant groups — notably European Jews, Vietnamese immigrants, and Indian immigrants — because their incomes across the first few generations grew much, much more quickly than the native rate. And though the hostility that often met these immigrants is not comparable to the experience of slavery and African Americans’ subsequent repression, it is worth appreciating that Jewish and Asian immigrants have not always been welcomed with universal warmth. The black experience is unique within the context of American history, but it is hardly unique within the context of the experience of other racial minorities in other societies throughout history.

Mr. Coates is largely correct about the past and is to a degree correct about the present. About the future, he is catastrophically wrong. The political interests of African Americans, like those of other Americans, are best served by equality under the law. The economic interests of African Americans, like those of other Americans, are best served by a dynamic and growing economy, preferably one in which the labor force is liberated from the dysfunctional, antique Prussian model of education that contributes so much to black poverty. The people to whom reparations were owed are long dead; our duty is to the living, and to generations yet to come, and their interests are best served by liberty and prosperity, not by moral theater.

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