

Rethinking Reparations: Rebuilding for Reform and Revolution

by Abdul Alkalimat

W.E.B. DU BOIS SET IN MOTION a great century-long debate with his observation at the end of the 19th century that the history of the 20th century would be struggles over the color line.¹ More than a rhetorical debate it summed up political struggle on all levels, from local towns in Mississippi to the global dynamics of capital in unprecedented patterns of accumulation.

At the beginning of the 21st century we can state that while the quality of life of the peoples of most of Asia, Africa, and Latin America remains essentially unchanged or has gotten worse, what has changed is the consensus about what to do. During colonialism, we had an anti-colonial movement for national liberation, we had consensus about the problems and solutions of the historical moment. Now we have been disoriented by neo-colonialism. When facing segregation, we built a civil rights movement. Now we have been disoriented with *de jure* civil rights covering up for *de facto* segregation and degradation. In earlier periods, white leadership dominated. Now there are very visible black faces in high places taking the lead on the very policies designed to oppress and exploit.

If ever there was a time for intellectual workers to get busy within the black liberation movement, the time is now. Our task remains: We are in a fight for freedom and human emancipation from all forms of exploitation and oppression. We need a new consensus, a new consciousness to nourish a common struggle.

THIS PAPER ARGUES that the fundamental ideological structure and process for all discourse and action remains, as always, the dialectics of reform and revolution. In other words, making incremental changes to improve things within the system versus a fundamental transformation of the system itself. First, before the cry of “unrealistic ultra-left foolish talk” attempts to silence this argument, let me state my belief that reforms are good to the extent that they help somebody, anybody, to obtain and secure fundamental rights and social benefits. However, there are unintended consequences to following the reform road with no attention paid to revolution, specifically the warning: be careful what you fight for, you might get it. Then what? Would anything have really changed? And, as a result of the change, would we be able to struggle more effectively or would we be betrayed by others who reap the benefits of the reforms?

Our march through history as African-American people has been toward freedom, a goal that has always been revolutionary for us and all other people in the world. If we compromise this process, and legitimate a system that continues to exploit and oppress, then what starts out to be a good process turns into its opposite. So, I appeal to the reader to hear me out.

Reparations to blacks for the legacy of the years of slavery and Jim Crow, for historical racism, is an issue that is being debated in many circles.² It is important to get some clear thinking on this issue as a specific issue in itself, but also as a single case that we can build on to get a more general approach to

thinking about freedom in the 21st century. In this context, there are three key aspects of this question to be discussed:

- 1.) Ideology: Can a case be made for reparations for the African-American people?
- 2.) Strategy: How can we connect the fight for reparations to the greater fight for freedom?
- 3.) Tactics: What program of action can unite the black liberation movement in this fight?

Ideology: Making the Case for Reparations

THERE IS A HIGH LEVEL OF CONSENSUS in the black community that the case for reparations is clear and justified. But everyone doesn't agree. David Horowitz, a 1960s white radical turned racist pit bull, published as an ad in campus newspapers and elsewhere his ten arguments against reparations. An article by Robert Chrisman and Ernest Allen, and another by Sundiata Cha Jua, refute his arguments.³ Due to the high level of consensus among blacks pro reparations, the ideological debate over reparations engaged in by blacks in the public sphere serves primarily to win over white radicals and liberals, as well as to counter the attacks from the right. This is necessary. But it is not our task in this article, in which we seek to explore and explode the apparent consensus within the black community. In other words: Reparations is a righteous demand, but as the struggle advances will interests further diverge along lines of race and class, will an all-inclusive black unity be sustainable?

The reparations debate emerges out of our last round of mass struggle in the last half of the 20th century.⁴ Masses of people erupted in resistance in the post World War II years. At that time the systemic, neo-slave tenancy conditions of the masses of black people were out of sync with the relations necessary for industrial capitalist utilization of black labor. Sharecropping, with lynching as its ultimate social control, was a problem for the façade of democracy that hid the imperialist fangs of Wall Street during the post-war era of national liberation movements. The fight for civil rights was carried out by a broad consensus that united the

masses of black people with the black middle class and its political elites. It seemed that entire black population won gains from this struggle. What made this possible is a unique convergence of political and economic factors during the 1960s.

HOWEVER, by the 1980s and 1990s the overall situation of black people became polarized, placing black leadership in a critical position. How could the black elite advance the cause of their class, the black middle class, while holding onto the aspirations of the masses of black people, at a time when their circumstances became so desperate as to give rise to discussion of a new class, a truly disadvantaged lot. On the one hand, we got black mayors (even a black governor), affirmative action, and a continuation of various forms of black capitalism, now extending onto the major corporate boards and think tanks in the nation. On the other hand, we got new forms of savagery via what William Julius Wilson calls social isolation and a concentration of the effects of drugs, unemployment, imprisonment, family breakdown, minimal schooling, poor healthcare, police violence, and a shortening of the life span.

The politics of the country have followed the white flight from the cities (which constituted the New Deal base of the Democrats) toward the center-right based in the suburbs. The black middle class is no different from this. They now have a wing firmly on the right, if not entirely giving public support to the Republican Party. Black people have more powerful positions in the national government than ever before, firmly on the right in elected and appointed positions in the executive and judicial branches, along with liberal Democrats in Congress and American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) members in civil service jobs. Given this polarization of class and politics within the black community, to what extent are reparations a national demand that can unite all black people? To what extent can reparations be a class demand, where capitalists are uniting with capitalists, while workers and poor people (black and white) certainly need to unite with each other?

IS THE DEMAND FOR REPARATIONS a class question? Undoubtedly, black people have a special and just demand for reparations based on slavery. At the same time, all other victims of capitalist exploitation and colonial plunder also have just demands for reparations. Capitalist slave owners paid no wages and barely provided subsistence, while industrial capitalists paid wages that barely covered subsistence for their workers. Slaves and workers in the era of the Industrial Revolution were born simultaneously as different parts of the same global process—the slave in the cotton field and the industrial worker in the textile mill. Both were cheated out of a fair share of the wealth they created. What starts out as a righteous democratic demand of the Black Liberation Movement, a special national demand, can become a democratic rallying point for the working class, a universal class demand, and as well be adaptable to apply to all forms of national oppression.

This leads to our second question: How do we connect the fight for reparations with the greater fight for freedom? This is a question we need to address with some care.

Strategy: the Fight for Reparations and the Fight for Freedom

OUR APPROACH to the history of the fight for reparations begins with a conception of the historical periodization of the black experience. According to this conception, there are historical periods of relative social cohesion, when stable life patterns play out, broken by periods of social disruption, when upheaval is the order of the day. Thus the social cohesion of slavery follows the social disruption of the slave trade. The social cohesion of tenancy follows the social disruption of emancipation. The social cohesion of the industrial period follows the social disruption of the proletarianization of the tenant farmer. De-industrialization is today's social disruption, while the still-forming Information Society promises to be tomorrow's social cohesion. We need to learn from past history so we can be makers of the history we will live as our future.

Any period of social disruption relates to

where society has been and where it can go. Political forces fighting during periods of social disruption need advanced programs for positive social transformation, including the demand for reparations. It's not that people haven't been seeking reparations during other times. But when fundamental change is underway, the politics we advocate can focus and give content to a mass political movement. For this, our ideas have to correspond to the actual conditions faced by our people.

Capitalist slavery was devastatingly destructive, a crime against humanity and an unprecedented form of accumulating profit. It is important to remember that the U.S.A. was established as a southern controlled country. Most of the early U.S. presidents were slave owners from the South, as were most cabinet members, federal judges and ambassadors. Slavery in the U.S. came to an end as it proved to be a fetter on the labor policy of the industrial capitalists and a competitor for control of the westward expansion of the country.

CAPITALIST SLAVERY also came to an end when various progressive movements converged to force the slave system to end. Black people were critical in this process, both within the slave system as well as from the free states of the North. Abe Lincoln was not the Great Emancipator that we have been led to believe. Lincoln and the main controllers of northern capital vacillated over freeing the slaves and were conciliatory to slave interests. Lincoln was quick to advocate a weaker Reconstruction program to keep the Radical Republicans from advancing their program—one that would grant equal civil rights to black citizens. This is the reality behind his Emancipation Proclamation, which, when Lincoln first proclaimed it in 1862, only freed slaves in those states that remained in rebellion in January 1863. It did not apply to other states and did not grant equal rights to the freed slaves.

Reparations—repairing what the evil of slavery had done—were at the heart of the Congressional debate over how Emancipation would be organized. One historical marker for the debate was an 1867 repara-

tions bill introduced by Radical Republican Thaddeus Stephens.⁵ The bill was an attempt to pass a law for redistribution of land, 40 acres to every former slave. The bill did not pass, but what was won for the ex-slaves was the institution of free universal public education, so that people could become literate and have some chance of negotiating their way in a new society.

What was attained the period that followed was an education that varied from the barest of reading, writing and arithmetic instruction to the Howard-Fisk-Atlanta axis of higher education for the black professional elite. If land distribution had won the day instead of education, we would probably have gotten something similar via a process of small black landholders being dispossessed of their property, leading to fewer but bigger black landholders. Nothing that appeared at that time could have stopped the march of history toward a class system being orchestrated by the systemic structures of capitalist society and culture.

THE NEXT MAJOR EXPERIENCE of social disruption of blacks was the proletarianization of the black community in the early part of the 20th century, part of the transition from a southern, rural agricultural environment to a northern, urban, industrial environment. Sharecroppers became wage-workers, and the legacy of the past continued within new social forms. Employment, education, housing, and other forms of discrimination persisted. Black activists of the time demanded change: a combination of reparations and a demand for basic fairness. It was primarily about getting jobs through political reform—from the fair employment practices to equal opportunity to affirmative action. Change did happen, but it fit a history of on-again, off-again policy, all based on the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed the rights, privileges and immunities of citizenship, due process and equal protection under the law. The Supreme Court has used it to rationalize racism in one instance and then social justice in another.

Racist oppression targets all black people, so it has been a national demand to elimi-

nate it. Black unity has historically been a necessary call—if you're catching hell (or likely to), then you're a candidate for being in the struggle to fight back (as we used to say in the 1960s, every Negro is potentially Black). But these two historical experiences, emancipation from slavery and from sharecropping, reveal that black people have in fact acted on the basis of their class interests whenever possible. What often hides this is that the black middle classes, small and thus unable to fight alone, have always needed to lead the black masses in order to get what is in their middle class interest. This is as true for black people in the U.S. as it was for colonized nations.

WHILE BOTH HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES have been about reforming life to make things better, one was about revolutionary transformation as well. The end of slavery was revolutionary in that one social system was ending and the issue was then about what system would replace it. Reparations paid in land would have enabled black people to become actors in shaping a post-slavery society as full landowning actors. But black people were denied that role in history. The later proletarianization process was about blacks trying to integrate into an existing industrial society, especially the trade unions. The best the revolutionary movement could do was take up the old demand for land, and this was expressed in resolutions passed by the Communist International in 1928 and 1930.

These lessons from history lead us back to our main question: at the present time to what extent is the demand for reparations for reform or for revolution? My argument is that we live in revolutionary times and that the world is being reorganized around new forces of production, creating a new stage of global capitalism. Most people who raise the demand for reparations are thinking about reforms, impacting the actual day-to-day lives of people who suffer the legacy and contemporary manifestations of the historical crimes against black people. To make the new history we need, however, the key question is how we link the fight for reform to the revolutionary process, to the social dis-

ruption and social cohesion underway today, so that when we get results, it can end our suffering once and for all. We've got to keep our eyes on the prize!

Reparations and the Process of Reform

THERE ARE FOUR MAIN FORMS of reparations as reform demand: First and most basic: *We demand back pay!* Slavery was work for no pay. Slavery was a system that produced vast wealth that has been perpetuated through history via inheritance protected by a racist class biased legal system. The demand for back pay requires answers to seven key questions: How much wealth did black people produce during slavery? What were reasonable wages that should have been paid? What interest should be calculated for the intervening years of no pay? How much should be paid back, both in the aggregate as well as to individuals? Who should be eligible for payment? Who should pay? In what form should the payment be made?

These questions will be settled in time as a matter of political economy, history, and law. The main point is that these are answerable questions. However, if reparations becomes nothing but a cash transfer, then it will be a momentary cash flow of short-lived significance. Imagine most of the community hitting the number at the same time. Oh boy, what a weekend! But does anyone think that, after a month or so, the basic misery and degradation of our community will have changed?

Second: *We demand an apology!* This is fundamentally a moral question that speaks to the very character of the country. We have had speeches and press releases, but what is needed is congressional action, bills from every involved state legislature, if not a constitutional amendment. Most religious denominations are implicated in slavery and its aftermath, as are the leading financial institutions and intellectual centers—universities, journals and magazines, libraries and professional associations. The cancer of racism has always been as American as apple pie. The apology needs to be encoded into mission statements, and declarations, but also the very liturgy of religious ceremony

needs to ask forgiveness to make the cure work.

Third: *We demand a new official historical record!* We have not had an honest rewrite of the official history of this country. Many people are at work on this, but I am not referring to the hip, Washington, D.C., black cultural workers in national institutions like the Smithsonian, but the state-sponsored textbooks that pervade every school in the country. The main points to be taught to everyone are as follows: The founding fathers and the U.S. Constitution were fundamentally flawed, as supporters of slavery. The Confederacy and all confederates were traitors and terrorists who should be permanently remembered as a disgrace to the country. The entire U.S. capitalist economy was built as a racist genocidal system!

Fourth: *We demand a multicultural public sphere!* More than history as text about the past, the public rituals of political culture must change. Some southern states still use the symbols of the Confederacy, as do many colleges throughout the former slave states. These are instances of public funding for positive commemorations of an evil past. Certain practices should be against the law. In Europe it is against the law to sell Nazi paraphernalia, but in every southern state, confederate memorabilia and souvenirs are to be found everywhere.

OVERALL, these demands are attempts to repair the damage done by slavery. I support all of these demands, and place great emphasis on the economic aspect of reparations. As far as I am concerned, the highest level of reform for improving the quality of life for the majority of African Americans would be to implement effectively the 1944 proposal for an Economic Bill of Rights by President Franklin D. Roosevelt⁶:

The right to a useful and remunerative job in the industries, or shops or farms or mines of the Nation:

The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;

The right of every farmer to raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living;

The right of every businessman, large and small,

to trade in an atmosphere of freedom from unfair competition and domination by monopolies at home or abroad;

The right of every family to a decent home;

The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health;

The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment.

The Right to a Good Education

LET US GET REAL about solving the problems we have: inadequate jobs and insufficient income, limited and often no health insurance, bad housing, and lack of security for our old age. These 1944 reform demands were part of an expanding industrial capitalism trying to accommodate working people and keep them from the world socialist alternative. Now we have the demonic threat of a global capitalism with new labor needs, and no need to maintain the old industrial social contract. This is a new day and we have to have new thinking.

Reparations and the Process of Revolution

MY BASIC ARGUMENT is that we are in a period of revolutionary social transformation, and therefore to think only in terms of reforms in such a period, compromises our hope for freedom. Furthermore, at this point reform is of importance to people who are positioned to survive in the new society, but seems highly unlikely for people who are delinked from the security that they once had in the last industrial period of development. When industrial workers were needed we had health insurance, but in this period of being replaced by computers and robots, we no longer get it. We need a new system or many of us face a slow dance of death, and for some of us it is a fast death not slow. And all of this is public and legal. So, yes, we have to fight for every reform of concern to people, but we have to link this fight to a revolutionary vision and strategy for freedom and an end to suffering once and for all.

The fight for reparations must be seen in its proper historical context. We are moving into the information society. There are at

least three basic principles that we have to fight for as part of a revolutionary vision and strategy:

- 1.) Cyber-democracy: everybody has access to information technology
- 2.) Collective intelligence: everyone is counted in our virtual consensus
- 3.) Information freedom: all digital information is free with no commodification

These three values are the basis for a new 21st-century counter-public sphere, in the terms of Manuel Castells a "grassrooting of the space of flows." We are in an information revolution being guided by the interests of capital globalization. These interests are shaping the information society in the image of the corporation. Our revolutionary vision must construct the information society in quite different terms.

CYBER-DEMOCRACY is about people having access to the tools of information technology, to computer literacy, as well as ownership or use of machines and Internet connections. We need the same fervor freedom fighters had for learning how to read and write in the 19th century for computer literacy in the 21st century. The greater policy demand for everyone that this implies is free universal life long learning for everyone.

Everyone is being put into the databases of corporations and the government. However, grassroots community level leadership is usually not building its own databases, the information needed to educate, organize and mobilize their constituency. Just as new forms of e-commerce and e-government have transformed capital and the state, so will cyber organizing have to transform leadership and movements for social justice.

Reparations have to be advanced as a demand from the social dispossessed, as a class demand, from within the information revolution, as a demand for black people to become actors vying for power to shape the new information society. This really is not about getting fish but learning how to fish. And there are some new kinds of fishing going on. New tools. New life styles. New sciences to learn. New art to make.

Tactics: Toward an Action Program

WHEN THE OBJECTIVE FORCES of revolutionary transformation are embraced by appropriate organizational forms and programs of action, the link between reform and revolution can be achieved. In this case an appropriate program of action to arm the youth and digitally divided as a critical social forces with revolutionary consciousness and the technical tools for revolutionary transformation in the information society. My argument is that we are at a revolutionary point of transition. The information revolution requires that people sum up their experiences, generate ideas, and communicate in new ways using information technology. Reparations—we want to repair history from yesterday and today, to end the wrongs forever. This requires that our demands fit the 21st century, not the 19th or 20th-century industrialization.

Now the general question is the same as Lenin asked in his time (1901)⁷:

Where to begin?

Lenin proposed a network of activists to develop a national hard-copy newspaper to link the small battles into one great movement and a revolutionary party. This newspaper based organizational strategy also shows up in the fight for black liberation. Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther are among those who used this approach. But today the new media is not the hard-copy newspaper, the radio, or the cable TV—it is the computer, the World Wide Web, and the Internet.

Our demand for reparations has to result in our being able to fight back – more unity, more resources, and more action. This paper is a call for action. In addition, we believe that one must link theory with practice so in each case we have provided a URL to one of our websites so that you can examine the experience these ideas are based on.

Here are five basic guidelines for action:

- 1.) *Build community technology centers as bases of operation.* This is the context for advancing our three revolutionary prin-

ciples. One can include here schools and libraries, but also local commercial shops like Kinko's, and other community centers that provide low cost or free computer training and Internet access. Our example is at www.murchisoncenter.org

- 2.) *Build virtual community by developing websites and linking up.* We can unite in cyberspace and overcome this terrible period of demobilization. One of our recent examples is the unity of black churches at www.cyber-church.us
- 3.) *In cyberspace we can network our small voices into one big voice.* Our recent examples include the following: The debates at the local level after 9-11 www.africa.utoledo.edu/911; and a national conference in New York on Reparations. www.murchisoncenter.org/reparations
- 4.) *Our theory needs to be grounded in and based on the summation of our actual struggles.* Our recent example is: www.communitytechnology.org/cyberpower
- 5.) *We need to strike not only when the iron is hot, but where the iron is hot.* We have the experience of using the Internet for the Seattle mobilization against the World Trade Organization, or for global support for the Zapatistas in Mexico. We can also recall the Internet mobilization that made the 1998 Black Radical Congress a success. In terms of independent media, the main example is www.indymedia.org, with its many local centers spreading all over the globe. Such efforts are multiplying along with the many social movements that meet the demands of the times in which we live.

The reparations issue is a battleground that unites all kinds of people in the black community. The black middle class is poised to take the leadership in court cases and resolutions passed in city councils, state legislatures, and congress. They will lead the fight for reform and stop short of what I am suggesting. The crisis we face is to heighten mass consciousness for an expanded discourse that aims at making real, lasting, sustainable changes. No band-aids this time. We need a new generation of cadre to embrace the road

of Malcolm X and take up the challenge to fight for reparations as a revolutionary demand and set in motion a leap in radical black struggle. This is time for a 21st-century approach to black liberation, social justice in the information society.

Endnotes

1. See the *Forethought to the Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Dubois, published 100 years ago (1903) <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/Dub-Soul.html>
2. See the online conference held in New York City as a recent example of the ongoing debate, <http://www.murchisoncenter.org/joshua/reparations/index.html>
3. See <http://www.murchisoncenter.org/reparations/resources.htm>
4. A more in-depth discussion of the historical basis for this argument can be found in the text: "Introduction to Afro-American Studies" See <http://www.murchisoncenter.org/rahul/introbook/index.html>
5. See <http://www.murchisoncenter.org/reparations/politics.htm>
6. See http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Human%20Rights%20Documents/FRoosevelt_EconBillRights.html
7. See <http://www.marx.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/may/04.htm>



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