

Taking Ta-Nehisi Coates Seriously

In June 2014, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote [a feature](#) in *the Atlantic* arguing that the terrible history of blacks in the United States justified reparations. Many consider this a radical proposition. Yet critical reaction was mild.

Kevin Williamson, [writing in](#) *National Review*, disagreed with Coates' proposal but was impressed with the "beautifully written monograph," describing the prose as "intelligent and sometimes moving." In his muted critique, Williamson gives little weight to the faulty logic and fundamental injustice of Coates' proposal.

Williamson is not alone. Other writers, like David Remnick of the *New Yorker* and media critic Jay Rosen esteem Coates as a public intellectual, perhaps the public intellectual of our time. "The more radical Coates's critique of America, the more tightly America embraces him," [comments](#) Carlos Lozada in a mildly critical appraisal. With few exceptions, the reaction of intellectuals to Coates' irascible essays has been rapturous. Even critic Rod Dreher [finds moving](#) Coates' account of his difficult and race-dominated early life.

In all this commentary, careful review of what Coates is saying, its pros and cons, is overshadowed. Coates' passion is understandable, his suffering as a child disarming. But passion need not displace reason. In most of Coates writing, it has.

Mr. Coates begins his Reparations article with a quotation from Deuteronomy, which says that a freed slave should get something in return for the bondage he has suffered. He continues with another quotation, from 17th century philosopher John Locke's Second Treatise on Government, which runs in part: "...there is commonly injury done to some person or other, and some other man receives damage by his transgression: in which case he who hath received any damage, has, besides the right of punishment common to him with other men, a particular right to seek reparation."

My own knowledge of Locke is far from complete. I was curious, therefore, to read a little more of what he wrote on this topic. Coates gives no page number, but I found a similar quotation, which is as follows: "In the latter case, the person who has been harmed has, in addition to the general right of punishment that he shares with everyone else, a particular right to seek reparation from the person who harmed him." (Second Treatise, Chapter 2, para 10.)

The quotes establish two principles: that a freed slave deserves recompense, and that the recompense should come from

“the person who harmed him.” This key phrase is omitted in Coates’ version.

The rest of Coates’ article goes on to violate both these principles, since he claims that 21st-century white people, who were not party to the moral crime of slavery, should make reparations to 21st-century black people who were not victims of it. Whatever the plight of modern of African Americans, if those responsible are dead, why should the living, most of whom are not even descendants of the oppressors, pay? The rest of Coates’ piece is an attempt to trace a line of causation to implicate modern white Americans.

In fact, the situation of African-Americans today is quite possibly better than it might have been had their ancestors remained in Africa – or so says journalist Keith Richburg. In [Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa](#), Richburg writes: “[E]xcuse me if I sound cynical...it’s Africa that has made me this way. I feel for her suffering...But most of all I think: Thank God my ancestor got out, because, now, I am not one of them. In short, thank God that I am an American.”

In other words, in Richburg’s opinion, African-Americans now, for all the tragedy in their past, are better off than if their ancestors had remained in Africa. If American blacks are not in fact worse off than they would have been absent slavery, why reparations? Coates demand for reparations fails on grounds of justice, fact and logic. So what are his other arguments?

He begins the piece with a sad account of one Clyde Ross, a bright lad, apparently, born in rural Mississippi in 1923, one of 13 children. Life was tough for Clyde. His parents were “robbed of the vote...through the trickery of the poll tax and the muscle of the lynch mob” in the 1920s. His illiterate father lost his land because he could not pay back taxes. Clyde lost his horse in a sale forced by a white buyer. We are not told why his father agreed to the sale nor why a poll

tax is 'trickery' rather than just unfair. "It was in these early years that Ross began to understand himself as an American—he did not live under the blind decree of justice, but under the heel of a regime that elevated armed robbery to a governing principle."

The fundamental illegality of America is a theme that runs through the article, even though many of the incidents that Coates recounts do follow law. It's just that the law seems racist to Coates, which at times it was. It is the same story with home ownership, a topic that makes up the bulk of the article. In the early twentieth century, "black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market through means both legal and extralegal. Chicago whites employed every measure..." Redlining meant that "[n]either the percentage of black people living there nor their social class mattered. Black people were viewed as a contagion." The entire mortgage industry was "rife with racism." The result is that neighborhoods like Lawndale in Chicago are now poor and crime-ridden.

The lives of black Americans have improved since the Jim Crow era, Coates admits partway through his essay, but he takes no comfort from the fact because the black-white wealth and income gaps remain large. When a black man does well it's because he is twice as good: "Barack and Michelle Obama have won. But they've won by being twice as good—and enduring twice as much."

Perhaps Coates has seen Barack Obama's still-sealed Harvard transcript? He offers no other evidence for this claim.

For every white contribution there is a racial sin: "If Thomas Jefferson's genius matters, then so does his taking of Sally Hemings's body." (Did it happen? [We can't be sure.](#))

And so the article goes on, alternating heartbreaking anecdotes and frequent allusions to slavery with depressing

statistics to illustrate the plight of blacks and the planful racism of whites.

How fair is Coates' attack on whites? Every society able to do so has owned slaves at one time or another. Many countries in various parts of the world, including Asia and Africa, still do. But Europeans were the first to abolish slavery on their own, without a fight. They get no credit from Coates. Some 620,000 Americans died in a war that was mainly about slavery. They get no credit either.

"This country was formed for the white, not for the black man," quotes Coates. But is it fair to use John Wilkes Booth as a white spokesman?

Racial housing discrimination was outlawed by the Fair Housing Act of 1968. "By then the damage was done," writes Coates. Not according to economist Thomas Sowell, who has pointed out that real discrimination would mean that loans made to blacks should be on average more profitable for banks than loans made to other groups. In other words, black borrowers should be held to higher credit standards than others. But over the past several decades, loans to blacks are not in fact more profitable than average. None of this is discussed by Coates who rejects all evidence that racial discrimination has diminished. Indeed, it is no longer just discrimination. White supremacy is the problem now.

Evidence for this is found in the exodus of whites from urban areas. "When terrorism ultimately failed, white homeowners simply fled the neighborhood," writes Coates. "The traditional terminology, white flight, implies a kind of natural expression of preference. In fact, white flight was a triumph of social engineering, orchestrated by the shared racist presumptions of America's public and private sectors."

What is the proof? Who were the engineers? What were their aims? Are there other possible explanations?

Of course there are, but Coates ignores them. He does quote a white homeowner who in fact suggests one. The man objected to a potential new African-American neighbor, saying, "Bill Myers was 'probably a nice guy, but every time I look at him I see \$2,000 drop off the value of my house.'"

It's true that if predominately black neighborhoods develop bad reputations, people likely will be more resistant to racial integration. That's self-protection, not racism – unless the black neighborhoods have been wrongly stigmatized. But Coates himself quotes statistics that make the neighbor's point. Black neighborhoods are statistically more crime-ridden than comparable white ones. White flight is not social engineering, but prudence—excessive perhaps, but not racist.

Coates ends his long article with Germany. If any country owed reparations, it is surely Germany after the Second World War. The survivors of the Holocaust were still living and so were many of the murderers of their co-religionists. Locke's criteria were well met. In the end, the Germans paid modest amounts to Israel and other Jewish causes.

But the Germans had good reason to hesitate, despite the overwhelming case against them: the ruinous reparations they were forced to pay after World War One. The effort to cope with the depredations of war combined with enormous debt led to hyperinflation and economic collapse in the next decade. Growing national resentment at the unfairness of the treatment imposed on them found its outlet in Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party.

The case for U.S. reparations is infinitely weaker than Germany's. The victims are dead, as are the perpetrators of the ancient evils of slavery. Tracing historical causation, as Coates does so confidently, is dodgy. Whites cannot escape responsibility by "disavowing the acts of one's ancestors, nor by citing a recent date of ancestral immigration," says Coates.

But why not? Most admit the innocence of those “dreamer” kids brought to this country by their illegal immigrant parents. Many white Americans will justifiably disclaim responsibility for the sins of their ancestors.

The first German reparations had disastrous and world-injuring consequences. It is not unlikely that the reparations Coates demands from white America would cause resentment and division almost as destructive to this country.

Does he care?

At every turn Coates interprets each bad thing that happened to black Americans as engineered by whites; each good thing is interpreted as an unintended consequence. As long as whites pay, Coates is untroubled.

Many readers are content with Coates’ output as eloquent prose poetry. But if he is to be considered more than a stylish provocateur, he needs to add more reason to the mix.

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