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Reparations: Cui Bono?

Kevin Carson

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David Horowitz, the leading figure in the anti-reparations movement, admits that justice would have been done by breaking up the plantations and dividing the land among freed slaves in 1865. Awfully generous of him, considering he knows that option is safely out of the realm of possibility. Horowitz also gets a lot of mileage out of quoting fellow neoconservatives like Marvin Olasky on the social pathologies of inner city blacks, and blaming them on the Great Society. In fact, these two issues are closely related.

If you've read *Regulating the Poor*, by Piven and Cloward, you know that illegitimacy and other social pathologies don't date back to the War on Poverty, but to a decade or more before LBJ. It was after the war, when the cities were overwhelmed with black sharecroppers who had been tracted off their land, that the problems really began. Unlike the Okies who at least had migrated to agricultural areas, blacks moving into northern cities had no relevant job skills. It was the astronomical rate of inner city unemployment and the economic irrelevance of fathers that led to the disintegration of the family, beginning in the 50s.

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This takes us back to Horowitz. The land that the black croppers worked and were tracted off of—for the most part the same land their grandparents had worked as slaves—should rightly have belonged to them in the first place.

But what happened to southern blacks was only a harsher form of what's happened to the laboring classes of all races since the seventeenth century. It's called "primitive accumulation." Modern capitalism got its start by robbing the European peasantry of their customary rights in the land, and then transforming them into a propertyless working class. In England, the Restoration Parliament's "land reform" turned copyhold tenants into tenants at-will, and thus robbed the majority of peasants of their property rights. From 1750 to 1850, a series of "acts of enclosure" deprived villagers of their collective rights to something like a fourth of the arable land in England.

The landlords and industrialists deliberately carried out enclosure because they saw the commons as a source of economic independence for the working class. As Arthur Young of Lincolnshire said, "[E]very one but an idiot knows, that the lower classes must be kept poor, or they will never be industrious." The Commercial and Agricultural Magazine warned in 1800 that leaving the laborer "possessed of more land than his family can cultivate in the evenings" meant that "the farmer can no longer depend on him for constant work."

As if these acts of robbery weren't enough, the industrial revolution took place in an England where the combined effects of the Poor Laws, Combination Acts, laws against vagrancy, Pitt's various "emergency" suspensions of habeas corpus, etc., placed the entire working class under a police state. The vagrancy laws alone, which forbade workers to move from one parish to another without an official permit, resembled the South African internal passport system. The so-called "laissez-faire" capitalism of the industrial revolution depended on human servitude.

In frontier areas like America, the ruling classes feared the economic independence that open land would give laborers, and relied on the state to restrict access to unclaimed land. Even when land was opened to settlement, as in the much-vaunted Homestead Act, the state gave wealthy land speculators preference over ordinary settlers. Most of the white laborers who settled America, through the early nineteenth century, were indentured servants or convicts. Considering the harshness of punishment under the indenture system, and the number of minor infractions for which the term of indenture could be extended for years, it is likely that most indentured laborers died in service.

We are today forced to sell our labor on the bosses' terms, because in the past we were robbed. "Forty acres and a mule"—for all of us—ain't just a cliché. It's JUSTICE.

Which brings me to the point of this article—reparations. The furor over reparations must really be a hoot for the ruling class. It's the oldest trick in the book: keep the producing classes fighting each other so they'll be too busy to fight the bosses. For example, for most of the seventeenth century in Virginia, there was little legal distinction between black and white servants. Servants of both races often intermarried, and began to develop a common class consciousness. The servant class, black and white, fought the planters in Bacon's Rebellion. Clearly, this wouldn't do. The Slave Codes, "white skin privilege," and racist ideology on a large scale, were the ruling class response to this crisis. And it worked pretty well, didn't it?

The same is true of the reparations movement. Like "affirmative action" for professional jobs ("black faces in high places"), it is more about the interests of the black bourgeoisie than those of working people. Cabinets, legislatures, and boardrooms that "look like America" just mean everyone can have the pleasure of being screwed by people of the same skin color. Likewise, although I've seen a few people on the libertarian

left, like Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, who genuinely intend to use the proceeds of reparations for grass-roots empowerment, it's a fair guess that most of the civil rights establishment view it as a cash cow for themselves. For Jesse Jackson, it's probably just another shakedown like the Anheuser-Busch distributorship.

At the same time, reparations will not hurt the plutocracy. So long as the statist roots of class privilege are left untouched, the usurers, profiteers and landlords will manage to adapt any "reform" to their own benefit. Monopoly capitalism will just pass the increased cost of reparations along to consumers, as it does all other forms of "progressive" taxation. Which means that the descendants of convict laborers and indentured servants will effectively be taxed to pay reparations, which in turn will almost certainly be skimmed off by people like Jackson. Just another example of how identity politics is being used to disrupt solidarity between working people of all races.

So as an alternative to reparations for slavery, how about reparations for primitive accumulation instead? Lets make a united front in the class war, instead of letting class be hidden behind race relations. The way I see it (I'm a Proudhonian mutualist, by the way, not a Marxist), all tenants paying rent on apartments, urban tenements, public housing, etc., should stop. Those of us working for manufacturers and other large employers should "fire the boss," as the Wobblies put it, and keep the fruit of our own labor. Agricultural wage laborers should dispossess the agribusiness companies and rich landlords whose plantations they work. Possession, for groups and individuals, should be the basis of ownership. The land to the cultivator, the shop to the worker, free and equitable exchange.