

**Excerpts from Susan Neiman,**

***Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil (2019)***

Any serious discussion of American reparations for slavery must acknowledge two facts:

1. America's wealth is intrinsically bound up with profits from slavery, from the plantations of the South to the factories of the North.
2. Chattel slavery was abolished in 1865, but it was replaced by other forms of subjugation that were not just a function of custom and prejudice but a matter of law.

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You cannot choose your inheritance any more than you can choose your parents. You can only choose your relationship to them. . . . But if you maintain a relationship, and especially if you assume any part of a legacy, you should be bound to acknowledge its context. Most states require that debts be paid before deceased people's assets are distributed to their heirs. It's an aspect of law that is based on intuition and fairness: you have no right to enjoy the benefits of an inheritance without assuming its liabilities as well. There is no corresponding moral rule; unlike personal property, historical debt can rarely be quantified. Yet the intuition embodied in the law is one we preserve.

Coates's argument is as simple as it is eloquent. Slavery was, among other things, the theft of black labor that produced enormous wealth. For some early white observers, honor and justice demanded that at least part of the wealth be given to those whose labor produced it. If it can be proved that legal measures created to subjugate African Americans persisted a century after slavery was abolished,

the debt that was owed to enslaved people should be paid to their heirs. The evidence for those claims was overlooked only because, for too many Americans, the period between the Emancipation Proclamation and the Montgomery boycott is simply blank. Recent research allows us to fill in the blank. Yet even earlier, Martin Luther King wrote, “The South deluded itself with the illusion that the Negro was happy in his place; the North deluded itself with the illusion that it had freed the Negro. The Emancipation Proclamation freed the slave, a legal entity, but it failed to free the Negro, a person.”

Reparations, Coates argued, would be the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences. It’s dishonest to appeal to national pride without acknowledging national shame. If you’d be appalled by a German nationalist who boasted of Beethoven and bratwurst while ignoring Buchenwald, you cannot confine your vision of America to the words of the Founding Fathers or the deeds of the Greatest Generation. You must own American evils as well. Doing so, Coates wrote, would initiate a national renewal. “More important to any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America’s maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders.”

From myth to wisdom: it’s a matter of growing up.