

San Francisco's Reparations Plan Is True Lunacy

Progressives want San Francisco residents to pay reparations for slaves their ancestors didn't own.

Doug Bandow

January 19, 2023

Few issues get the Left more excited than collective guilt. Everybody who lived before the woke era was evil, and that's a lot of people. Truth be told, even Barack Obama and Joe Biden are pretty sketchy, having opposed gay marriage until it was politically convenient to switch sides. Since every guilty person owes reparations, that means a lot of cash for Progressives in Power, or "PiPs," to redistribute. *A lot.*

The latest lunatic idea from PiPs — but then, do they have any other sorts of ideas? — is making San Franciscans pay reparations for slavery, which the city never supported, thereby foisting the burden on many people whose ancestors didn't even live in America. Still, if the city fathers, er, nonbinary, gender-fluid, nontraditional city parents, want to give away money, why not help them? I'm thinking of moving to San Fran and claiming some cash for being the descendent of indentured servants. That seems pretty close to slavery. And though I have no proof that any of my ancestors were indentured servants, they might have been. Certainly, it's just as likely that my ancestors were indentured servants as it is that Sen. Elizabeth Warren's ancestors were Native Americans.

The Human Rights Commission has issued the "Draft San Francisco Reparations Plan" on behalf of the San Francisco African American Reparations Advisory Committee. Evidently, this document does not intend to discuss whether reparations are warranted. Rather, it provides a grand scheme to allow PiPs to engage in the radical social engineering that they have come to love and expect.

The principle for reparations in the case of slavery should be relatively simple. Those who were enslaved in America deserve reparations. The appropriate moment for that compensation was at the end of the Civil War, and the reparations could have occurred through the redistribution of property, most appropriately of plantation land. Of course, there were smaller slaveowners, especially urban dwellers, but the impact of the conflict fell most heavily on the South and wiped out much of the population's wealth. Squeezing payments from that mass of people would have been difficult under even the best of circumstances. But no property, not even from larger estates, was provided to those who had toiled on the land under the lash. Once that moment passed and the last generation of the formerly enslaved disappeared, the case for reparations dissipated.

The appropriate moment for that compensation was at the end of the Civil War, and the reparations could have occurred through the redistribution of property, most appropriately of plantation land.

Nevertheless, much is claimed by the Human Rights Commission report, which is evidently written by PiPs, for PiPs, to empower PiPs. The draft plan declares, for instance, that “The practice of slavery in the US was uniquely violent and disruptive wherein African Americans were foundationally and systematically disconnected from knowledge of their geographies, languages, names, relatives, and historic cultural practices.”

Of course, slavery in America was odious and monstrous, but slavery was a worldwide practice. Ancient empires conquered one another, often slaughtering the men (whether cisgender or trans!) and enslaving the women and children. This process was “violent and disruptive.” The North African states enslaved hundreds of thousands of Europeans. This process was “violent and disruptive.” And those who captured and sold Africans into slavery were ... Africans. This process was “violent and disruptive.” Anyone serious about reparations should be thinking globally.

After all, several African nations should be paying African Americans for past depredations. Residents of the modern countries of Algeria, Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Egypt, Gambia, Ghana, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, and Zambia are historically implicated in the slave trade. The San Fran PiPs should issue a compensation claim to the nations that committed the original sin of kidnapping, detaining, and selling those who came to America as slaves. Why let foreign beneficiaries of the slave trade off the hook for the crimes of their ancestors?

The authors of the 60-page report do recognize that San Francisco was never a hub of the African slave trade. But never mind, explain the creative PiPs:

“Reparations are being demanded by members of the Black/African American communities not to remedy enslavement, but to address the public policies explicitly created to subjugate Black people in San Francisco by upholding and expanding the intent and legacy of chattel slavery. While neither San Francisco, nor California, formally adopted the institution of chattel slavery, the tenets of segregation, white supremacy and systematic repression and exclusion of Black people were codified through legal and extralegal actions, social codes, and judicial enforcement.”

There is a profound flaw in the case for any reparations based on slavery. The practice was a grotesque violation of the human person. It could not be justified under any circumstance. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that slavery made *today's* African Americans financially worse off. Ignore the reality that they came into being only because their ancestors were transported to America. (Conception requires a specific act between specific people at a specific time in a specific place. Alas, biology is far less forgiving than lefty social science “research.”) Almost certainly the economic circumstances, as well as the quality of life and continued survival odds, of African Americans are better in America than they would be in Africa. Consider growing up — or not surviving to grow up — in Liberia, Nigeria, Burundi, Rwanda, or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (A multisided conflict in the latter killed an estimated 5.4 million people between 1998–2007.) Slavery was a monstrous crime against slaves. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that their enslavement made *their descendants* worse off than the latter would have been in Africa.

Nevertheless, there is no evidence that slavery made *today's* African Americans financially worse off.

In any case, what makes African Americans unique is ancestral slavery. Once the issue becomes unjust “legal and extralegal actions, social codes, and judicial enforcement,” then the list of victims who could legitimately seek reparations is long. There are the Chinese, who suffered particularly in San Francisco and California more broadly, as well as the Irish, Jews, and other immigrants. Ethnic Germans were mistreated during World War I, with enduring consequences after that conflict. Native Americans suffered horribly. As public mores change, the list of victim claimants continues to grow: women, gays, trans, disabled, and on it goes. Paying everyone off would turn the transfer society into a reparations society.

Even further afield, the authors admit that so-called “reparations” are really progressive social policy, which is the perfect means to enhance the power, happiness, and fantasies of PiPs. (“I am, therefore I dictate” is the mantra of most PiPs.) The report explained:

“The recommendations included are proposed to combat the ongoing, explicit, anti-Black discrimination that Black citizens in San Francisco continue to experience. For example, the San Francisco African American Reparations Advisory Committee (AARAC) names urban renewal and its continued economic impacts on African Americans as a primary example. The Committee identifies the ways that these harms were enshrined and perpetuated through policy decisions, corporate advocacy, and institutional choices across the last seven decades.”

Of course, potential plaintiffs under *this* standard are almost endless. Urban renewal was a liberal (read: progressive) program that ravaged all sorts of neighborhoods and affected many demographics in addition to African Americans. Occupational licensure has benefited many professionals and has especially victimized minorities and the poor — those who can least afford what amounts to domestic protectionism. Eminent domain has been used to seize private property, especially property in poor neighborhoods, to enrich corporate interests. Indeed, PiP policies, which tend toward social engineering yet are often captured by influential elites, usually have their most destructive impact on the most economically disadvantaged and politically weakest citizens. The U.S., for all its flaws, provides far more economic opportunities than the African nations where those seeking compensation would have ended up if their ancestors had not been transported to the New World. That doesn’t justify the crime of slavery, of course, but it vitiates any claim for “compensation” of the descendants of slaves.

Defending California’s responsibility for slavery, the report’s PiP authors point out California’s undoubted mistreatment of non-slaves. For instance, the report states:

“Facing discrimination from both codified laws and vigilante white citizens, Black communities left en masse in the early days of California’s founding in search of peace and freedom. Between 1850 and 1860, nearly 200 Black families in San Francisco fled to the British colonies to avoid persecution within the state.”

All true. However, *no country* created sooner than, oh, the 2000s could withstand PiP scrutiny. By this standard, most everyone on earth is owed reparations — Russian serfs, Spartan Helots, Japanese peasants, Latin America’s original native peoples, and on it goes.

Again, look at Africa. Imagine living in, say, Zimbabwe *today*. The nonprofit organization Freedom House rated Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda as “Not Free” nations. Any African American who instead was an African living in

one of those countries would deserve reparations for *ongoing crimes* committed against them. Assuming they were still alive.

Perhaps the most astounding claim by San Fran PiPs is that the failure to create a racial spoils system is itself grounds for reparations:

“An ongoing hindrance in California to equitable access in government contracting for Black people, women, and other marginalized identities is Proposition 209, a 1996 constitutional amendment banning affirmative action. Initially passed by a margin of 10 points, the stated intention of Prop. 209 was to ban discrimination and preferential treatment based on race, sex, and national origin, among other things.”

Shocking! Imagine a world in which a majority of Californians — including, notably, many African Americans — believed that the best solution to racial discrimination was *to end racial discrimination*. Who ever thought up this crazy idea? More surprising is that the PiPs did not suggest making this into a thought crime and, thus, additional grounds for reparations.

As one would expect, PiPs proposed lots of new programs to be administered by, of course, PiPs. Five million bucks for every eligible person. Two hundred fifty years of income support for low-income African Americans. (Why don't the rich descendants of the enslaved also deserve compensation?) Various benefits — including “comprehensive debt forgiveness” (meaning *everything!*), tax preferences, protection “from financial speculators or predators,” and (lots of) subsidized housing. And while they're at it, throw in the creation of wonderful neighborhoods, “community hubs,” and “cultural institutions” — imagine the fun PiPs would have with these ideas! Add lots of economic, educational, and health programs and it sounds a bit like Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

There are a few more measures, such as the proposal to “reduce the ongoing burden of stress disparately endured by Black San Franciscans.” At this point, it probably would be more important to mitigate the stress on those supposed to pay for this cornucopia of benefits for PiPs, er, descendants of slaves. Finally, San Franciscans are supposed to develop political support to overturn state policies, such as the ban on affirmative action, after presumably having voted against them initially. All told, a better title for the planning document would be “PiPs in Paradise!”

Left unaddressed is whether anyone would be exempted from the proposed PiPocracy. What about people descended from the Union soldiers who ended the Confederacy and slavery? Or descendants of immigrants or other oppressed peoples — California's early Chinese population, for instance? This latter category also should include disadvantaged whites, such as the poor from Appalachia or those who grew up in Unionist sections of Southern states and suffered after the withdrawal of northern troops after the Civil War. This is just a start. After all, injustice is ubiquitous, which means there are too many victims to keep track of.

After all, injustice is ubiquitous, which means there are too many victims to keep track of.

Of course, PiPs will be PiPs, which means they have no idea how to pay for San Francisco's grand new social experiment. Washington, D.C., can simply print money, politely advertised as the Federal Reserve purchasing federal debt, but the enlightened paradise in California's Bay Area tragically has yet to acquire a dollar printing press. So just who is going to finance this proposed reality show based on *Looney Tunes*? One suspects that many of the people expected to

provide a meal ticket for PiP fantasies would head for the exits if such a program ever was enacted by the city council. And since PiPs don't believe in the police, who would force taxpayers to remain to be plucked as needed? The process would almost be fun to watch if it didn't complete the destruction of what once was a vibrant city.

Slavery was a terrible evil, as was the racial prejudice that continued after abolition. America still has more to do. But creating a racial spoils system to empower lefty elites as they remake the country into their fantasy world has nothing to do with justice. The San Francisco proposal demonstrates that the Left is increasingly deranged and has successively less contact with the real world. Ultimately, PiPs have become a threat to the rights of all citizens and to liberal democracy itself.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire and The Politics of Envy: Statism as Theology.