

PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

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The Case for Reparations

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Because of its visibility, Randall Robinson's new book, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*, may rekindle a broad public debate on reparations. The issue is not new, nor is public debate about it. In 1969, the civil rights leader James Forman presented the *Black Manifesto* to American churches, demanding that they pay blacks five hundred million dollars in reparations. The *Manifesto* argued that for three and a half centuries blacks in America had been "exploited and degraded, brutalized, killed and persecuted" by whites. This treatment was part of a persistent institutional pattern of, first, legal slavery and, later, legal discrimination and forced segregation. Through slavery and discrimination, the *Manifesto* went on to contend, whites have extracted enormous wealth from black labor with little return to blacks themselves. These facts constitute grounds for reparations on a massive scale. American churches were but the first institutions asked by Forman to discharge this great debt.

The *Manifesto* achieved immediate notoriety and stimulated debate in newspapers and magazines. Within a short period, however, public excitement died away.

The issue of reparations has always found favor within the African American community itself, taking root not long after the freeing of the slaves during the Civil War. It flourished around World War I with the Marcus Garvey movement and later found voice in Forman's *Black Manifesto*. It has recently regained vitality, given new life by a recent precedent, the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, in which Congress authorized payment of reparations to Japanese American citizens who had been interned during World War II. In each

session of Congress since 1989, Representative John Conyers has introduced a bill to create a commission to study reparations for slavery and segregation. Although the bill has made no legislative headway, the publication now of Randall Robinson's new book reflects the growing sense among many African

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