



PF Topic Analysis September/October 2015

The 2015-2016 debate season kicks off for Public Forum debaters with the topic **Resolved: The United States Federal Government ought to pay reparations to African Americans**. This is a topic that many people have strong feelings about... but you're going to have to let those go. Chances are, you won't win every coin toss, so it is important that you find a strategy that you are comfortable with for both pro and con. Remember that the purpose of debate is to learn the ideas behind both sides of an issue. Embrace that outlook, and try to keep a cool head.

It is also important to understand from the beginning that this guide uses lots of hypothetical scenarios to illustrate different concepts, but that does not mean I am suggesting that these hypotheticals are descriptive of all people in all circumstances. Particularly when we're discussing economic mobility, there is a tremendous amount of variation between individuals in terms of many relevant factors: background, natural intelligence, quality of education, culture, family life, work ethic, unforeseen life events, and plain luck all come into play. You will get much more out of this guide if you read the provided examples as illustrations of a concept, rather than universal laws. The point of them is to describe one way that a certain outcome could occur, in order to lead you to appreciate the underlying argument, so you can use it (if you so choose) in your debates. In no way should you assume I'm ever making any normative or prescriptive claims, or refusing that other outcomes could also be possible.

Got it? Ok, then let's jump in.



As always, we're going to start by taking a look at the **key terms in the resolution**. Once we know what we're talking about, we'll move into strategic options.

United States Federal Government (USFG) is a pretty easy one. The USFG is the government for the entire United States, based in Washington D.C. It is composed of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. That's all pretty basic, elementary-school-civics type stuff. But it gets a little more complex when you really dive in. The USFG also includes all of the federal agencies (State, Defense, Treasury, etc.), which are a part of the executive branch. There are also a myriad of rules regarding which branch can act on which types of issues, and how. If you feel like you need to study up on the finer points, [this](#) is a pretty good resource.

In PF, I don't generally recommend you invest too much time and energy in questions of process and enforcement. That said, one of the con options on this topic will center around the idea that it would be impossible to successfully execute a reparations project (more on this later). For this reason, I do think it's worth your time to dedicate *some* thought to the "how?" as well as the "why?" Just don't get too caught up here.

One more note on USFG: technically, as any seasoned policy debater will tell you, there is no such thing as the "United States Federal Government" — "federal government" [should not properly be capitalized](#). But arguments about that are lazy and dumb and lack real impacts, so I *insist* you don't make them. Moving on.



The resolution's use of the word **ought** is surprisingly sticky. Throughout the history of philosophy, many ethicists and thinkers have grappled with its precise definition. This is a problem LDers deal with constantly, so it may be helpful for you to consult your LD friends, and/or some of our [past LD topic guides](#).

Briefly, "ought" means "should," but its connotation brings up a philosophical/ethical element. When you say you "ought" to do something, you are making a [normative claim](#). You are saying that the action in question is "good," which is a statement of value. The distinction is that "ought to" conveys a moral judgement, something "should" does not necessarily do (although, in some contexts, it can). However, the two words are very frequently used interchangeably.

In practice, "ought" should just have one main implication for your rounds: on both sides, you're going to want to have some kind of framing arguments. This could be as simple as "ought=what is moral, morality is determined by utilitarianism," or it could be much more complex. It is important, however, that you build your cases in a way that they are strengthened by your framework. If you say "we should determine 'ought' based on util," and then you go on to read a bunch of contentions about abstract philosophical concepts or other non-utilitarian concerns, you will be in trouble. In each contention, you should provide analysis that links your main arguments/impacts back to your framework.

Pay can go one of two main ways, and the difference may turn out to be strategically significant for you. One definition of "pay" is "to give money in exchange for goods or services rendered," according to the [American Heritage Dictionary](#). This interpretation would have two implications: first, it suggests that reparations need to be monetary. Second, it suggests that reparations should be limited to



compensation for services rendered—e.g. providing money to descendants of slaves to address the unpaid value of their labor.

The other main way you might define “pay” is “to make due return to for services rendered or property delivered,” or “to discharge indebtedness for,” “to make compensation for,” etc. according to [The Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#). This interpretation eliminates the monetary requirement, and allows for other types of remuneration (such as healthcare, educational vouchers, land, etc.) The second requirement is a bit blurry here: you might argue that it is the same, or you might argue that words like “indebtedness” and “compensation” suggest that reparations could serve as payment for more abstract social ills, like systematic discrimination.

Whether or not any of this matters to you, of course, depends on whether the specific type of reparations are important to your strategy.

Surprisingly, the key word in the topic, **reparations** does not carry any tricky elements. It is consistently [defined as](#) some variation of “Something done or money paid to make amends or compensate for a wrong.”

African American is [defined as](#) “an American who has African and especially black African ancestors.” Other definitions say “African American” can exclusively be used to refer to people with a black skin tone—e.g. a white South African person would not qualify. Either way, the term does play an important limiting role: only people with African ancestry would be eligible for reparations. Therefore, a black American of—for example—Jamaican heritage would be excluded.



Taken together, we can see that there are three main, slightly-different ways to understand this topic:

1. (Black) American citizens whose ancestors came from Africa and were held as slaves should be given monetary payment to compensate for the unpaid labor of their ancestors.
2. (Black) American citizens whose ancestors came from Africa and were held as slaves should be given money, items, or services of value to compensate for the unpaid labor of their ancestors.
3. (Black) American citizens with African ancestors should be given money, items, or services of value to compensate for a myriad of historical wrongs committed against them and their ancestors, including but not limited to slavery, segregation, structural inequality, mistreatment, etc.

Each of these 3 should also need to involve some sort of framing mechanism in order to deal with the resolution's use of "ought."

If you don't immediately understand why the three interpretations above are meaningfully different, take a minute to think about it. The two main elements of discrepancy surround, first, whether reparations must exclusively be money, and second, whether reparations can be given for many types of injustice, or only for slavery.

The differences may become important, depending on what kinds of cases you choose to deploy, as well as what kinds of cases you are forced to debate. In other rounds, it may not come up at all.



Now that we understand the nuances of the resolution, we will begin to discuss the arguments both sides might choose to make.

Let's begin with the **pro side** of the debate.

One of the most common arguments in favor of reparations is that the legacy of slavery and discrimination have contributed to disproportionately high rates of cyclical poverty in the African-American community. The converse of this argument, obviously, is what American whites unfairly benefitted from the nation's racist past. Therefore, the pro might say, is that white Americans may currently hold wealth that *literally* rightly belongs to African-Americans.

Here is some **evidence** supporting that claim:

(Jacqueline Bacon, author & scholar working on issues about language & justice, "Reading the Reparations Debate." Quarterly Journal of Speech V. 89 N. 3 (August 2003): p. 180, 2003)

The ways in which historical events and actors are related to one another in the accounts of reparations supporters depend on a perspective based on implicature and the rethinking of responsibility for which Gutierrez-Jones calls. Advocates of reparations highlight large, complex economic and power relationships while downplaying discrete connections such as ownership of slaves or



direct financial benefit. Economist Julianne Malveaux maintains that the recent identification of insurance companies that “collected profits generated by slavery” is significant because “it rounds out our knowledge about the many sectors of our society that profited from slavery.” Supporters argue that the benefits of slavery extend through white privilege to present-day white Americans whose ancestors never owned slaves. “Most living Americans do have a connection with slavery,” John Hope Franklin asserts. “They have inherited the preferential advantage if they are white, or the disadvantage if they are black, and those positions are virtually as alive today as they were in the 19th century.” In these arguments, history cannot be boiled down to categories such as slaveholder and slave, proslavery and antislavery, even past and present. These narratives challenge the privatized racial view Gresson describes, used by many contemporary Americans to separate themselves from the nation’s racial history. Americans, past and present, are implicated in and affected by racial power and privilege, which complicate concrete notions of guilt, profit, and responsibility.

In order to really comprehend this argument, it’s important that you don’t reduce it to its strawman version. Obviously, we’re not talking about direct damage-- no one alive today was a slave or slaveholder. The effect has very little to do with the actions of the current generation, and you would be smart to disabuse yourself of understandings that suggest otherwise. If all of your con blocks to this argument just say “modern-day African-Americans weren’t slaves,” you are going to have a tough time against a decent pro team.

Rather, the argument is that wealth compounds over generations. While it is certainly possible for one individual to go from “rags to riches,” that is not the norm. Much more commonly, according to this argument, social mobility moves slowly over lifetimes. This is because having some degree of prosperity allows a person/family to invest—in business ventures, real estate, education, valuable skills, etc. Each investment brings rewards for the next generation, which is then reinvested, and so on.



In order to get a really robust understanding of what that argument means, let's use an example, featuring "Bob," our hypothetical teenage white guy. This discussion is long, but bear with me, because fully comprehending this concept will really, really help you in many rounds.

Imagine Bob's great-great-grandfather immigrated as a young man from [somewhere in Western Europe] in 1830 or so. He had no wealth or connections. Great-great-grandfather takes a job as a farm laborer. He makes very meager wages, but he scraps and saves. After several years, he is able to eke out a small pot of savings. Because people in his time lived simply (no cars to break down or unexpected trips to the ER or expensive phones for children to lust for), he manages to hang on to his savings without having to dip into it. Then, he uses his savings to move his family West, where he is awarded [~600 acres of land at no cost](#) (as married couples arriving in Oregon were given at the time). Great-great-grandfather uses the skills he learned as a farmhand to develop the land. As his children grow, he passes the same skills on to them. Soon, they have enough manpower to grow a surplus. They focus the extra efforts on cultivating something that can be made into a valuable product—maybe they grow fiber crops and produce textiles—which they then sell to their neighbors and area general stores. The family starts to turn a profit, and saves as much of it as they can.

By the time great-grandfather reaches adulthood, he inherits his family's land, raises a family of his own, and continues the family business. He now has a well-established business, which he has been trained to operate since he was young, and he has a modest-but-significant amount of money saved up. Enough to provide for his family in an emergency, and then some. He uses his extra savings to purchase more land, or hires some help, or invests in better tools and equipment. The operation grows, and so do his profits. He starts to make other investments—maybe he buys some stock, sends his children to college, builds a



better house, advertises his products in local papers. By the end of his lifetime, the family business has grown large enough to be the major supplier of textiles to the region.

Now grandfather takes over. He has the double benefit of having trained in the operation since childhood, as well as a degree in business under his belt, thanks to great-grandfather's money. He invests some of the growing company's profits in industrializing the operation, allowing him to produce dramatically more goods than previously. He expands the company to produce finished clothing, as well as raw textiles. He is savvy enough to continue using the latest technology as it develops—he ships products nationwide on rail and automobile, he advertises on television, etc. National chain stores are starting to become normal around this time, and grandfather gets his clothing on their shelves. He now owns a nationwide company that does millions or more in annual sales. His wealth has allowed him to steadily improve the standard of living for himself and his children, who no longer have to actually produce the products themselves, but are free to pursue advanced educations and other valuable skills.

Father uses this privilege to get an MBA from a top school, and takes some high-profile (but unpaid—he can afford it) internships to learn from the best business minds in the country. When he takes over the family business, he uses his business expertise and connections for further growth. He hires a top marketing firm to polish the company's branding, begins distributing internationally, advertises on national TV, and eventually gets into online commerce. Maybe he uses some of his wealth to invest in other ventures, which bring in large profits without father lifting a finger.

Now, Bob is a rich kid who has every opportunity available to him. The circumstances of his fortune have nothing at all to do with him—they are the result of a long string of ancestors each slightly improving his



lot in life over many years. Bob will most likely get good grades, get into a top college, and become a great success in his own right. He will have to work for all of these things. But, according to the compounding wealth argument, he will have an easier path to success than someone whose family did not have the means to enroll him/her in elite prep schools, to fund participation in numerous extracurricular activities, to hire tutors, etc.

No one would say any of Bob's forefathers didn't "deserve" their money—each of them saved, made smart decisions, and worked hard every day for a lifetime. But, the above story illustrates how it is also inaccurate to say any of the men personally earned everything they have with their own sweat—they inherited some of it. Even great-great-grandfather had the outside help of free land from Oregon.

The above example illustrates the fundamental idea behind one of the biggest pro arguments on this topic. Basically, that transitioning from poverty to prosperity often takes multiple generations, because it requires time and long-term investments.

Now, to see exactly how that relates to the pro side of this topic, let's contrast Bob with "Bill," our hypothetical teenage African American. His great-great-grandfather also relocated to America in 1830, but under dramatically different circumstances—against his will, to be sold as a slave. He spent the remainder of his life performing back-breaking labor without compensation or personal freedom. His children, too, suffered under slavery until 1865. The entire family was denied any kind of formal education.



When slavery was abolished, great-grandfather continued tending to cotton fields, but as a [sharecropper](#) rather than a slave. With no education and no experience in any other sort of work, combined with the [continued vitriolic racism](#) in the region, he was unable to get work doing anything else. Great-grandfather's share of the harvest each year was enough to just barely sustain his family, but not enough to save to buy his own land, trapping him in an endless cycle. Even if he could afford some land, though, white people in the area wouldn't like it, and could attack or kill him and his family with [near-impunity](#): no court at the time would convict a white man for killing a black man. The free land giveaway in Oregon had ended over a decade ago, while his great-great-grandfather was still enslaved. Public schools for black children were [continually under-funded](#) by racist legislators, so the children received very poor education.

Around 1910, a [blight of boll weevils](#) destroyed the cotton fields. [Machines](#) were also making human labor less cost-effective for landowners. Faced with the possibility of starving, great-grandfather scraped together the small pool of savings he had managed to collect, and moved his family. Again, due to racism and lack of training, few jobs were available. He was limited to menial chores or demanding and dangerous labor (such as building railroads). These jobs paid so little that his entire family also had to take work to make ends meet. This, combined with the low quality of available schools, kept them from receiving a good education. When the Great Depression hit, things got even worse: job opportunities dried up, and great-grandfather would have to compete with white people for them. [Prejudice ensured the white man always got the job](#). President FDR had just begun a system of national welfare, and the family had no other choice.

About 5 years later, grandfather reached adulthood. During both World War 1, he was able to get work in ammunitions factories. While the pay was still meager, it was better than any of his ancestors had



received. He sacrificed to save as much as he could, and opened a small business. Unfortunately, in the early 1920s, many white citizens were hostile towards black businesses, and often threatened and vandalized them. Some cities even experienced [full-scale race riots](#). Because many small businesses survive on very thin profit margins, the added expense of dealing with danger and making repairs became too costly, and eventually sunk the business. The savings grandfather put into the venture were lost.

During World War 2, grandfather returns to the ammunitions factory. As of 1954, his children are no longer segregated in school. However, they still received [prejudiced treatment](#) from many teachers and classmates. Grandfather becomes involved with the Civil Rights Movement, and slowly begins to see a few of the nation's most racist structures become dismantled. But there is still a long ways to go. While factory work brought in enough money to maintain a decent lower-middle-class life, experience leaves grandfather reticent to ever return to the business world. He continues a career in factory work and lives the rest of his days above the level of dire poverty, but never earns a high enough income to make significant, wealth-building investments.

Father dreams of being the first person in his family to go to college. Thanks to the efforts of many, universities will no longer overtly [reject him](#) just for the color of his skin. He works hard, gets good grades, and earns a large enough scholarship that, combined with a small pot of savings his father scraped together over many years, he is able to attend the local public university. He receives a degree, and gets a middle-class, white-collar job. After a few years, he is able to purchase a modest but suitable house. He never has a lot of extra money laying around to spend freely, but with some budgeting he and his family are able to live a nice, middle-class life.



However, finances tighten as grandfather reaches old age—he was never able to save the large amount of money necessary to fully retire, and factory work has become too grueling for him. Father contributes some of his income to support grandfather and grandmother for the remainder of their lives. This limits the amount of money father is able to save for his own retirement, as well as Bill’s future education. Thankfully, Bill attends a decent public school and makes good grades, so he will most likely manage to go to college with the help of student loans. He plans to spend his first 2 years at community college, to reduce costs.

In this situation, “Bill” has an ok life, and a good chance at landing himself in the middle class. Some others—of all races—certainly have it worse than Bill does today. Plenty of people would see no reason to “feel sorry” for him. The point of Bill’s story is not to paint some tragic picture, but rather to provide an example of the pro argument about compounding wealth. In the same number of generations, Bill finds himself sitting on significantly less wealth and resources than Bob. Certainly, you could not reasonably say that Bill’s forefathers worked any less hard than Bob’s. In fact, they almost assuredly worked harder.

The difference, the pro would say, is that Bob’s family began growing their fortune the moment his great-great-grandfather set foot on American soil (and probably before that, in his home country). Even when he was earning a pittance, the fruits of his labor were his to keep. On the other hand, Bill’s family had very little opportunity to begin building wealth up until his grandfather’s generation, when some better-paying (but still not great) jobs became available to African-Americans. Before that, people were routinely turned away for anything beyond low-paying menial labor due to the color of their skin. Even if Bill starts a business that enjoys quick success in his community, he will nevertheless only be at about



the same place on the “wealth ladder” as Bob’s great-grandfather was. Bob, using the pro’s reasoning, had a “head-start.”

One of the main arguments for reparations is that they are intended to make up for white America’s “head-start.” The idea is that they would help speed up the process of African-Americans securing some wealth on which to build. Another way of expressing roughly the same idea is that reparations are “back-pay” for all of the hours of unpaid labor performed by slaves. Had those men and women been paid for their work, the generational compounding effect may have resulted in a much better status quo for African-American citizens. This, also, is the pro’s answer to the con argument that “he/she wasn’t a slave, so why does he/she deserve money?” When viewed through a lens of generational wealth accumulation, a person might argue that a modern African-American citizen is literally entitled to that money—it should have already been theirs.

Here is some **evidence** on the idea of compounding wealth:

(Bill Bonner, author writing on economics & finance, “Compound effort over time, part II: generations of wealth,” MoneyWeek Financial Magazine, <http://moneyweek.com/compound-effort-over-time-part-ii-generations-of-wealth-12095/>, 5/7/2011)

The longer and harder you work at something, generally, the more success you have.

But we left an intriguing idea dangling. What if you could work at something longer than a single lifespan? What if you could keep compounding for more than one generation? What if one generation could help the next succeed?



The idea is both self-evident and shocking. In America, you are supposed to be self-reliant, self-sufficient and independent. You should believe that you are responsible for your own success. You are supposed to be able to do whatever you want to do, and go as far as your luck and pluck permit.

What if it weren't true? What if your success in life depended largely on your parents and grandparents?

Driving across Baltimore recently we went through a working-class neighbourhood called Dundalk. Fifty years ago, it was a neighbourhood of white, blue-collar factory workers and their families. Men earned good wages at the GM plant, or at Bethlehem Steel, in the ship terminals, mills and factories. Women stayed home and raised their families.

And today? The factories are largely gone. Now, men work in lower-paying jobs in the service sector. Women are single mothers. But they're still in Dundalk.

We have no facts. Just observations and guesses. But fact-finders have already concluded that America has much less 'social mobility' than it used to have, even less even than Europe's sclerotic social-welfare states.

Why do people stay in Dundalk? Are they genetically programmed for the lower middle class? Are they culturally suited for low-skill, low-income employment? Are they educationally prepared for nothing else?

Sociologists argue over the causes. What interests us are the effects. For whatever reason, the next generation picks up where the last one left off.

We know that wealth is accumulated over many generations. We know that just by looking around. Our generation did not build many of the edifices we see, nor clear the fields where are crops are planted, nor invent the automobile, the aeroplane, the television or the toaster. We inherited those things, and much more besides.

We know too that if you're born in New York rather than New Delhi, you're likely to be richer. And we know that if you're born to a rich family in midtown Manhattan, you're likely to be richer as an adult than if you're born to a poor family in Harlem.

And yet, how many people take responsibility for their children's wealth? How many figure out how to compound their success into the next generation and beyond?

There are many things that take more than a single generation to accomplish. If you want mature oak trees lining your driveway, for example, you had better think in terms of generations, or start very early. Olive trees can take an entire generation – 35 years – before they produce a decent harvest. Then, they live for centuries longer.



And what about a skill or a reputation? How long does it take to build a reputation as a great beer-maker? A great winemaker? A great guitar-maker? Or a great banker?

Not years; generations.

The Martin family started making guitars in 1811. Now, everyone has heard of Martin guitars.

The family is still making them.

The Beretta family is still making guns; the business was begun in 1526.

The Rothschilds have been in banking since the 18th century.

The Lemoine family started publishing books in Paris in 1772; they're still at it too. And the Hoshi family in Japan has been running a hotel for 1,200 years!

Of course, these are rare examples. But there are a lot of businesses that involve delicate judgments, unusual habits, or the kind of specialised knowledge that is very hard to come by in a single generation or learn in school.

Parents mortgage their houses to send their kids to school. But the parent who advises his child to stay in school or graduate school may be doing him a big disservice.

The common belief is that people who get advanced degrees earn more than people who don't. Statistically, this is true. But it is misleading. It doesn't mean that any individual who gets a degree or advanced degree will earn more than if he didn't. All it means is that taking the whole population, average people who have more education tend to earn more than average people who have less education. Doctors earn more than carpenters. Engineers earn more than backhoe operators. But the average person earns an average salary. Obviously, if you want to earn an average salary you are better off in a field where the average is high.

But what about earnings that are not average? What about the fellow who was going to be a doctor and instead decides to start a business of his own, or goes to work for a pharmaceutical company? Would he be better off with more years of book learning or more years on the job?

To ask the question another way, would Bill Gates have had more success if he had stayed in Harvard and gone on to law school? We don't know. But it is unlikely.

To turn to a more common example, what about the child who is destined to enter the family firm? Is he better off spending more time in school or going right to work? Almost every parent would say – "let him stay in school as long as possible". If pushed to identify the merits of further education, the parent would say "it can't hurt".

But maybe it can hurt.

People learn, no matter where they are and what they do. So, the real question is, where are they likely to learn more, or which kind of learning will be more valuable?



Book learning has a value – especially in the sciences. But if the hypothesis of ‘compound effort over time’ is correct, it may be more valuable to begin early accumulating the instincts, experience and hunches that prove so valuable in real life.

Plus, time spent in school may not only be less productive, it may be counterproductive. Much of what is taught – depending on the discipline – is not knowledge at all. It is nothing more than intellectually fashionable claptrap which later proves to be completely false. Imagine the poor family that sends a child to an Ivy League school so that he may get a degree in economics or finance. Then, it sends him to a business school so he may deepen his understanding of the subject. By the time the kid finishes school, the family has spent nearly \$300,000 on his education.

Then, when his studies are finally completed, he comes back and applies the latest theories of finance to the family fortune. Had he arrived on the scene in 2005-2007, for example, he might have loaded up the family with a portfolio of mortgaged-backed derivatives, in order to earn higher yields from ‘safe’ investments.

He might have applied ‘modern portfolio theory’ too, like the geniuses running Harvard’s endowment, and wiped out half the family fortune.

Or maybe he would turn his education to the business itself. You can imagine him telling dad and the old-timers that there were new and better ways to do things... and that they should be trying to ‘maximize shareholder value’ by leveraging the firm.

The old timers would shake their heads.

“No... debt doesn’t seem like a good idea...” they would say.

Or, “hmmm.... something doesn’t seem right...”

But asked to explain why they were reluctant to put the new learning to work, they would have a hard time arguing the point. They would only have hunches and habits, the accumulated wisdom of decades; it wouldn’t stand up for long against the mathematical proofs offered by the young MBA!

Finally, the old guard would give up:

“Well, I guess you’re right. We can increase our return on equity by borrowing money... I guess that makes sense.”

And it did make sense – for a while. In 2006, the firm might have been more profitable than ever... and maybe even have bought a corporate jet and begun expanding into new markets.

“Well, I guess Sonny was right,” the old man could say to himself. “It is a new era.”

And so, the firm – like Lehman Bros, which had done business successfully ever since the War Between the States, loads up with debt. And then, when next major cyclical downturn comes, it goes broke!

Julius Caesar never earned an MBA. Nor did Cornelius Vanderbilt. Or Henry Ford. Or Andrew Carnegie. Or practically any of the great successes of business and financial history. MBAs hadn’t been invented!

Caesar learned his trade by following in his father’s footsteps. His father showed him how to be a praetor, a senator and governor of an Asian province. Caesar learned how to talk to people. He learned how to think. He learned who he could trust. His father made the introductions. His father set the pace. Then Caesar was able to step into his fathers footsteps, and keep on walking.



Caesar did not start from nowhere. He did not start with nothing. He started off where his father left him. He launched his career with the capital his father gave him – skills, reputation, experience, money, and contacts.

One of the many under-rated legacies a parent can leave a child is a good reputation. Trust can take generations to build. We trust Mr. Martin to build guitars because his family has been making them for many, many years. We trust Mr. Ford knows how to make cars and Mr. Hershey knows how to make chocolate.

“The thing about doing business in China,” said a man sitting next to us on the plane, “is that it can take a very long time to build up trust. And without it, you’re lost. They don’t trust you. So they won’t treat you very well. That’s how they protect themselves, by cheating you first.”

Trust reduces the cost of doing business. Less need for lawyers and contracts. No need for insurance, bonds and hold-backs. That’s one reason ethnic groups tend to prefer to do business internally. They understand one another. They know what to expect. They know who they can trust, and how much.

Even in well-known, open careers such as filmmaking, banking and politics, trust, contacts and ‘brand’ awareness are extremely important. It’s tough to break into acting or politics, for example, but it’s a lot easier if your parents had already opened a breach in the wall. The number of people in the trade today whose parents and grandparents were also in it prove the point; there are far more of them than would be predicted by pure chance. Of course, it’s easy to see why. The children know how the business works; outsiders don’t. They have the contacts; newcomers don’t. People in the business trust them to know what to do and how to do it. So, it’s much easier to gain entry for someone such as Angelina Jolie (father: Jon Voigt), Michael Douglas (father: Kirk Douglas), Jeff Bridges (father: Lloyd Bridges), or dozens of other well-known political figures.

Of course, that could be said of almost every career and every business – whether it is plumbing or haberdashery. One generation lays a foundation. The next can build on it.

However, in order to get very far with that argument, you will need to win that reparations actually are an *effective* strategy for addressing the wealth gap between white and black Americans. You won’t win



many debates by just waxing poetic about the disadvantages African-Americans have faced; you have to also establish that reparations are likely to *solve/mitigate* these harms. (That part is a bit harder, for reasons we'll cover in the con portion of this guide.) Don't neglect to spend some time in your case establishing solvency.

Of course, you may choose to write your pro case to defend reparations as something other than plain old money. There are a large number of [different proposals](#) you could look into. Some have suggested giving African-American citizens free [college educations](#), guaranteed [healthcare](#), [tax benefits](#), or even [weighted votes](#). Each of these will have different benefits and obstacles. I won't cover these in detail in this introduction, but if you're interested in going this route, check out the links to get you started. I'm also always happy to answer your questions via email.

If you are going to defend non-monetary reparations, it is important that you be prepared to win a debate about whether that is an acceptable interpretation of the topic. Refer back to the first section of this guide if you need a refresher.

There is another strain of possible pro argumentation that avoids the question of solvency. That is approaching the topic as a purely moral question. The basic idea is that America needs to atone for the atrocities committed against African-Americans in the past, and that it ought to be done as something like a symbolic gesture, even if it fails to materially improve people's lives. Some authors argue that this is a necessary step before we can ever help to heal the country's racial divide. Others take a more retributive stance—America's white population stole labor, culture, and lives from victims of slavery, and they should experience some degree of collective punishment for that.



Here is some **evidence** supporting reparations from a purely ethical, non-economic standpoint:

(Allan D. Cooper, Otterbein University, "From Slavery to Genocide: The Fallacy of Debt in Reparations Discourse," Journal of Black Studies 43(2); p. 121, 2012)

But independent of the legal argument, reparations for genocide poses a much more powerful ethical argument. Up until now, the fundamental justification for reparations has been economic: African Americans are owed a debt. Reducing slavery to a cost-benefit analysis connotes that the inherent indignity of being a slave is merely a matter of unfair compensation for labor performed. If this was all it was, then the entire working class of America could demand reparations for their lack of fair pay. But slavery was about much more than economic hardship; slavery related to an assault on the humanity and dignity of African Americans. Robert S. Browne (1972) offers this insight: It is doubtful if one can meaningfully discuss the reparations concept solely within an economic context, in isolation from the associated moral and political considerations which are inseparable from a reparations demand. Conceivably, one might successfully demonstrate the Pareto optimality of a capital transfer of a specified size to the black community, perhaps by demonstrating that failure to make such a transfer might result in an economic wastage of even larger magnitude. But to label such a capital transfer as "reparations," and to justify it solely on the basis of economic efficiency while ignoring the myriad equity considerations which the term reparations implies would be so sterile and mechanistic as to constitute a near insult to the black community's humanity. (p. 39) Zack (2003) simplifies the argument: "Slavery would be wrong if the labor extracted from slaves had no value and never profited those who extracted it" (p. 140). In short, the fundamental flaw in the "reparations-as-debt" argument, espoused by Randall Robinson and most of the recent proponents for reparations, is that it focuses



attention on the net worth of a slave rather than the crime against humanity committed by the perpetrator. It has proved impossible and impractical to calculate the financial loss suffered by slaves and their descendants. But there is absolutely no argument that the Jim Crow policies forced on African Americans were wrong and unjustifiable. Brown v. Board of Education clearly represents a government admission that Jim Crow policies harmed the African American community. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, and other legislative acts implicitly acknowledge that previous governmental policies constituted an infringement of basic human rights for the African American community. The question should not be “What are African Americans owed?” The question should be “How can the U.S. government demonstrate that it no longer endorses or associates itself with the genocidal policies of past administrations?”

Here is some **evidence** that says reparations are important purely for their symbolic value, which is necessary to achieve reconciliation:

(Allan D. Cooper, Otterbein University, “From Slavery to Genocide: The Fallacy of Debt in Reparations Discourse,” Journal of Black Studies 43(2); p. 121, 2012)

In short, financial compensation for victims of genocide, although lacking in any true compensatory value, is a symbolically significant exchange that promotes authenticity to an apology offered by a state to victims of genocide. Compensation represents some acknowledgement that the apology is sincere and that the wrongdoer is prepared to surrender something of value to meet the victimized party halfway as both now proceed into a future that will be developed in partnership with each other. Ideally, reparations should always be tied to an apology; when



the head of France's national railway company offered a formal apology on January 25, 2011, for its role in shipping thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps some 60 years earlier, a lawyer for the more than 600 Holocaust victims and survivors who had filed a class-action lawsuit against the company immediately responded, "Now they should take the next step and pay reparations to the victims" (de la Baume, 2011, p. A6). It is important that an apology be initiated by the wrongdoer and not be part of a demand by a community of victims. "Any apology offered as a result of pressure may (would) not have the attributes that are central to some construction of the apology: that it be freely given and be sincere" (Cunningham, 2004, p. 565). In the end, even limited restitution seems to be more reparative than an effort to apologize; aboriginal communities in Australia were relatively unbothered by prime minister John Howard's refusal to apologize for past genocidal policies as long as the government fulfilled its commitment to provide various forms of restitution.

If you have the time, it would be strategic to advance one or more arguments about both consequentialist solvency and moral obligations. This will create strategic flexibility that allows you room to change course if you find yourself way behind on some point. For example, if you're getting killed on the solvency question, you can frame your later speeches along the lines of "even if reparations don't materially improve anyone's lives, we still need to have them because [xyz]."



Here is a piece of **evidence** that combines economic and non-economic rationale:

(Jamelle Bouie, chief political correspondent at Slate, Slate (online), "How America Should Pay Reparations,"

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/05/reparations_should_be_paid_to_black_americans_here_is_how_america_should.html, 5/22/2014)

With "The Case for Reparations," Ta-Nehisi Coates of the Atlantic sets slavery aside to focus on the long plunder of the 20th century, in which whites used coercion, violence, and government to exclude blacks from the bounty of American prosperity. The civil rights revolution of the 1960s was vital, but it wasn't a panacea, and the problems of today—from the racial wealth gap to the crumbling ghettos of the Midwest—stem from the racist policies of our recent past. Or, as Coates puts it, "White supremacy is ... a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it."

This is more than rhetoric. Black families paid taxes and black soldiers fought for democracy in Europe and the Pacific, but—from low-interest home loans to money for education—they were barred from the benefits of the G.I. Bill. Indeed, the same federal dollars that built the suburbs were used to keep blacks out of them. It was the federal government that "pioneered the practice of redlining," writes Coates, "selectively granting loans and insisting that any property it insured be covered by a restrictive covenant—a clause in the deed forbidding the sale of the property to anyone other than whites. Millions of dollars flowed from tax coffers into segregated white neighborhoods." At the same time, "legislatures, mayors, civic associations, banks, and citizens all colluded to pin black people into ghettos, where they were overcrowded, overcharged, and undereducated."



The case for reparations, in short, is straightforward. As a matter of public policy, America stole wealth from black people, denied them a shot at prosperity, and deprived them of equal citizenship.

And that’s just the 20th century. If you go beyond that—to include all stolen income from the revolution to secession—the balance falls deep into the red. In 1860, translated to today’s terms, slaves represented a staggering \$10 trillion in wealth, an incredible sum. If you include compound interest—to represent the compounding plunder of the next century—you are left with an implausibly large amount of money.

Wisely, Coates doesn’t try to build a proposal for reparations. At most, he endorses a bill—HR 40—that would authorize a government study of reparations. Instead, his goal is to demonstrate the recent origins of racial inequality, the role of the federal government, the role of private actors, and the extent to which the nation—as a whole—is implicated. Even if your Irish immigrant grandparents never owned slaves, or even lived around black people, they still reaped the fruits of state-sanctioned—and state-directed—theft, through cheap loans, cheap education, and an unequal playing field.

If anything, what Coates wants is truth and reconciliation for white supremacy—a national reckoning with our history. As he writes, “More important than 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.”

Still, even if “no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America,” there’s still value in imagining a concrete scheme for reparations, if only to have a sense of the bills we owe. And so, how would we accomplish the task? Would you attempt a massive transfer of wealth? Or would you try to compensate black communities with targeted policies?

The “wealth option,” accomplished by cash payments, is what we tend to think when we hear “reparations.” In this scenario, the federal government would mail checks to individuals, either in a lump sum or spread out over time. There are a few, immediate concerns with this notion. First, who is eligible? Given the pervasiveness of anti-black prejudice, should it go to all black Americans—who, regardless of origin, deal with the burden of white supremacy—or should it go to the descendants of slaves, who share a unique disadvantage? And how do we determine lineage? Through self-reporting? Through a comprehensive census of black Americans? Genealogical records for slaves are so scarce that any method of selection will come with the risk of fraud, since for most, we can’t confirm with absolute certainty that a given person is a descendant of slaves.

And even if we could agree on recipients, how much should individuals receive? A uniform sum or an amount based on your heritage, i.e., the more enslaved ancestors you have, the bigger your payment?

Even with all of those questions, however, there’s a lot to recommend when it comes to cash benefits. For starters, it empowers individuals, families, and communities. They know what they need, and we should trust them to figure out their own interests over the long term. Yes, a cash scheme could never be fully fair, but that’s not the point; what we want is to heal injury and balance accounts, and on that score, it could work.



On the other end is the policy approach. Instead of cash, the federal government would implement an agenda to tackle racial inequality at its roots. This agenda would focus on major areas of concern: housing, criminal justice, education, and income inequality. As for the policies themselves, they don't require a ton of imagination. To break the ghettos and reduce the hyper-segregation of black life, the federal government would aggressively enforce the Fair Housing Act, with attacks on housing and lending discrimination, and punishment for communities that exclude low-income residents with exclusionary zoning.

What's more, it would provide vouchers for those who want to move, subsidized mortgages for those who want to own, and huge investments in transportation infrastructure, to break urban and rural isolation and connect low-income blacks to jobs in wealthier, whiter areas.

On the education front, state governments could end education budgets based on local property taxes—which disadvantage poor communities and disproportionately hurt blacks—and the federal government could invest in school reconstruction, modernization, and vouchers—for parents who want their children in private schools—in addition to higher education subsidies for black Americans. These "in-kind" benefits have the virtue of freeing up disposable income, thus acting as de facto cash payments.

It almost goes without saying that this move for policy reparations would include an end to the war on drugs, an end to mass incarceration, and a national re-evaluation of police procedures to reduce racial profiling. And, looking forward, it could include progressive "baby bonds"—federally managed investment accounts with modest annual growth rates. At \$60 billion a year, according to one proposal, this would help ameliorate wealth inequality for future generations.

There are more policies along these lines, no doubt. The advantage, for most of these, is that they are both universal and hugely beneficial to black Americans.

Of course, however you designed a reparations scheme, it would be incredibly unpopular. Between our racialized disdain for the "undeserving" and general distaste for intrusive government, nothing on this scale could get off the ground. Even if it could, there's an excellent chance the courts would kill it.

And ultimately, as Coates writes, the money isn't important. What's critical is that we reckon with our national crimes against black Americans, to say nothing of Native Americans and other minority groups. We must wrestle with our history, lest we ignore the "certain sins of the future"—or worse—the sins of our present.

I would, however, caution you against trying to cram too many different arguments into your pro case. This is a topic where the pro has the pathos advantage, so don't give that up. Rather than scatter-shotting random arguments, take the time to develop a clear, persuasive, organized story about providing justice for a long-abused people.



Here's one last piece of **evidence** for the pro—it argues that reparations are key to justice, and all other alternatives fail:

(Rodney D. Coates, Professor of Sociology at Miami University (OH), "If a Tree Falls in the Wilderness: Reparations, Academic Silences, and Social Justice" Social Forces 83(2); p. 855, 2004)

Mr. West, daydreams continue to produce nightmares, frustration begets hopelessness, and the victimized continue to spiral down the path to increased poverty. Freedom absent choice produces anxiety, and choice absent power produces frustration, and power absent responsibility anarchy. The slaves were told they were free, but as pointed out by Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois, all they were free to do was starve, sleep in the cold, and eek out a meager existence. The proposed reconstruction made promises of choice but failed to deliver the sustained power to alleviate over 300 years of racial oppression, exploitation, and repression. But ever so brief, the light in the darkness shined, but the darkness comprehended it not. For power never willingly concedes anything, and power was once again snatched from the African, and the regime of the South was re-installed in power. Black codes, chain gangs, and the violence and lynching of the KKK reined hell throughout the south and much of America for the next hundred years. Again the dawn of the 1960s brought new hope and power. As this power, black and unshakeable, threatened to drench urban America in the wake of their sorrow, and fearing anarchy — the voices of appeasement, complacency, and the conservative promised change with all deliberate speed. As the long hot summers filled more and more of our realities, other band aids were proposed — culminating in Johnson's promises of a new reconstruction — the Great Society, etc. Today, as we watch these promises erode and the last relics of our collective guilt, affirmative action, slowly dismantled, a more significant, lasting, and permanent remedy must be achieved. I see no other remedy, no other measure that would provide for justice, of what West called redistributive justice but that of reparations. Anything short of full remediation, full restoration, and full reparations will continue the process of applying Band-Aids to hemorrhaging wounds. Any



program, policy, executive decision, or concerted efforts, history being our guide, will punish the victim with the stigma of a handout, the perception that blacks are getting something underserved, or the jealousy of whites that this benefit is “reverse discrimination.” Such practices ultimately become excuses for system failure, societal inadequacies, and political weakness. Such practices, during times of economic necessity or political complacency, quickly are reversed, reduced, or reconsidered as the failures, inadequacies, and weaknesses are transferred upon the backs of the victims.

The **con**, in comparison to the pro, has numerically more strategic options. Whereas the pro will be best served by prioritizing “depth” in their cases, the con may be better off taking the “breadth” route. Let’s look at some of the possibilities.

One very common con argument is that reparations would increase racial animosity in the United States, and thereby turn back the clock on black-white relations. Some worry that many whites would revert to overt, even violent displays of racism.

This is another place where we have to dig in a bit to gain a useful understanding of the argument—but don’t worry, this exploration will be shorter than Bob and Bill! The racial animosity argument is premised largely on a perception internal link. Consider: money for reparations has to come from somewhere. Most likely, that would involve taxation—as we’ll discuss in greater detail a bit later, that is really the only plausible way to fund a reparations project. Even if there was no tax increase, Americans tend to assume their taxes are paying for anything they don’t like. Since the argument is based on a subjective emotional response, it doesn’t really matter whether citizens correctly understand what is happening. It only matters that, for some reason, they’re mad about it.



Moreover, many people object that forcing all non-African-Americans (or just all whites) to fund reparations is unfair. There are a million small objections: what about Americans who are neither white nor black? What about people of mixed heritage? What about white Americans whose ancestors never owned slaves, or immigrated well after the end of slavery, or even fought (and perhaps died) for abolition? These kinds of things compound the anger that people feel when they are forced to pay for something that does not benefit them, as discussed above. “Why should I pay the debt, if my family had nothing to do with incurring it in the first place?” many ask. By itself, this argument is fairly weak. It is easily answered by the discussion of compounding wealth discussed above, which-- regardless of what you think about its merits-- is a much more nuanced argument, and is therefore likely to prevail in most debates. A better way to use this line of thought would be to further emphasize how *angry* many white citizens will be if they are forced to pay reparations, thus helping your argument that animosity will increase.

In this way, you don't need to win that they are correct to feel angry. You only need to win that, right or wrong, they will be, and that will cause marked deterioration in race relations. If your opponent objects that it is unethical for people to feel that way, you don't have to spend any time trying to argue that it isn't. You can simply reply that whites overwhelmingly opposing reparations is a statement of objective fact, not a normative claim as to how they should feel. If you win that there is a significant material impact to that antipathy, then that is a factor that must be weighed.



Here is some **evidence**:

(Alfreda Robinson, Associate Dean and Associate Director of the Litigation and Dispute Resolution Program, The George Washington University Law School, "TROUBLING "SETTLED" WATERS: THE OPPORTUNITY AND PERIL OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN REPARATIONS," Boston College Law Review, pp139-156, 2004)

Reparations opponents contend that although the case for reparations is profound, the objections to it are similarly intense. Some reparations opponents, like Professor Loury, contend that African Americans have more to lose than to gain from seeking reparations because the hostility toward reparations is just as intense as it is against racial preferences.⁴² In the view of many reparations opponents, focusing on reparations is an engagement in wishful thinking. The potential for white backlash is another basis for opposition to reparations. In response to the view that reparations will bring closure to the painful history of racial discrimination against African Americans, reparations opponent and Boston Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby cautions:

Closure, however, is the one thing a great debate on the subject of reparations is assuredly not going to provide. Far from calming racial grievances, it will only inflame them further A national campaign for a vast transfer of wealth from whites to blacks is not going to make things better.



Additionally, here is a simple piece of **evidence** regarding white America's aversion of the idea of reparations:

(Emily Swanson, Huffington Post, HuffPost/YouGov survey on reparations, "Americans can't even stomach an apology for slavery, much less reparations,"

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/02/reparations-poll_n_5432116.html, 6/3/2014)

But a new set of HuffPost/YouGov polls suggests that most Americans aren't prepared to take the step of making reparations, either for slavery alone or for the century-plus of institutionalized racism that followed.

In one survey, Americans said by a 68 percent to 15 percent margin that the government should not make payments to black Americans who are the descendants of slaves. Americans were somewhat more likely to say they would support reparations for slavery if they came in the form of education or job training programs, but still rejected the idea by a 57 percent to 27 percent margin. Public opinion on the issue appears unchanged in the past decade: In a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll conducted in 2002, just 14 percent of Americans said they would support making cash payments to slaves' descendants.

Factoring in the systemic discrimination that followed for more than a century after slavery's end does little or nothing to budge Americans' opinions. In a second HuffPost/YouGov poll, Americans said by a 69 percent to 15 percent margin that the government should not make cash payments to black Americans "to make up for the impact of slavery and discriminatory policies that continued into the 20th century." By a 51 percent to 33 percent margin, most said they don't support job training or education programs for African-Americans to make up for that combined impact.

The polls were conducted among a group of Americans chosen to reflect racial and other demographics on a national scale.

Nearly half of Americans said the present-day wealth gap between blacks and whites is something that can be attributed to slavery, although an almost equal amount disagreed with that idea. A higher number of Americans said they believed the wealth gap is a result of the years of systemic discrimination that followed slavery's abolition.

In the initial poll, a combined 46 percent said that slavery was a major factor (20 percent) or a minor factor (26 percent) in explaining the current wealth disparity between blacks and whites, but 44 percent said it wasn't a factor at all. Meanwhile, a combined 64 percent said that past discrimination against blacks is a major factor in that gap (34 percent) or a minor factor (30 percent), while only 28 percent said it wasn't a factor at all.

Looking at just African-American respondents, on the other hand, 75 percent said slavery was a factor in explaining the racial wealth gap, including 48 percent who said it was a major factor. Similarly, 87 percent of African-Americans said past discrimination was a cause of the wealth gap, including 62 percent who said it was a major factor.



Overall, the surveys found a significant gulf between black and white Americans on reparations. In the second survey, 58 percent of black Americans, but only 9 percent of white Americans, said they would support cash reparations to make up for the combined effects of slavery and post-Civil War discriminatory public policy. Seventy-six percent of black Americans and only 27 percent of white Americans said they would support education and job training programs.

From here, you need to connect animosity to an impact. There are many possible negative outcomes of increased racial division you could explore. Here's an incomplete list of ideas: straight-up race-based violence, increased economic violence (denying African-Americans jobs, promotions, etc.), rolling back other policies that are important for African-American equality, major psychological harms, some morality-based arguments, etc.

You could argue that racism can't be ended without changing the minds of the racists (otherwise they'll just keep on doing racist things). The problem with that is that the uniqueness question isn't in your favor: there are no reparations now, and racism still exists. You would need to cultivate a pretty good story as to why reparations would birth bigotry in currently tolerant people, or sway those who might be kind of "on the fence," or increase the degree to which current racists are "active" in their hate.

A slight variation on the last argument is that white people currently hold most positions of power in American society (we do have a half black president, but 85% of congress is white, [75%](#) of federal judges are white, [99%](#) of Fortune 500 company CEOs are white, etc.) So, in order for actual structural and legal changes to take place in the short-term, one might argue, it may be important to get white people to enthusiastically support the movement for racial justice. This is another one of those points where you



shouldn't allow the pro to suggest that morality demands support. "It doesn't matter what they *ought* to do," you'll respond, "we're just pointing out what they *will* do, right or wrong."

Whatever you choose, make sure you develop it so that the judge is clear on why it should be a priority.

A related point to animosity is "masking." You could suggest that reparations would be harmful towards African-Americans because of the rhetorical weapon they could place in the hands of racists. Whenever there were any problems in an African-American community, bigots could say "reparations should have fixed this," and use it to feed their narrative of racial inferiority. Similarly, the government and other powerful figures may feel absolved completely of their obligation to deal with racial injustice, including issues that take a more insidious form, such as unequal treatment in the criminal justice system. You need only look into some of the cases of prominent African-American men being [mistaken](#) for [criminals](#), and treated as such by the police, to see the argument that money does not necessarily solve discrimination, or even violence. A final variation on this point is that people (especially whites) will believe that racism has been addressed, and be less moved to activism and protest against it. "You got reparations" will become the new "we have a black president"—an easy way to brush aside concern about various remaining injustices.



Here is some **evidence** that covers masking and white backlash:

(Peter Flaherty and John Carlisle, The National Legal and Policy Center, "The Case Against Slavery Reparations," <http://nlpc.org/sites/default/files/Reparationsbook.pdf>, October 2004)

Reparations advocates ostensibly think compensation would heal racial wounds. Randall Robinson, for example, says there is no chance that America can solve its racial problems without reparations. Actually, it would exacerbate racial divisions. The notion of forcing innocents to pay people who were never enslaved would likely generate bitterness throughout the country. In addition, the iniquitous transfer of wealth from poorer nonblacks to more affluent blacks would stir widespread outrage. Walter Williams, a black professor and columnist, observed, "I can't think of a better fortification for racism than reparations to blacks. . . . To force whites today, who were not in any way responsible for slavery, to make payments to black people—many of whom may be better off [than the whites]—will create nothing but great resentment" among whites. Reparations, writes Robert W. Tracinski of the Ayn Rand Institute, implies that by simply belonging to the same race as slave owners, whites still bear a collective responsibility. Each member is blamed for actions of other members who lived long ago. The ultimate result, he warns, will not be racial harmony or a color-blind society, but "racial warfare." Says Tracinski, "It encourages the view of blacks and whites as a collective of victims pitted against an opposing and hostile collective of oppressors, with no possibility for integration or peaceful coexistence." Recent incidents in Alabama and Mississippi provide a foretaste of what would happen if slave reparations became a reality. In 2000, a record \$1 billion was paid out to black farmers based on a lawsuit that alleged racial discrimination at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Fliers were circulated singling out black farmers who received settlement money, condemning the lawsuit as a massive "rip-off" stemming from governmental pandering to minorities. Slave reparations would involve much more money and be on a much wider scale. The ensuing racial animosity would be unimaginably worse. In addition to exacerbating race relations, slave reparations



also would weaken any national effort to eradicate poverty among blacks. Glen Loury, director of the Institute of Race and Social Division at Boston University, says it would be a Pyrrhic victory for African Americans. “It will undermine the claim for further help down the road, because the rest of America will say, ‘Shut up: You’ve been paid.’”

Another possible argument is that reparations are simply not plausible. In addition to the concerns about who ought to pay, there are also difficult questions as to who should receive payment, and how. The topic seems to take care of the “what about black people whose ancestors did not come from Africa?” question, as we discussed above. However, it does not resolve questions like “what percentage of someone’s ancestry must be African for them to qualify? 1/2? 1/4? Less than that?” and “how would someone go about proving their African heritage?” An even more extreme example might be “how would reparations deal with someone who is mixed race, and who is the child of one white person who descended from slave owners and one black person who descended from slaves?” What about someone of mixed heritage who has a certain amount of “African blood,” but who has primarily identified as another race on legal documents etc. throughout their life? Or a black child who knows nothing about his/her biological origins because he/she was involved in a closed adoption? Someone who never knew their father and therefore couldn’t say exactly what his ancestry might have been? You might think this line of thought is silly, but such things do have to be worked out in order to implement any kind of nationwide, multi-billion dollar program.

In order for that kind of argument to get you anywhere, you’ll need to win that questions of implementation are relevant to the debate. A good argument for that is that it is impossible to determine whether an idea is good or bad until you know at least some of the details. If you decide you want a cat, there’s a pretty big difference between picking up a kitten from the pound and keeping an adult lion in your house. If your friend asks you to go out to lunch, where they’re proposing you go is



usually relevant to you—if they pick a place you hate, you probably won’t go. If you’re deathly allergic to shellfish and they pick a crab place, you definitely won’t be going. If you’re looking to buy a car, you’re going to care whether or not the car runs. In other words, an idea can be good or bad based entirely on execution. This is perhaps more true when it comes to public policy than anywhere else.

It would be possible to attach morality claims to some of the above implementation issues: “[forcing innocent parties to pay is immoral](#),” etc. Plenty of American whites have no direct connection to slavery (because their family immigrated last year, because their ancestors were active abolitionists, etc). This is a very common objection to reparations. In the provided link, the author states that “reparations are a collectivist affront to the American ideal of individualism.”

However, this is most likely not a great strategy for the purposes of our debates. For one thing, there’s no clear impact. Sure, lots of people don’t want to see their taxes go up, but does that lead to anything significant? Can you realistically say this would *destroy* America’s ideals? It is very difficult to come up with an impact that can be weighed persuasively in a debate round. Moreover, even if you say it’s a purely moral question, you would be asking the judge to weigh the moral harm of collectivism against your opponents’ discussions of racism and slavery. It will most likely be difficult to convince most people that unfair taxes are worse. I am not saying that you cannot use this sort of argument, but make sure you are ready to be very persuasive on the impact level.

Another way to indict the pro’s solvency claims would be to argue that the economics of the proposal don’t work. This strategy is directly responsive to pro cases that center on questions of poverty and/or



wealth inequality, but much less so to other sorts of impacts. But, since cyclical poverty is likely to be a popular pro argument on this topic, you might get some use out of it.

The basic argument is that, in the modern American economy, people living in poverty often aren't just out of money, [they are in debt](#). Sometimes deeply. They might be behind on their rent, car payment, or other bills. They might have previously taken an ultra-high-interest "payday loan" in order to pay a bill, and are now trapped in a vicious cycle of ever-accumulating debt. Perhaps they suffered an unexpected medical emergency and are struggling to pay off tens of thousands in hospital bills that they're low-quality insurance (if they are fortunate enough to have insurance at all) did not cover. Because they are struggling to make payments, they incur interest, penalties, and late fees, so the debt continues to grow. They might also have a different problem that can still be understood as debt: an important household item, such as a refrigerator or car, has been broken or stolen, so any extra cash would be immediately used on repairs or purchasing a replacement.

Why might debt matter? Think back to Bob and Bill. Long-term, sustainable economic stability is only likely when a person is able to make the sort of investment that causes their future income to grow. This might mean stocks, property, real estate, business ventures, education, etc. But paying off debts that have already been incurred is not a wealth-generating investment. It helps get your bank account out of the red, which is important, but rarely enough to lead to significant economic mobility.

There are many numbers that have been presented for per-person dollar figures in a reparations project, and they vary greatly. My research suggests that the most common proposals fall within 2 very different ranges: \$25,000-\$40,000, and \$500,000-1.5 million per person. It is obvious that the lower



range would not constitute life-changing money for many people, especially for people who have significant debt.

For example, let's say Sally is 40-years-old, living below the poverty line, and receives \$40,000 in reparations. She might use \$15,000 to pay off debt and make needed repairs/replacements of basic necessities. Because of her low income, she has never been able to save any money for her old age, so she socks away \$20,000 in an IRA (many experts suggest a person should save at least \$1 million over a lifetime, so she's still facing some trouble down the line). That leaves \$5,000. She puts \$2,500 in a rainy-day fund, and uses the other \$2,500 to take her children to Disneyland, which they've always begged for, but she's never been able to afford.

Is Sally's life now better? Sure. She's out of debt, has some (inadequate, but better than none) savings, and made precious memories with her children. But has she built any real, lasting wealth? No. She hasn't even become middle class. She still lacked the means to create any significant new opportunities for herself, so her income will probably remain the same. In a few years, as life happens and bills add up, she may find herself back in the same place as she began.

Ok, but what about the larger dollar amounts? A million dollars is certainly life-changing. Well, yes, if we're talking about it in a vacuum. If I gave you a million dollars right now, it would almost certainly completely change the rest of your life, for the better. But economies do not function in a vacuum. The [most recent study](#) on the subject of reparations suggests the cost may surpass \$14 trillion. For context, the entire USFG budget is \$3.8 trillion. The United States [GDP](#) (in other words, the value of America's



entire economy) is \$17.8 trillion. Although it is hard to say for sure what would happen (and I am not an economist), that kind of massive expenditure seems likely to risk some form of economic chaos.

It is also relevant to consider that the expense would almost certainly have to be paid for by some kind of taxation. Obviously, we couldn't fund it with budget cuts; the cost may be more than quadruple the annual federal budget. Simply printing more money would result in massive [inflation](#) and near-zero benefits. So, the USFG would need to dramatically increase revenues. That raises a myriad of complicated economic issues that we won't go into in the interest of space, but they might be looking into if you like this sort of argument. Certainly, if you're a proficient debater on the finer points of economics, you will easily outwit many opponents who simply don't understand the concepts well enough to effectively argue them.

Arguments about the economics of reparations will probably force you to also engage in the "implementation matters" debate. If you don't pin the pro down on what form reparations should take (How much per person? How to pay for it? Lump sum or [annuity?](#)), then they will just dance around your arguments by saying "nope, that's not what we'd do!" This is a good place to really hammer home the point that you can't evaluate the quality of an idea without knowing anything about its execution.

The con might also want to explore the idea of opportunity cost. Setting aside complicated discussions of monetary policy, most people would agree that there is a finite amount of money in the USFG's budget. If you spend money on something, it has to come from somewhere. In the case of reparations, this might mean cutting existing programs to free up funds, or it might mean increasing taxes and



appropriating that money. Even if the money comes from new taxes, though, it still *could* be spent on something else. Con teams might want to argue there are better ways to use those funds.

For example, perhaps instead of reparations we should prioritize improving schools, or reforming the justice system, or creating well-paying job opportunities, or providing monetary assistance that is needs-based rather than race-based. If you want to propose one of these (or another) alternatives, you'll obviously need to be prepared to win that they are not only effective, but *more effective* than reparations. You'll also need to win that your proposal isn't the same as reparations. For example, if you say it would be better to dedicate [\$X] to improving primarily African American schools, you want to be ready to explain why that's *not* reparations.

A similar argument to the above could also be made for human energy and willpower: anti-racist activists might be better off focusing their resources and efforts elsewhere. Movements are made up of people, and therefore have finite capacities in terms of attention and energy.

This argument can be used to help fortify other arguments in a con case. For example, you might concede the pro's impacts, but argue that reparations aren't feasible, but some other solution is. Or, you might say that straight reparations would increase racial tensions, but another type of program would not. (Perhaps because, typically, the American public disfavors any program they see as a "handout," but favor programs to offer opportunities, like better education.) Unlike the pro side, where you should build a robust case around 1 or 2 central arguments, the con can dramatically improve their chances by making several separate-but-related arguments.



The con also may be able to access some more abstract, non-consequentialist offense. One such example would be that economics were not the sole (or even primary) reason why slavery was an atrocity, and that reparations would symbolically “flatten” this crime against humanity to a simple issue of monetary debt. Proponents of this idea often suggest that it is offensive, immoral, and/or dangerous to allow the American public to believe that the horror of slavery has been “made right” just by giving one generation some cash. Some fear that this would blunt citizens’ emotional reactions to the reality of such a dark history, and perhaps even allow it to be cast in the history books as a minor indiscretion regarding labor payments, and not the major atrocity and factor in early American history that it unfortunately was. You might boil this argument down to “America shouldn’t get to feel better about slavery by “buying it out.””

Here is **evidence** discussing this idea:

(Peter Flaherty and John Carlisle, The National Legal and Policy Center, “The Case Against Slavery Reparations,” <http://nlpc.org/sites/default/files/Reparationsbook.pdf>, October 2004)

Recent Holocaust reparations, particularly those associated with the 1990s lawsuits against European insurance companies, have caused considerable controversy. Several Jewish American scholars and journalists criticized the payments, saying they started as a legitimate effort to recover money in long dormant Swiss bank accounts, but turned into a shameless money grab by lawyers who started going after European insurance companies. Some say it only degrades the memory of millions who died in the Holocaust, and that the main focus of activity is the claims, rather than the horror of the death of 6 million Jews. Norman Finkelstein, professor of history at Hunter College and author of *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections of the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, commented: “They [the lawyers] have hijacked the Holocaust



and appointed themselves saviors of the victims—all in the name of money.”⁴⁹ In 1998, Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, came out strongly against Holocaust reparations, declaring that when “claims become the main focus of activity regarding the Holocaust, rather than the unique horror of 6 million Jews, including 1.5 million children, being murdered simply because they were Jewish, then something has gone wrong.”⁵⁰ He went on to say that the Holocaust reparations movement could send the message that accounting for the material losses is what is important, rather than mourning the victims. As Massachusetts Institute of Technology political science professor Melissa Nobles said, “Money can profoundly obscure the nature of a tragedy.” Of course, the same can be said about the slave reparations movement. Associating huge amounts of money today with the suffering of people in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries is demeaning to those who suffered. Money, moreover, can be corrupting. As pointed out earlier, current reparations agitation already has degenerated into a cynical game of legalized extortion with multimillion-dollar lawsuits against corporations, universities and other entities whose alleged ties to slavery are tenuous to nonexistent (see “Shakedown via the Courts”).

Going in almost the total opposite direction, another more philosophical argument for the con would be that the continued focus on slavery holds African-Americans back by forcing them to think of themselves in a disempowered context, rather than imagining new possibilities. This is sort of like when you’re nervous about messing up on something (like a speech or presentation) and you get so focused on your anxiety that you actually do wind up making a careless mistake. There is actually ample psychological and sociological data that suggests that groups of people tend to unconsciously fulfill the roles they see as prescribed to them. For example, one study showed that if you tell a girl that “usually girls aren’t as good at math as boys” right before she takes a math test, she will perform significantly worse than if she’s told nothing. So, proponents of this line of argumentation would say, African-Americans would be best served by divorcing their understandings of themselves from the legacy of slavery, which reparations would hinder.



Here's **evidence**:

(Marybeth Gasman, Assistant Professor of Higher Education in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania focusing on Historically Black Colleges, The Journal of Higher Education, 77.2, pp317-352, 2006)

In many ways, Jencks and Riesman followed a long line of research (including the Moynihan Report) by generally liberal thinkers who did a disservice to Blacks by attributing all of their current problems to the legacy of slavery—thereby denying them agency and overlooking Black accomplishments since slavery (Moynihan, 1965; Stuckey, 1987). 8 The problem with this understanding is it has a tendency to see Uncle Tom–like behavior (and other forms of self-hatred) in current Black leadership: hence Jencks and Riesman's mischaracterization of Black colleges as not being incubators of civil rights protest. This understanding also tends to ignore the contemporary context—that is, the effect of recent history, and the role that Blacks played in these events. This is not to say that Blacks did not suffer debilitating effects, both from slavery and segregation. Nor is it to say that Blacks have only themselves to blame for current troubles. But to characterize these problems as an unchanging holdover from a time long passed is to deal African Americans a double blow: first, to depict them as putty in the hands of an oppressor, then to deny them the ability to grow and adapt to freedom. For a fuller understanding of Black agency, researchers must look at the situation from multiple perspectives.



Here, we're going to transition into the section of this paper that I want to clearly designate as **controversial arguments that many people may find offensive and I do not necessarily recommend**. Many people will go into debates already having extremely deeply-held feelings about the question of the resolution. Obviously, it's best to approach topics about sensitive topics such as race in a sensitive and respectful way. In my opinion, it is better both in terms of competition and civility to avoid any arguments that people might find insulting or inflammatory. Even if you firmly believe one or more of these arguments are correct, and think it is ridiculous to be offended by them, debate is still a communication activity. It doesn't really matter if you think your judge's reaction is unfair—they still get to write the ballot. So, you need to know upfront that running any of the next few arguments we discuss is going to be a liability. Your judge might be outraged and dock your speaks severely or drop you on principle. Your opponents may be hurt or angry or impugn your character. Just as I'm not endorsing these arguments, I also do not necessarily endorse those reactions, or condemn people who agree with the following arguments. The purpose of this guide is not to make normative statements regarding the propriety of arguments. I am presenting them so you that you know what's out there. Do with this information what you will, but keep in mind that running them means taking on some very significant risks.

[Please do not send me emails complaining about propagating offensive ideas, and conversely please also do not send me emails complaining about my cautious treatment of these ideas. Whether or not they have merit is up to you to debate. I am only interested in repeating the ideas of others, and providing strategic commentary from a debate perspective (namely, that some people are going to be really bothered by these arguments, regardless of whether you agree with them or not, and that may have competitive implications). If you think I gave them too much credence, or not enough, and you want to yell at me, channel that energy into writing awesome cases instead.]



The first of such arguments is somewhat similar to the last strategy we discussed. However, it takes a quite a bit harsher angle. This argument is a criticism of government dependency and/or adopting a victimhood role. There are countless iterations of this out there, but it basically boils down to suggesting that no one is owed anything regardless of what happened to their ancestors, and that blaming current misfortune on historical injustice is destructive to both the self and society at large. This is sort of the “cowboy up” school of thought: you should rise to meet whatever challenges you encounter, even when they aren’t fair.

Another controversial argument comes from economist [Dr. Walter Williams](#). He suggests that, in the long-run, slavery benefitted African-Americans, because it brought them to the U.S., and the average income and quality of life in America is higher than that of the average African. He tries to temper the shock this claim causes many people by explaining “to morally condemn a practice such as slavery does not require one to also deny its effects.” He also argues that slavery has been characteristic of most societies for nearly all of human history up until recently, and that slavery in America was not driven primarily by racism. Some people may find this logic compelling, while others might find it outrageous and repugnant. If it matters to you either way, Dr. Williams happens to be black.

Similar to Williams’s logic, [David Horowitz](#), a conservative writer, argues that the wealth created by slave labor has not only benefitted white Americans, but has now circulated throughout the economy to also enrich African-Americans. In other words, although only slave owners profited directly from work done by slaves, this wealth was used to develop America and its economy in a variety of ways, which we now all benefit from. He also makes a number of other controversial claims about reparations, but I won’t go over them all. If you are interested, the above link provides a rundown.



The last risky argument that we'll address comes echoes a general theme that the other two hint towards at some point in their writing: that Africans participated in the slave trading industry, and therefore assigning guilt based on race or heritage is problematic. Furthermore, proponents of this argument say, almost all racial groups have been enslaved by someone, somewhere, sometime in human history. What is controversial about this point is not the basic fact of Africans participating in the slave trade; that is [known historical fact](#). A number of African empires sustained themselves almost solely by making war and capturing people to be sold as slaves. What makes this argument unsavory to some people is that it can be seen as suggesting that Africans sold into slavery were somehow responsible for their own predicament. Another common objection is that chattel slavery (buying and selling people as property, versus indentured servitude-type structure where slaves have some rights) did not really become a significant industry in [Africa prior to contact with Europeans](#).

Regardless of how you feel about the above argument, I don't find it particularly strategic. Winning that Africans profited from selling slaves does *not* mean you have won that the actually-enslaved person (or his/her descendants) are not entitled to compensation for the ordeal. At best, it is a reason why the blame for slavery may not rest solely with white people. But that isn't the topic of this debate, and going down that road is not going to benefit you here. If you want to use this argument, it's probably best to read it in conjunction with some of the other issues with who ought to pay and who ought to receive payment that we discussed earlier. For example, a person could theoretically be descended from an African-American slave, but also have relatives who were African slave traders.

If you choose to use controversial arguments, you will be well-advised to choose your words carefully and pay attention to your judge's reactions and non-verbal signals. If someone looks outraged or



disgusted, you may want to change course. After all, the first rule of persuasive is “appeal to your audience.”

The last strategic option we’re going to cover is the counter-advocacy (or whatever you prefer to call it). These arguments allow you to capture most of the pro’s offense, which avoiding some disadvantages. Then, you can argue that the resolution is false, because there is a non-resolutional option that also addresses the problem(s).

One counter-advocacy would be funding reparations, instead of through the USFG, instead through only private companies that profited from slavery. This helps to avoid hurdles that arise in trying to decide which citizens should pay.

Another would be conducting a reparations-like process through America’s civil courts system. Some descendants of slaves may have concrete, demonstrable proof that they have a claim to a particular piece of land. For example, their great-great-grandfather may be buried there. Either through existing courts, or by setting up special courts used exclusively for this purpose, African Americans could file a legal claim and receive a portion of the (often very valuable) land their ancestors once tended to. This has some advantages, but also some drawbacks. The most significant problem with this proposal is that much land that used to hold plantations has today been developed into residential or commercial space. What should happen if a court finds that a particular African American is entitled to a piece of land, but that piece of land is currently being occupied by a house owned by (for example) a family that emigrated from China last year? If you plan to use a counter-advocacy, make sure you are prepared to answer these sorts of questions.



Want more con stuff? [Check out this.](#)

That concludes our introduction to the basics of this season's first PF topic. You should now be ready to build some solid cases!

Remember that this is a sensitive, complex issue with roots that stretch far back into history. There is simply no way this guide could even begin to cover all of the relevant information or strategic options, so you must take responsibility for continuing to conduct research on your own. I encourage you to do so thoughtfully, with an open mind.

And don't forget that you can always email completed cases to **Rachel.Stevens@NCPA.org** for a free, confidential case critique! We'll get them back to you, with personalized comments, as soon as we can.