

As an objection to reparations for US slavery, some people say things like this:
“No one around today was enslaved or owned slaves”.

I think this argument rests on a false premise, so let’s reconstruct it:

(R1) None of the perpetrators or victims of the injustice of slavery are still around.

(R2) Reparations for an injustice are owed only if the perpetrators and victims are still around.

(R3) So, reparations for slavery aren’t owed.

First, R1 ignores that the US gov’t, as an institution, was complicit in slavery and is still around today.

Second, it assumes that the only victims of slavery were people enslaved themselves, but obviously the harmful consequences of slavery outlasted the practice itself.

But even with these assumptions, I think R2 is false. Here’s a potential counterexample:

Suppose person A was enslaved by B, and A eventually gets free. Now, suppose A has a child C, and B has a child D. And then both A and B die. D inherits all of the stolen wealth from B, and C inherits very little from A, since A was never payed reparations.

Question: Does D owe reparations to C for the inherited stolen intergenerational wealth?

I’m inclined to think so. So, I think R2 is false.

Now, obviously the real-world situation is a lot more complex, but my only point here is that this argument is unsound.