

Transcript – Ways & Means Podcast – S5E1

Emily Hanford: From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. We share bright ideas for how to improve society. I'm Emily Hanford.

Hearing leader: Slavery was a crime against humanity, one which whose impacts we as a society continue to grapple with today.

In June of 2019, there was a hearing on Capitol Hill. The hearing was before a subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee ... the actor and activist Danny Glover testified.

Danny Glover: I sit here as the great grandson of a former slave, Mary Brown, who was freed by the emancipation proclamation on January 1, 1863...I had the fortune of meeting her as a small child.

The hearing was on a bill that would establish a commission to study the effects of slavery and the idea of reparations. In other words, to consider the idea of the U.S. government should give some kind of compensation to the descendants of people who were enslaved.

Coates: The matter of reparations is one of making amends and direct redress, but it is also a question of citizenship.

The writer Ta-Nehisi Coates testified in favor of the bill, known as House Resolution 40.

Coates: In H.R. 40, this body has a chance to both make good on its 2009 apology for enslavement, and reject fair-weather patriotism, to say that this nation is both its credits and debits. That if Thomas Jefferson matters, so does Sally Hemings.

The question of whether and how to compensate the descendants of people who were enslaved has hung over the United States since the end of the Civil War. But it's getting new traction.

ELIZABETH WARREN: America was founded on the principles of liberty and built on the backs of enslaved people. It is time for our government to face this truth...

INTERVIEWER: What is your position on reparations to the descendants of slaves?

BERNIE SANDERS: Well as I just indicated, there are massive disparities that must be addressed.

Darity: The fact that you have some of the folks who are actual candidates for the presidency, even using the term reparations, is somewhat of a breakthrough. And I would argue that there's more discussion about reparations today than there has been at any point in U.S. history since the Reconstruction era.

This is Professor William Darity, Junior.

Darity: ...known better as Sandy Darity.

Sandy Darity has long been skeptical of the idea that reparations were realistic. Thirty years ago, he was asked to write the foreword to a book about reparations. Sandy says the first thing that popped into his mind was ...

Darity: Oh, that will never happen.

But reading the book actually changed his mind. And now, 30 years later, he's pretty much the guy when it comes to studying the feasibility of reparations in the US.

TV/Radio Host 1: My guest today is Sandy Darity...

TV/Radio Host 2: This is a special broadcast because I'm interviewing Dr. Sandy Darity.

TV/Radio Host 3: ...we're here to talk about reparations and the role they're having in the 2020 elections.

Sandy Darity is a professor at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. He provided testimony to that Congressional hearing we heard earlier. And now he's leading a team of people who are writing a plan for what a reparations program in the US could look like.

(Music)

Coming up on this episode of Ways & Means...we'll explore the how's, the whys – and the political potential – for a big idea... reparations for slavery.

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This season of Ways & Means is supported by Polis: the Center for Politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. I'm Deondra Rose, director of research for

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As I said earlier, the idea of reparations goes back to the end of the Civil War. General William T. Sherman and Northern leaders agreed to an order setting aside 400-thousand acres of confiscated Confederate land for freed slaves. This is where the “40-acres and a mule” idea comes from. But, it never happened. Three months after Sherman signed that order, President Lincoln was assassinated. The next president, Andrew Johnson, reversed Sherman’s order and gave the land back to its former Confederate owners.

Darity: And so from my perspective, the real starting point for the contemporary black-white wealth gap is the failure to provide the formerly enslaved with the 40 acres that were pledged to them.

The contemporary black-white wealth gap... it’s huge, according to Sandy Darity. While Black Americans make up about thirteen percent of the population, they hold just three percent of the nation’s wealth. What does that mean in practical terms? It means the average black household has \$800,000 less in net worth than the average white household.

Sandy argues this racial wealth gap was caused by a series of government policies that denied economic opportunity to African Americans and provided opportunities to many white Americans.

For example, let’s look at land ownership. Early in American history many white people got a start on building wealth through something called the Homestead Act. The act was signed into law by President Lincoln in 1862.

Darity: Recent white immigrants to the United States in the latter part of the 19th century, as well as landless southerners, were given substantial tracts of land in the western part of the country, typically up to about 160 acres of land. They essentially received free equity. And so that was a tremendous starting point for building wealth or accumulating wealth. And I think that the estimate that I've seen from the historian Keri Leigh Merritt is that approximately 45 million white Americans today are folks who were beneficiaries or descendants of the recipients of the Homestead Act land grants.

Many historians, including Keri Leigh Merritt, point out that while the Homestead Act was technically open to freed slaves, in practice, African Americans were excluded. The proof – they say – is in the numbers.

Keri Leigh Merritt estimates that more than 1.6 million white families became landowners at the time because of the Homestead grants. But only 4,000 - 5,000 African-Americans ever received their final land grants.

Black people were denied other kinds of opportunities that lead to wealth building, too. Take the GI Bill – it was a federal program, launched after World War II, to help returning veterans.

GI Bill archival audio: The government pays all of your school bills up to \$500 a year, and living expenses of \$50 a month, or \$75 a month if you have dependents.

The GI Bill also helped returning vets purchase homes by guaranteeing low-cost loans. This was a federal program, but it was run locally.

Darity: Individual states had a great deal of discretion over whom would get the benefits and also how much the benefits would be. And I believe there is an estimate that in the state of Mississippi, there were only two black veterans who received benefits from the G.I. Bill.

It was up to local bankers who got approved for the low-cost loans – and according to a paper published by the American Political Science Association, there were 3,000 home loans in 13 Mississippi cities in a single year, 1947, but only 2 of those went to black borrowers.

Sandy Darity and others argue that unequal treatment like this has caused the black-white wealth gap. Sandy puts the blame squarely on the shoulders of the US government.

Darity: You know to give it a semi-biblical cast. The idea is that wealth begets wealth. That wealth is something that is acquired cumulatively. And so you can either get on the path of accumulation or you can be on the path of decumulation. And in the United States, those paths have diverged based upon race, where whites have historically been given a boost to be on the path towards accumulation. While blacks have been deprived of those kinds of opportunities and then propelled onto a path of decumulation.

(Music)

Tony: It's just the most interesting thing I've ever done in my life.

Tony Burroughs has figured out how race affected his family's ability to build wealth. But it took some digging.

Tony: Well, I love everything about genealogy. It's a mystery. It's like solving a puzzle.

Tony Burroughs is founder and CEO of the Center for Black Genealogy in Chicago. He didn't know anything about genealogy until college, when he attended a talk by Alex Haley, who described tracing the lineage of Kunta Kinte from Africa for his famous novel, *Roots*.

Host: What was it about *Roots* that made it the phenomenon it became?

Haley: I think that part of it was the fact that it was really about a family, who was a family that was seeking its ancestry. And you see everybody on Earth who—doesn't matter what race, what nationality, what religion, whatever—we all come from some family which has some heritage, some native land...

Tony and his friends were astounded.

Tony: What's this guy talking about, you know? We never knew it was possible for an African-American to find out who their great great-grandparents were and who their ancestors were in slavery. We had no clue.

Tony started to trace his family roots. It took him 20 years of piecing together documents and clues to find evidence of an ancestor in the will of a white woman in Pennsylvania. The will described how the young boy she owned, David Truman, was to be freed in 1806 when he was 25 years old. Tony ordered a copy of the will immediately.

Tony: When the copy of the will came in, I just pulled out my computer and I started typing it in and transcribing it. And when I got to the point where she details when he would be freed and the fact that he should be taught to read and to learn math, I mean, like tears just started coming out of my eyes. It was just really, really mind boggling. And again, I had been tracking this guy for 20 years!

Because of this research, Tony Burroughs can clearly see his family's wealth – or lack of it.

Tony: David Truman, I think he got like \$8 dollars when he got freed in 1806. Well, you can't do a lot with \$8 dollars, you know.

Eight dollars back then is about \$165 dollars today. David didn't get anything else for his years of enslavement. No 40 acres, no nothing.

Tony: Our families never got the land, which was the basis of wealth that white Americans got.

Tony's ancestor David Truman farmed other people's land. David Truman's children and his grandchildren became farmers, too, but only one grandson managed to accumulate enough capital to actually buy some land of his own. One acre, which he later sold. It wasn't until Tony Burroughs' parents' generation that the family finally became landowners for good.

Tony: We're talking about great-gram... Four greats, three greats, two greats, one great grand. We're talking about six generations.

Six generations from slavery until the family had the financial footing to own land. And Tony says the fact that it took so long means the family missed out on opportunities to accumulate wealth.

Tony: Well, that land increases in value and that land is passed down from generation to generation. And some of that land is land where you can have income, property off of that land. So land in America is still the basis of wealth, you know?

Tony Burroughs has been paying attention to the congressional hearings and the presidential candidates talking about reparations. He'd be one of the people to benefit if reparations ever actually happens. How much? It's all in the details.

Tony: When you say receiving reparations, I mean, how much are they going to give me? They're going to give me a check for \$125 dollars or is going to be \$125,000 dollars? You know, I mean, how do you calculate what reparations are due when you go six generations? You know, I don't have a clue how you put a figure to that.

(Music)

These are the kinds of questions Duke Professor Sandy Darity is trying to figure out. He's been able to trace his own family line back to slavery.

Darity: I have enslaved ancestors on both sides of the family. And on my mother's side, directly traceable to a plantation in Rose Hill, NC.

Sandy Darity has assembled a team to take a look at how reparations might actually work.

Darity: The committee that I've put together is actually called the Reparations Planning Committee. And the objective is to flesh out the details of how you might actually execute a reparations program.

The team includes an economic historian, a genealogist who specializes in African American history, and other experts. They're trying to figure who would get reparations -- and how -- and how much it would cost.

Sandy says to be eligible, a person would have to demonstrate that they had at least one ancestor who had been enslaved in the US. And that person would have to show that for at least 12 years prior to the adoption of any reparations program, that person self-identified as black, Negro, or African-American.

Sandy thinks the best way to make reparations is with direct payments to people. Governments have made these kind of direct payments to victims of other historic injustices in the past.

Darity: Whether we're talking about the German reparation payments to victims of the Holocaust, we're talking about the payments the U.S. government made to Japanese Americans about 40 years after World War II, if we're talking about the payments the US government gave to the families who lost loved ones during the attacks on 9/11. Those were direct payments.

Japanese Americans were incarcerated unjustly for about two years during World War II, and they each received \$20,000 from the US government.

Germany paid billions of dollars in reparations, and even now the US government is making payments to some Holocaust survivors living in the United States to assist them with suffering and economic hardship due to their experiences at the hands of the Germans.

Direct payments have been made in other cases of what Sandy Darity calls "grievous injustice." For example, the US government made direct payments to victims of 9/11 even though the US was the victim in that instance, not the perpetrator.

But slavery -- it was more than 200 years of the US government sanctioning and benefitting from the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of people.

How much should black American descendants of US slavery get? What would it all cost?

Darity: I've tended increasingly to think that that the measure of the funds should be dictated by the amount that would be required to eliminate racial wealth differences in the United States. That amounts at least to something in the vicinity of 10 to 12 trillion dollars.

Other experts have put the possible cost of reparations for slavery even higher.

Sandy Darity often talks publicly about his ideas, and his views attract plenty of criticism. A recent article drew more than 600 comments. One reader said reparations add to the "victim" mentality and take away from self-reliance. Here's Sandy's response:

Darity: Well, I think what takes away self-reliance is the lack of resources that permit you to fully participate in the society. And so that's what we need to correct. It's also interesting, I think, when people have been subjected to subjected to harms, traumas, and the like, we don't normally say that the way in which you address that is by ignoring it. We usually insist that the perpetrators in some way attempt to make the situation right. It's not best handled by saying, "Well, you know, just get over it."

Other people reject the idea of reparations because slavery was a long time ago. That was then, this is now kind of thing. One reader said in response to Sandy's recent article about reparations said, "I feel no guilt about what happened in the past because I wasn't a part of it." It's an argument Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has used.

McConnell: I don't think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago for whom none of us currently living is responsible is a good idea...

Darity: So, I have two responses. One is that I don't think of this as a matter of personal or individual guilt. I think of this as a matter of national responsibility. And the culpable party is the federal government, not any particular individual organization, institution, or person. But the second thing is, I think that kind of comment is predicated on the view that the case for black reparations is tied exclusively to slavery, which people say happened so long ago. There is an argument that could be made that if you think about this from a generational perspective, it didn't necessarily happen all that long ago. But many of the people who make that kind of comment definitely were alive during the Jim Crow period. And they are obviously alive now where we have mass incarceration,

police executions of unarmed blacks, sustained economic discrimination. And then, of course, the thing that I've been talking about a lot is this enormous wealth disparity.

Sandy Darity says when a government's laws and practices have clearly done harm, the government has a responsibility to fix things, to right the injustice. Sandy acknowledges that the idea of reparations for slavery is a long shot. But he doesn't think that's a reason to shy away from trying to make it happen.

Darity: You know, if somebody was anti-slavery in 1815 and had taken the position that, well, there's no point in fighting slavery because it's never going to end then you would not have had the full development of an abolition movement. So similarly, since I think reparations for black American descendants of slavery in the United States is something that is fully justified and morally required, the fact that we may still be in a moment where the odds of it occurring appear to be low, that's not a reason to not be engaged in the struggle to make it happen.

(Music)

This season of Ways & Means is supported by Polis: the Center for Politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. Find out more at polis.duke.edu

Professor Sandy Darity is the Samuel DuBois Cook Professor of Public Policy at Duke University, where he also directs the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity. His most recent book is called *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the 21st Century*. It's co-written with Kirsten Mullen.

We will have a link to his work, as well as to Tony Burroughs' genealogy website, at our website, waysandmeansshow.org.

Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Karen Kemp and Alison Jones. Our associate producer is Hunter Stark. Our assistant producer is Matt Majack.

And this is the first episode of our 5th season! Please tell your friends about us. And thanks for joining me. I'm Emily Hanford.