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## blackworld



Glenn Loury

Courtesy of Boston University's  
Institute on Race and Social  
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In his latest book, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Harvard University Press), Glenn Loury presents a powerful explanation of America's persistent racial disparities and issues an eloquent call for racial justice. The distinguished Boston University economist weds political and economic theory with quantitative analysis to produce a surprisingly readable and compelling collection of essays exploring the persistence of inequality in America. He blames racism both for black disadvantage and for white America's indifference to it, calling for policies to alleviate the suffering of those African Americans he calls "American history's losers."

What makes the book so surprising is not its subject but its author; until recently Loury had been one of the black darlings of the neoconservative intelligentsia, criticizing Affirmative Action, preaching self-reliance and moral rectitude, and blaming black disadvantage on "the enemy within" — dysfunction within the black community, not white racism. At the same time Loury was hobnobbing with conservatives like William Bennett and Clarence Thomas, though, he was living a secret life — both his affair with a Smith College undergraduate and his increasingly extreme cocaine habit came to light in 1987. But he stuck with the conservatives, and they with him.

Loury's recent split with the right was so public the *New York Times* magazine covered it. But his political about-face is more evolution than revolution. He told the *Times* he was horrified by *The Bell Curve*, and in 1996 he penned an article for the journal of the American Enterprise Institute (the right-wing think-tank from which he had just resigned) entitled, "What's Wrong With The Right," declaring that although "liberal methods" to reverse racial inequality were wanting, "liberals sought to heal the rift in our

body politic engendered by the institution of chattel slavery, and their goals of securing racial justice in America was, and is, a noble one. I cannot say with confidence that conservatism as a movement is much concerned to pursue that goal."

I recently spoke to Professor Loury about his new book, the reparations debate and his odyssey from neo-conservative to social progressive.

**In your book, you argue that white America feels little outrage or alarm over black-white inequality because it still doesn't see African Americans as fully human. That's a serious charge.**

I say that in the book, in somewhat hyperbolic terms. I don't mean to say that when white Americans see black Americans, they see animals. What I do mean is that the important question is which kind of inequalities, instances of disparity will occasion a sense of disquiet in the society, an ill ease, a desire to scrutinize, to interrogate, a sense that something's not quiet right.

I talk about the absence of that sense of alarm or disquiet at protracted and prolonged racial inequality. That's what's seen in the criminal justice system. We're becoming a nation of jailers. The scale of physical confinement and supervision of human bodies that this society has undertaken as a major project in domestic policy in the last thirty years is sobering. It's significant. We're talking scores of billions of dollars, we're talking millions of human beings who are confined or closely monitored, we're talking a quadrupling of the scale of this enterprise since the 1960s. And African Americans are vastly overrepresented in it — on a scale of disproportion that is just stunning. Blacks are one in eight in the population but one in two of those in prison. Six to seven percent of prime age black males on any given day are under the supervision of the state.

That's the question that is not raised. Does this circumstance not connect us with our long and troubled and ignoble [racial] history? Do we not have structures in place and institutional practices and policies that exacerbate this circumstance? For example, the war on drugs and how that war is prosecuted — might we not entertain alternative ways of proceeding in this matter? To what extent does this circumstance raise questions of justice? These are all plausible questions that a society might put to itself. That they are not so put here is, in my judgment, a reflection of how that circumstance connects with the meanings that are associated with blackness and African Americanness in American political culture. That's a narrative that goes down in American political culture relatively easily... the sense in which those people are stigmatized or marginalized, they're tacitly understood as the kind of people among whom such a circumstance can normally occur.

**Africana.com recently interviewed neo-conservative author David Horowitz, who argues that more than \$1 trillion has been funneled into the ghetto over the past thirty years, and the poverty remains because the black community has a problem with crime and illegitimacy. He also said that only 25 percent of African Americans live below the poverty line, while the remaining 75 percent are middle class. Is he right?**

The claim about the black middle class is just wrong. There's a lot people who may not be in poverty but who certainly are not middle class. But the main claim here is that we've tried and programs haven't worked — these people have a bad culture. Their marginality is their own matter and not a matter of public concern. Political leaders have hypothesized that much or

most racial inequality stems from "single-parent families," crime rates or whatever. Now let's suppose that that is true — I don't think that's true — but it would still not follow from that claim that therefore, it's on them. They messed up, it's on them.

There are self-destructive and self-limiting patterns of behavior in African American communities, but this behavior did not pop up out of the earth one morning. It is a historical product. So just to take an instance, we have tens and tens of thousands of African Americans migrating to Detroit in the years during and right after the Second World War, and if because of the racist and segregationist restrictions on where they could move, they ended up in overcrowded, dilapidated by-the-docks and by-the-riverside ghettos and if in that context we observe patterns of social life that are not uncharacteristic of ghettos anywhere in the world or of any other time in American history ... if you looked at the Lower East Side or Hell's Kitchen, or whatever immigrant population in the 19th and early 20th centuries of European immigrants, you will find exactly the same kind of so-called pathology among the Irish, among the Italian and among the Jew... that behavior, once observed, would not let the society off the hook about what to do for those people who have been unfairly treated.

Also, the claim that a trillion or trillions have been spent — when? where? how? who? what? — I missed that. The fact is there was no Marshall Plan or Great Society program directed at the ghetto in the wake of the riots of the 1960s and all through the crack epidemic of the 1980s. There was not.

#### **And yet, I've read that you oppose formal reparations. Why?**

In my book, I argue for racial justice. I say that there is an obligation that attends the history of racial oppression and we should have policies to counteract racial inequality. Racial egalitarianism is what I argue for. But I don't argue for reparations — in fact I make a distinction and suggest that I think that the formal reparations movement is the wrong way to go.

There are basically two reasons for that. One, I think the only long-term solutions require policies that political majorities have to enact. We have to have allies. There has to be a broad-based political coalition in support of what has to be done in order to be effective. My judgment is that reparations cuts against that. Drawing a sharp distinction between the claims of African Americans and the claims of others makes it less likely that we'll be able to sustain political action. I worry about the marginalizing quality of the reparations advocacy, how it divorces black claims from the normal political process and sets them up for a kind of special dispensation. And my worry is that by separating and specializing black claims, we put ourselves at a distance from the base of a broader progressive political vision that is the only way to move the country in a way that will make a big difference in the lives of the most disadvantaged African Americans.

Now the other reason I actually fear the potential success of reparations advocacy is because the reparations advocacy packages and bounds the African American claim on the American public by making it into a tort claim, into a claim of injury-compensation. It limits black claims. But our claims can't be discharged. The very idea of formulating a reparations demand passively articulates the idea that black claims can be discharged. I think at the day it's not possible to get enough money to compensate for the compartmentalizing and kind of commodification of African American experience.

To put it another way — and this gets a little hyperbolic — ours is a sacred

critique of American society, civically sacred. It goes right to the core of the meaning of the national claim to legitimacy. That's what the African American claim is — the promissory note that is yet to be delivered home. Now, the reparations advocacy makes profane — again, in the civic sense — that sacred claim. It reduces the resonance of it, the salience of it, turning it into a dischargeable quid-pro-quo, as opposed to an incompleteness in the very idea of America. That's not a good move, in my judgment. So I think the advocates of reparations — my friend Charles Ogletree and others — they're grasping for straws and making a profound political error. That's my judgment. They're good men, they're good people, but I think they've just got this one wrong.

**Much has been made of your odyssey from neo-conservative to social progressive — what accounts for the change?**

With respect to my conservative former friends, I don't think I can answer your question without attacking them! I woke up one day and realized that I was in bed with a bunch of people for whom the concerns that were absolutely central to me were marginal concerns at best and were of interest more because of the ideological points they allowed to be scored than because of the actual human necessity of doing the right thing. I woke up one morning and asked myself, who are these people? What do they want? What do I want? Why am I here?

Wake-up call number one was The Bell Curve. At a conference of the American Enterprise Institute when the book was published and I had read it, and I was very upset and was writing something critical about the book, I went to [author Charles] Murray and I said, "Charles, nothing personal, but I'm going to have to criticize your book." And his response to me was: "If you can't say anything good about it, then why say anything at all. Why don't you just be like [black conservative economist] Tom Sowell and not say much at all?" Yeah. So my mother, my cousins and everybody has just been called dumb, congenitally not quite with the modern world and we have "scientific" proof of that, and I'm sleep-walking through this fog and kind of waking up to what's going on and I know enough to know that this ain't right — and there I am asking for a leave from this guy to undertake a criticism of his book, and his response is to call on solidarity for people who're supposed to be part of the same political movement.

And when I realized that that was the position that I had gotten myself into, I said, "Oh my God! How do I live like this?" It's a series of things like that. I don't know if I was ever conservative in any meaningful ideological sense, but more conservative than some people and willing to speak against the grain, to criticize and say the unsayable, and I find that I'm in bed with the worst kind of reactionary engaged in a project of intellectual legitimation of the worst kind of anti-progressive public policy. I can't do anything about the mistakes I may have made in the past, but I certainly did not have to persist in kind.

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