

*Essay****THE ANATOMY OF RACIAL INEQUALITY:
THE AUTHOR'S ACCOUNT****Glenn C. Loury***I.**

In my book, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, I have tried to do three things: outline a theory of “race” applicable to the social and historical circumstances of the United States; sketch an account of why racial inequality in our society is so stubbornly persistent; and, offer a conceptual framework for the practice of social criticism on race-related issues that might encourage reflection among our political and intellectual elite, and in this way promote social reform. These objectives are subsumed, respectively, in successive chapters of my book entitled “Racial Stereotypes,” “Racial Stigma,” and “Racial Justice.”

Any theory of “race,” it seems to me, must explain the fact that people take note of and assign significance to superficial markings on the bodies of other human beings—their skin color, hair texture, facial bone structure and so forth. This practice is virtually universal in human societies. Scientists have conjectured that it has a deep neurological foundation. This is the point of departure for my analysis. I refer to a society as being “raced” when its members routinely partition the field of human subjects whom they encounter in that society into groups, and when this sorting convention is based on the subjects’ possession of some cluster of observable bodily marks. This led to my claim that, at bottom, “race” is all about “embodied social signification.”

Let us call this the *social-cognitive* approach to thinking about “race.” It may be usefully contrasted with an approach derived from the science/art of *biological taxonomy*. There one endeavors to classify human beings on the basis of natural variation in genetic endowments across geographically isolated sub-populations. Such isolation was a feature of the human condition until quite recently (on an evolutionary time scale), and it permitted some independence of biological development within sub-populations that can be thought to have led to the emergence of distinct races. When philosophers deny the reality of “race” they have in mind this biological-taxonomic notion, and what they deny is that meaningful distinctions among contemporary human subgroups can be

derived in this way. Whether they are right or not would appear to be a scientific question.¹ But, whatever the merits of this dispute, it is important to understand that the validity of racial classification as an exercise in *biological taxonomy* is distinct conceptually from the validity (and relevance) of my concern with racial categorization as an exercise in *social-cognition*.

Moreover, and this too is absolutely critical, to establish the scientific invalidity of racial taxonomy demonstrates neither the *irrationality* nor the *immorality* of adhering to a social convention of racial classification. Even if critics of the “race concept” are correct, and the scientists who think that “race” is a useful biological-taxonomic category are wrong, it would not follow from this that seeing oneself or other people as belonging to “races” is akin to believing that someone with exceptional talents or an odd personality has come from another planet. We can adopt the linguistic convention that when saying, “person A belongs to race X” what we mean is that, “person A possesses physical traits which (in a given society, at a fixed point in history, under the conventions of racial classification extant there and then) will cause him to be classified (by a preponderance of those he encounters in that society and/or by himself) as belonging to race X.” And, whereas this maneuver would seem deeply unsatisfactory if applied to the question of someone being a planetary alien, I hold that this is a plausible way to proceed when discussing the social reality of “race.”

This is a *pragmatic* judgment on my part, not an *a priori* logical claim. That is, I hold this view because the social convention of thinking about other people, and about ourselves as belonging to different “races” is such a longstanding and deeply ingrained one in our political culture that it has taken on a life of its own. Belief that “alien beings are with us” has no comparable salience. If it did, then the subjective reality of this belief (and of the practice of classifying people on this basis) would be of interest, regardless of its objective correctness. Thus, for students of the history and political economy of the modern multi-racial nation state like me, the logical exercise of deconstructing racial categories by trying to show that nothing “real” lies behind them—an exercise that critic of the “race” concept seem to be so fond of—is largely beside the point.

This perspective is supported by the theory of “self-confirming stereotypes” that I advance in the book. My point here is a subtle one, and judging by reactions to the book I am not sure that all my readers have grasped it. Let people believe that fluctuations of the stock market can be predicted by changes in sunspot activity. This may be because, as an objective meteorological matter, sunspots correlate with rainfall, which influences crop yields, thus affecting the economy. Or, solar radiation might somehow influence the human psyche so as to alter how people behave in securities markets. Each of these proposes an objective causal links between sunspots and stock prices. They can be likened

to grounding one's cognizance of "race" on the validity of a race-based biological taxonomy. But, suppose that no objective links of this kind between sunspots and stock prices exist. Still, if enough people believe in the connection, monitor conditions on the sun's surface, and act based on how they anticipate security prices will be affected, then a *real* link between these evidently disparate phenomena will have been forged out of the subjective perceptions of stock market participants. As a result of this process, a belief in the financial relevance of sunspot activity will have been rendered entirely rational.

Likewise, no objective basis for racial taxonomy is required for the subjective use of racial categories to become warranted. As a concrete illustration, drawn from recent debates about racial profiling, I offer in my book (pp. 30–31) the example of cab drivers in a big city who may be reluctant to stop for young black men because they fear being robbed. That is, they think that chance of robbery conditional on race (and given other information like age and sex) exceeds some prudential threshold if the prospective fare is a young black man, but not when that fare is, say, an older white woman. Imagine that, as a matter of the crime statistics, this surmise is accurate. Nevertheless, a very simple process of "adverse selection" could explain how such a circumstance might arise, even in the event that each racial group is no more inclined to rob a taxi driver than any other: If a young man knows the taxi is unlikely to stop for him, and if he does not intend to rob the driver, then he may not want to rely on taxis for transportation since he will expect the average wait to be quite long. Plausibly, this waiting is less costly for someone who intends to rob the driver than for someone who does not. The fact that cab drivers are reluctant to stop for a certain group of persons may discourage all members of that group from using taxis, but those persons intent on robbing will be relatively less discouraged than those who have no such intention. Thus, should the cab drivers begin with an *a priori* belief that one racial group is more likely than another to harbor robbers, and if they are for this reason reluctant to stop for people in that group, then the drivers will end up creating incentives for people to self-select in such a way as to make it relatively more likely that someone hailing a cab who belongs to the profiled racial group is a robber.

So, we can see from this example that race need have no *objective* validity (the proportion of robbers in each racial group might be the same) for its *subjective* use to be rational (cab drivers might have a rational justification for their use of racial information). It is enough that influential social actors hold schemes of racial classification in their minds and act on those schemes. Their classificatory methods may be mutually inconsistent, one with another, and they may be unable to give a cogent justification for adopting their schemes. But, once a person knows that others in society will classify him on the basis of certain markers, and in the event that these acts of classification affect his

material or psychological well being, then it will be a rational cognitive stance—not a belief in magic and certainly not a *moral* error—for him to think of himself as being “raced.” In turn, that he thinks of himself in this way and that his societal peers are inclined to classify him similarly can provide a compelling reason for a newcomer to the society to adopt this ongoing scheme of racial classification. Learning the extant “language” of embodied social signification is a first step toward assimilation of the foreigner, or the newborn, into any “raced” society. I conclude that “races,” in the social-cognitive sense, may come to exist and to be reproduced over the generations in a society, even though there may exist no “races” in the biological-taxonomic sense. It follows that calling attention to the scientific dispute on the existence of races need have no bearing on the legitimacy of the social practice of racial classification. Despite several critical comments from readers, I continue to insist that, for the purpose of understanding how “race” operates in the American social hierarchy my viewpoint—thinking of “race” as “embodied social signification”—is both logically coherent and analytically useful.

The foregoing may be unsatisfactory to those who are often keen to move quickly from the cognitive to a normative plane of discussion. Plausibly, many people imagine there to be something “wrong” with seeing others (or, for that matter, oneself) in racial terms—with preferring to associate with people because of their racial identities; with feeling obligated to co-racialists, and so on. Just as one might think it wrong to punish people (witches) for the crime of being “the devil’s handmaiden” when in point of fact no people actually are, so too one might think it wrong to condition one’s dealings with others on the basis of “race” when, in point of fact, there are no (biological-taxonomic) “races.” If there are no races, then what possible justification can there be for the embrace of racial identity? My view is that the existence of “races” (in the biological-taxonomic sense) and the ethics of the practice of racial classification are largely distinct problems. What is more, I do not think we can get at the latter problem by interrogating the human heart, one person at a time. It is a mistake, in my view, to judge the propriety of social conventions in terms of whether individuals are thought to behave virtuously or viciously when they elect to comply with those conventions. To be taken seriously, an ethical critique of race-based thinking must get beneath (or behind) the cognitive acts of individual persons, and investigate the structure of social relations within which those individuals operate.

II.

This brings me to the topic of *racial stigma*—which I take to be the central innovative concept in my book (Loury 2002, Ch. 3). Some critics have charged

that I am unclear about my meaning here. And some see me as reiterating, in a slightly modified form, the view that anti-black racism is mainly an expression of moral malfeasance on the part of individual (white) persons. These charges are groundless. To reiterate, my approach to the problem of racial inequality is *cognitive* not *normative*. I eschew use of the word “racism” not because I don’t believe there is a moral problem here, but because the word is imprecise. More useful, I think, is my core concept—*racial stigma*—and the related notion of “biased social cognition.” *What I am trying to do with these notions is to move from the fact that people take note of racial classification in the course of their interactions with one another; to some understanding of how this affects their perceptions of the phenomena they observe in the social world around them, and how it shapes their explanations of those phenomena.* It is the link between cognitive perception and causal explanation that I am interested in. I am asking: When does the “race” of those subject to some problematic social circumstance affect whether powerful observers perceive there to be a problem, and if so, what follows from this?

Given the evident sensitivity of racial discourses, it is perhaps best if I make the point with a non-racial example. Consider gender inequality. We know that there is disparity in the social outcomes for boys and girls in two different venues—the schools and the jails. Thus suppose that, when compared to the girls, boys are over-represented among those doing well in math and science in the schools, and also among those doing poorly in society at large by ending-up in jail. There is some evidence to support both suppositions, but only the first is widely perceived to be a problem for public policy. Why? My answer is that it offends our basic intuition about the propriety of underlying social processes that boys and girls have different levels of achievement in the technical curriculum of our schools. Although we may not be able to put our fingers on exactly why this outcome occurs, we instinctively know that it is not right. In the face of this disparity we are inclined to interrogate our institutions—to search the record of our social practice and examine myriad possibilities in order to see where things might have gone wrong. Our base-line expectation is that equality should prevail here. Our moral sensibility is offended when it does not. And so, an impetus to reform is spurred thereby. We cannot easily envision a wholly legitimate sequence of events that would produce the disparity, so we set ourselves the task of solving a problem.

On the other hand, gender disparity in rates of imprisonment occasions no such disquiet. This is because, tacitly if not explicitly, we are “gender essentialists.” That is, we think boys and girls are different in some ways relevant to explaining the observed disparity—different either in their biological natures, or in their deeply ingrained socializations. (Note well, the *essentialism* with which I am concerned need not be based solely or even mainly in biology. It

can be grounded in (possibly false) beliefs about profound cultural difference as well.) As “gender essentialists,” our intuitions are not offended by the fact of vastly higher rates of imprisonment among males than females. We seldom ask any deeper questions about why this disparity has come about. In this sense, we do not perceive there to be a problem, and so no solution is sought.

Now, we may be right or wrong to act as we do in these gender disparity matters, but my point with the example is to show that the bare facts of gender disparity do not, in themselves, suggest any course of action. To act, we must marry the facts we observe to some model of social causation. This model need not be explicit in our minds. It can and usually will lurk beneath the surface of our conscious reflections. Still, it is the facts *plus* the model that lead us to perceive a given circumstance as indicative of some as yet undiagnosed failing in our social interactions, or not. This kind of reflection on the deeper structure of our social-cognitive processes, as they bear on the issues of racial disparity, is what I had hoped to stimulate with my discussion of “biased social cognition.” And, the role of “race” in such processes is what I am alluding to when I talk about “racial stigma.”

To show how the argument goes, I would like to invoke a “thought experiment” not unlike the ones I analyze at length in my book. Imagine that an observer (correctly) takes note of the fact that, on the average and all else equal, commercial loans to blacks have a greater risk of default, or that black residential neighborhoods are more likely to decline. This may lead that observer to withhold credit from blacks, or to move away from any neighborhood when more than a few blacks move into it. But, what if “race” conveys this information only because, when a great number of observers expect it to do so and act on that expectation, the result (through some possibly complex chain of social causation) is to bring about the confirmation of their beliefs? Perhaps blacks default more often precisely because they have trouble getting further extensions of credit in the face of a crisis. Or, perhaps non-black residents panic at the arrival of a few blacks, selling their homes too quickly and below the market value to lower-income (black) buyers, and it is this process that promotes a neighborhood’s decline. If under such circumstances observers were to attribute racially disparate behaviors to deeply ingrained (biological or cultural) limitations of African-Americans—thinking, say, that blacks do not repay their loans or take care of their property because, for whatever reasons, they are just less responsible people on average—then these observers might well be mistaken. Yet, since their surmise about blacks is supported by hard evidence, they might well persist in their error. Such an error, persisted in, would be of great *political* moment, because if one attributes an endogenous difference (a difference produced within a system of interactions) to an exogenous cause (a cause located outside that system), then one is unlikely to see any need for systemic reform.

This distinction between *endogenous* and *exogenous* sources of social causation, I am arguing, is the key to understanding the difference in our reformist intuitions about gender inequalities in the schools and in the jails: Because we think the disparity of school outcomes stems from endogenous sources, while the disparity of jail outcomes is tacitly attributed in most of our “causal models” to exogenous sources, we are differentially moved to do something about the observed disparities.

So, the effect I am after when I talk about “racial stigma” and the reason I employ an apparently loaded phrase like “biased social cognition” is this: It is a politically consequential cognitive distortion to understand the observably disadvantaged position of a racially defined population subgroup as having emerged from qualities taken to be intrinsic to the group when, as a matter of actual social causation, that disadvantage is the product of a system of social interactions. I argue that a given instance of social disparity is less likely to be thought to constitute a social problem when people see the disparity as having been caused by what they take to be the deficiencies of those (e.g., the boys in the jails, but not the girls in the schools) who lag behind. I reiterate that it hardly matters whether the internal qualities *mistakenly* seen as source of some group’s observed laggardly status are biological or deeply cultural. What matters, I argue, is that something has gone wrong if observers fail to see *systemic, endogenous* interactions that lead to bad social outcomes for blacks, and instead attribute those results to *exogenous* factors taken as internal to the group in question. My contention—despite the misgivings of several critics—is that in American society, when the group in question is blacks, the risk of this kind of causal misattribution is especially great.

I believe the disparate impact of the enforcement of anti-drug laws offers a telling illustration of the value in this way of thinking. There can be no drug market without sellers *and* buyers. (Just so, there would be no street prostitution without hookers and johns.) Typically, those on the selling side of such markets are more deeply involved in crime and disproportionately drawn from the bottom rungs of society. When we entertain alternative responses to the social malady reflected in drug use (or in street prostitution), we must weight the costs likely to be imposed upon the people involved. Our tacit models of social causation will play a role in this process of evaluation. To ruin a college student’s life because of a drug buy, or a businessman’s reputation because of a pick-up in the red light district, may strike us as far more costly than to send a young thug to Rikers Island, or to put a floozy in the hoosegow. One consequence of racial stigma, I suggest, is that because those bearing the brunt of the cost of our punitive response to the broad social malady of drug usage are disproportionately black, our society is less impelled to examine what we are undertaking in this area of policy, and to consider reform. I could be wrong

about this, but the speculation is certainly not implausible. How “serious” a given crime is seen to be in the minds of those who through their votes indirectly determine our policies, and how “deserved” the punishment for a given infraction, can depend on the racial identities of the parties involved. This, I am holding, is human nature. There need be nothing “sinister” in any of it. But, if we want to *analyze* what is going on around us, and not limiting ourselves to *moralizing* about it, we will want to take such possibilities seriously.

In my book, I use the theory of biased social cognition that I have just sketched to argue that durable racial inequality can best be understood as the outgrowth of a series of Myrdal (1944) called “vicious circles of cumulative causation.” Tacit association of “blackness” with “unworthiness” in the American public’s imagination affects cognitive processes and promotes essentialist causal misattributions. When confronted by the facts of racially disparate achievement, the racially disproportionate transgression of legal strictures, and racially unequal development of productive potential, observers will have difficulty identifying with the plight of a group of people whom they (mistakenly) think are simply “reaping what they have sown.” In such a case, there will be little public support for egalitarian policies benefiting a stigmatized racial group. This, in turn, encourages the reproduction through time of racial inequality because, absent some policies of this sort, the low social conditions of many blacks persist, the negative social meanings ascribed to blackness are then reinforced, and so the racially biased social-cognitive processes are reproduced, completing the circle.

III.

What is more, I argue that this situation constitutes a gross historical injustice in American society. My view is that present racial inequality is a justice problem because it has its root in past unjust acts that were perpetrated on the basis of race. *I see past racial injustice as establishing a general presumption against indifference to present racial inequality.* To see why this matters, suppose it could be shown that a posture of official public indifference to racial inequality would *enhance* our comity and community. (So, it would seem, many advocates of a “color-blind” America believe.) Even so, I would still want to urge that some efforts to reduce racial inequality would be warranted. However, I do not think that the degree to which social policy should be oriented toward reducing present racial inequality—the weight to be placed on this objective in the social decision calculus, if you will—can or should be conceived in terms of “correcting” or “balancing” historical violations. This is what leads me to question reparations as a response to the historical racial injustices of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. My view is that, although the

quantitative attribution of causal weight to distant historical events required by reparations advocacy may not be workable, one can still support *qualitative* claims. Much of moral consequence rests upon this distinction.

My discussion of racial justice (Ch. 4) stands in the great American tradition of progressive social criticism. I seek to extend and generalize conventional notions of “racism” and “discrimination” so as to deal with the post-civil rights reality of our time. Central to this new reality, in my view, is the fact that there has opened a wide gap between the races in productivity-enhancing behaviors—the acquisition of cognitive skills, the extent of law-abidingness, the stability of family relations, attachment to the workforce and the like. I place this disparity in human development between the races at the center of my analysis, and put forward an account of it rooted in social and cultural factors, not in the inherent capacities of black people, or in our “values.” What I am saying in so many words is that, even if there were no overt racial discrimination against blacks, powerful social forces would still be at work to perpetuate into future generations the consequences of the universally acknowledged history of racism in America. A corollary of this position is that combating such racism as continues to exist will be insufficient to achieve racial justice.

In stating this, I do not mean to suggest that conventional efforts to combat discrimination should be suspended. Nor do I imply that racism is an empty concept or an historical relic irrelevant to the study of present-day social relations in the United States. The evidence of continuing racial unfairness in day-to-day social intercourse in this country is quite impressive. But, the evidence of a gap in acquired skills that at least partly explains racial disparities is also impressive. There is a one-standard-deviation difference between the mean cognitive test scores of young blacks and whites, only about half of which is accounted for by racial differences in schooling and family backgrounds (Neal and Johnson, 1996). The National Assessment of Educational Progress shows the average black at age 17 performing only slightly better in reading and mathematics than the average white at age 13 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996). Two of every three black infants are born to an unmarried mother. Young black men are upwards of five times more likely than whites to be arrested and convicted of criminal offenses. In central cities throughout the country one can observe non-white immigrants of relatively recent arrival overtaking native-born blacks, in terms of their economic and social performance. I repeat: none of this is a reflection of the incapacity or immorality of black people, in my opinion. But, stark facts like these cannot be wished away, nor can they be adequately accounted for simply by invoking “white racism.”

My central proposition is that to understand this horrible situation one must take account of the indirect and subtle effects of racial stigma, as distinct from discrimination. I argue in the book that racial stigma leads not only to biased

social cognition, but also to biased processes of human development deriving from the extreme social isolation of many blacks. There is fairly strong support for this view in the literature. Anderson (1990) provides an ethnographic account of life in inner city Philadelphia in which peer influences significantly constrain the acquisition of skills by adolescents in those neighborhoods. Waldinger (1996), in a study of immigrant labor in New York City, concludes that poor blacks suffer less from the racism of employers than from the fact that they do not have access to the ethnic networks through which workers are recruited for jobs in construction and service industries. Glaeser and Cutler (1997), comparing U.S. cities with varying degrees of racial population concentration estimate that a 13 percent reduction in segregation would eliminate about one-third of the black-white gap in schooling, employment, earnings, and unwed pregnancy rates. Mills and Lubuele (1997) argue that students of urban poverty have yet to explain why "low income black residents actually or potentially eligible for jobs that have moved to suburbs (have) not followed such jobs to the suburbs."

Some observers of the American scene, and not only conservatives, see this situation as reflecting a deep incapacity or immorality of the black lower classes. Accordingly, they deny that this circumstance raises any question of social justice for our nation. I think they are wrong, but I do not think that calling them "racists" is an effective rebuttal of their arguments. I seek grounding for the demand for racial justice that does not require a showing of contemporaneous discrimination (which surely exists, but which cannot account for the magnitude of racial disparity productivity-enhancing behaviors in my view), and that does not rest upon the existence of some kind of generic, trans-generational historical debt.

IV.

I turn now from the argument of my book to a consideration of the larger political context into which my argument has been injected. More than a few critics have taken *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* to be an effort to rehabilitate myself with liberals after many years as a conservative voice in debates over racial issues. This is a serious misreading. This book is an exercise in social theory, not in polemics, and those who have been willing to briefly acquaint themselves with it will quickly find this to be so. My goal with this exercise has been to understand something of how race, racial identity, and racial classification work in the social life of this nation. Such an endeavor self-consciously undertaken as an expression of political ideology is bound to fail. There are literatures in economics, sociology and social psychology to which I hope to contribute with this work. While I hope and I believe that I have done

so, ultimately this is a question that my scholarly peers will decide.² Some people will inevitably be disappointed to hear this, but I must insist that in the writing of this book I have had no political agenda.

V.

Finally, let me address myself to those who say that I am now contradicting some of the most powerful arguments that I advanced against racial liberalism in the past. More than a dozen years ago, in the pages of the journal *First Things*, I wrote the following:

It is time to recognize that further progress toward the attainment of equality for black Americans, broadly and correctly understood, depends most crucially at this juncture on the acknowledgment and rectification of the dysfunctional behaviors which plague black communities, and which so offend and threaten others. Recognize this, and much else will follow. It is more important to address this matter effectively than it is to agitate for additional rights. Indeed, success in such agitation has become contingent upon effective reform efforts mounted from within the black community. . . .

The (key) point . . . is (that) progress such as this must be earned, it cannot be demanded. . . . (W)hen the effect of past oppression is to leave a people in a diminished state, the attainment of true equality with the former oppressor cannot depend on his generosity, but must ultimately derive from an elevation of their selves above the state of diminishment. It is of no moment that historic wrongs may have caused current deprivation, for justice is not the issue here. The issues are dignity, respect, and self-respect—all of which are preconditions for true equality between any peoples. The classic interplay between the aggrieved black and the guilty white, in which the former demands and the latter conveys recognition of historic injustice, is not an exchange among equals. Neither, one suspects, is it a stable exchange. Eventually it may shade into something else, something less noble—into patronage, into a situation where the guilty one comes to have contempt for the claimant, and the claimant comes to feel shame, and its natural accompaniment, rage, at his impotence.³

How, many will ask, can the man who wrote those words make *racial stigma* the central organizing principle of his “anatomy of racial inequality?” Or, equivalently, how can we take at face value his current claims about the power of racial stigma, if he was willing to say such things only a decade ago? While

this is not the venue for me to fully address such questions, I can offer this partial reply: It is not inconsistent to hold that black parents, like all other parents, are responsible for the behaviors of their children, and simultaneously to hold that the nation is responsible for the ghetto poor. Nor is it a contradiction to assert, at one and the same time, that profound behavioral problems afflict many black communities, and that these maladies are no alien imposition on an otherwise pristine Euro-American canvas, but instead are products of economic and political structures indigenous to American society. Both can be true. And, if both are true, the question becomes one of emphasis. While my emphasis has definitely changed, I do not repudiate the earlier claims.

The deeper issue, though, is the difficulty of coherently and effectively voicing both truths when one endeavors to practice social criticism in what I have elsewhere called a “multiple audience” context.⁴ Whenever he advances an argument for any kind of reform, a black critic faces two audiences—a communal and a civic one. Each audience has its own expectations and makes its own demands. The passage from 1992 quoted above was an exercise in social criticism directed, ironically, at liberal black American intellectual elites. (The irony here is that the piece was surely better known among and more widely cited by conservative whites.) And, my recently published book is an exercise in social criticism directed at the American intellectual and political elite as a whole. A decade ago I was preoccupied with the questions of *dignity* and of *self-respect* for black people. And, where problematic and self-destructive behaviors of black people bear importantly on such questions, an honest critic—one who truly loves his people—must say so. This I have tried to do.

Whatever one may think about my views on such matters, those were inherently *communal* questions. This is not to say that only blacks could speak of such matters, or that blacks had to speak only among themselves about them. It is merely to acknowledge that, for the most part, these were and are matters where blacks must take the lead in defining the goals and managing the processes of moving toward them.

But, questions of *social justice* and *fair opportunity* are the fit subjects of a broader public discourse. And, where the historical echoes of the racial subordination of African-Americans continue to bear on such questions, an honest social critic must say so. This I have also tried to do.

The ultimate difficulty here is that, while self-development is an existential necessity for blacks as an ethnic community, its advocacy by black social critics in the larger civic discourse can undercut the pursuit of racial justice. The greatest problem, as I see it, with my earlier advocacy was that I failed fully to appreciate the force of this point. The problem is that stressing the self-

limiting behaviors of some black people authorizes external critics to see only a *black behavioral* problem, and not a *social justice* problem, when in fact both difficulties may be present. At the same time, advocacy for racial justice can undercut needed communal reforms by focusing all of the attention on external difficulties, ignoring the necessity of internal reform. This situation is captured by the dual meaning of “we” implicit in my signature question from the book: “What manner of people are *we* who accept such degradation in our midst?” There are two implied imperatives—getting our “behavioral trains to run on time” in black communities, and addressing a structural legacy from generations of racial oppression. These rest on very different ground: While the first draws on ties of blood, shared history, and common faith, the second endeavors to achieve an integration of the most wretched, despised, and feared of our fellows along with the rest of us into a single political community of mutual concern.

This problem is closely related to the age-old conundrum, going back to Kant, of reconciling individual and social responsibilities. We humans, while undertaking our life projects, find ourselves constrained by social and cultural influences beyond our control. Yet if we are to live effective and dignified lives, we must behave as if we can indeed determine our fates. Similarly, black Americans are constrained by the residual effects of an ugly history of racism. Yet seizing what the iconic black conservative, Booker T. Washington, once called “freedom in the larger and higher sense” requires that blacks accept responsibility for our own fate even though the effects of this immoral past remain with us. But, our doing so cannot be allowed to excuse the nation from acknowledging a basic moral truth—one that transcends politics—which is that the citizens of this republic bear a responsibility to be actively engaged in changing the structures that constrain the black poor, so that they can more effectively exercise their inherent and morally required capacity to choose.

Acting upon the above considerations, I was on a moral crusade in 1992. I am engaged in a rather different quest now, but I maintain that these are complementary, not contradictory endeavors. Fifteen years ago, I was sure that the largest obstacle to incorporating the ghetto poor into the commonwealth was that their leaders had the wrong ideas. Today, I see that position as having been mistaken and I am laboring to correct the error. As I said in the conclusion of my book, the role of a responsible black public intellectual today is to keep in play an awareness of the need for both communal and civic reforms, finding a way to make progress in either sphere complement that in the other (Ch. 5).

Still, playing that role credibly is not easy. Sadly, the larger currents of American public life inhibit nuance in discourse about race and social policy (by commentators of all races). Moreover, there is something inevitably

emblematic about the role that a prominent black intellectual like myself plays in such discussions.⁵ This role of “tacit testifying” which black dissenters inevitably play when they publicly break ranks from their co-racialists accounts for why we tend to be so easily pigeonholed in, and are so willing to remain confined to, one ideological camp or the other. And, it also helps to explain why when we change our minds, many people—liberals and conservatives alike—act as if they smell a rat. But, at least in my case, they are quite wrong.

The great economist and public intellectual, John Maynard Keynes, is reputed to have said: “When circumstances change I change my opinion. What do you do?” Like all scholars, I hope to continue to think, to learn, and to grow. I wish my critics and sympathetic readers alike the same pleasures.

NOTES

1. It is worth noting here that a number of distinguished modern scientists disagree with them. Steven Pinker of MIT, in his recent book, *The Blank Slate* (Viking, 2002), stresses that races are not discrete, non-overlapping categories but nevertheless argues that what we perceive as race has *some* biological reality as a statistical concept. A similar position is adopted by geneticist James Crow and zoologist Ernst Mayr, both Fellows of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, writing separately in the Winter 2002 issue of *Daedalus*.

2. For evidence giving credence to expectations in this regard see Raphael 2002.

3. “Two Paths to Black Power,” *First Things* (26) October 1992, pp. 20–21.

4. “Self-Censorship and Public Discourse: A Theory of ‘Political Correctness’ and Related Phenomena,” *Rationality and Society*, October 1994, reprinted as Chapter 8 in my collection, *One by One from the Inside Out* (Free Press, 1995).

5. Consider how the race of the author has contributed to the credibility of the arguments in books like John McWhorter’s *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, or Randall Kennedy’s recent *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word*. The importance of the authors’ race in these cases is due not so much to the possibility that he has access to inside information. Rather, the key point is that the argument’s *legitimacy*, not its *accuracy*, can be enhanced by an author’s race. (“Even some blacks can see that . . .”) But, legitimacy depends on what a reader can safely assume about an author’s motives. As a result, social criticism on race-related topics by black writers inescapably entails an *ad hominem* element.

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