

October 23, 2007

PPAI 2200, The Political Economy of Punishment

Prof. Glenn C. Loury

Writing Assignment #3 [Also posted on the course website, URL below.]

This assignment is due on Tuesday, October 30, at the start of class.

This assignment is based mainly on my book, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*. Two excerpts from the book's argument follow (one from Chp. 5, which was not assigned):

'Race' may be a human product, but ...it is not readily subjected to human agency... Because we filter social experience through racial categories, and given the ancillary meanings with which those categories are freighted, we can be led to interpret our data in such a way that the arbitrariness of the race convention remains hidden from our view, leaving us "cognitive prisoners" inside a symbolic world of our own unwitting construction. (chp. 2)

By now the reader knows I take a constructivist position in regard to the ontological status of 'race': A field of human subjects characterized by morphological variability comes through concrete historical experience to be partitioned into subgroups defined by some cluster of physical markers. Information-hungry agents hang expectations around these markers, beliefs that can ... become self-confirming. Meaning-hungry agents invest these markers with social, psychological, and even spiritual significance. Race-markers come to form the core of personal and social identities. Narrative accounts of descent are constructed around them... This vesting of reasonable expectation and ineffable meaning in objectively arbitrary markings on human bodies comes to be reproduced over the generations, takes on a social life of its own, seems natural and not merely conventional, and ends up having profound consequences for social relations among individuals in the raced society. (chp. 5)

Those "profound consequences," Loury argues, include "biased social cognition" (chp 2). They entail the possibility that the elimination of "reward bias" can be consistent with the continuation of "development bias" (chp. 3). And, they lead Loury to distinguish (in chp. 2) between the cognitive activities of "specification" and "inference."

Based on your reading of Loury, Trondman, Pager, and any other relevant sources you might care to mention, your assignment— in three concise, double spaced pages – is to use the theoretical approach to "the grammar of race" hinted at in the quotes above to analyze American criminal justice policy. (Or, if you think my approach is off-base, argue as to why you think so.) Be specific about what you take to be the virtues and inadequacies of my approach, illustrating your points with examples drawn from our reading, our discussions, and current criminal justice issues as reported in the press, etc.