

Two Cheers for Glenn Loury
Two Cheers for Glenn Loury -
Or Maybe Just One

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IN 1998 DERRICK BELL WROTE a highly critical review in *New Politics* of Randall Kennedy's *Race, Crime, and the Law*. He minced no words in reproving Kennedy for straying far from the "stunning models of racial advocacy" that marked his early work when he joined the faculty of Harvard Law School in 1986, following a wave of student protests demanding the hiring of black faculty. In his review Bell scored Kennedy for his equivocal and apologetic positions on racial issues, observing that the media will accord "special celebrity status to any black willing to speak for whites." Bell ended his review with an unexpected and disarming personal appeal: "Come home, Randy! We advocates of racial justice need you on our side, not in our way."¹

No doubt, Kennedy took umbrage at Bell's insinuation that intellectual dissent was tantamount to racial betrayal. Kennedy perhaps identified with black conservatives who defiantly assert their right to deviate from the "civil rights orthodoxy" and to hew an independent line without being subjected to racial excommunication. No one has been more vociferous on this point than Glenn Loury, who once assailed black leaders for being caught in a "loyalty trap." He continued:

They are fearful of engaging in a candid, critical appraisal of the condition of our people because they do not want to appear to be disloyal to the race. But this rhetorical reticence has serious negative consequences for the ability of blacks as a group to grapple with the real problems that confront us. Moreover, it represents a failure of nerve in the face of adversity that may be more accurately characterized as intellectual treason than racial fealty. After all, what more important obligation can the privileged class of black elites have than to tell the truth to their own people?²

It should come as no surprise that, in the aftermath of his much-publicized break with the political right, Loury's words would be used against him. In a 1999 article in the *National Review*, Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* who published Loury's early essays, wrote that Loury had "fallen,

or perhaps deliberately leaped, into 'the loyalty trap' he once worked so hard to escape."3 Podhoretz allows that "everyone has a right to change his mind," citing his own about-face when he defected from liberalism and emerged as one of the founders of the neoconservative movement. What Podhoretz does not say is that his political flip-flop was motivated entirely by ethnic loyalty, as he made clear in a 1972 article in *Commentary* entitled "Is It Good for the Jews?" Podhoretz traced his disenchantment with liberalism to a growing realization that liberals were moving in directions -- diminished support for Israel in the wake of the 1967 war and support for "compensatory programs" (the embryo for affirmative action) -- that were antithetical to Jewish interests. In the case of Glenn Loury, his political shift grew out of a similar realization that his ideological bedfellows were gravitating to positions that he could not countenance. Loury was a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in 1994 when his fellow fellows Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray published *The Bell Curve*, followed a year later by the publication of Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism*. With considerable public fanfare, Loury resigned from the American Enterprise Institute in 1995. Clearly, his loyalty to the conservative cause had been stretched to its racial limits.

LOURY'S REHABILITATION INTO RESPECTABLE liberal circles came in 2000 when he was invited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. to deliver the W. E. B. Du Bois Lectures at Harvard. The lectures have now been published by Harvard University Press under the title *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, replete with exuberant blurbs from Orlando Patterson, Charles Tilly, Michael Walzer, and William Julius Wilson, among others. Unfortunately, Loury passed up the opportunity to use the lectures and the book they spawned to revisit his earlier positions on race and race policy. I do not mean to suggest that Loury should have written an intellectual mea culpa. As Podhoretz reminds us, everybody has a right to change his mind. However, Loury was no ordinary person or obscure professor. With his elite credentials and his affiliation with conservative journals and think tanks, he had emerged as one of the nation's leading pundits on race, appearing frequently on television and op-ed pages, testifying before Congressional committees, and otherwise influencing public debate and the formation of public policy. Public discourse on race might have been enriched had Loury taken pains to explain exactly what positions he now renounces, why he does so, what his current positions are concerning America's festering racial problems, and where he stands now on key public policy issues. These very issues form the subtext for *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, but they are camouflaged behind a dizzying array of theoretical abstractions and turgid prose. It is as though Loury would have us think that he arrived at truths that previously eluded him through rigorous application of economic models. Never mind that the ideas that he propounds in his lectures are commonplace in the vast literature on race. Having wiped his internal slate clean, and renounced his previous affiliation with right-wing organizations, Glenn Loury now resorts to a dubious solipsism, and pretends that he must

begin, well, at the beginning. As he writes, "I rely heavily in this book on the elementary observation that, in the first instance, 'race' is a mode of perceptual categorization people use to navigate their way through a murky, uncertain social world."⁴ [Great, Glenn Loury has discovered race, or rather that people habitually think in terms of racial categories.] Next, as he wades through the theoretical thicket, he stumbles on "racism," a previously unknown entity, leading him to ask: "Exactly what is the nature of racism? What is its mechanism?" For emphasis he places his answer in italics: "I want to suggest with the stigma idea that a withholding of the presumption of equal humanity is the ultimate mechanism of racism in American public life." (88) Once created, this "stigma idea" creates the facts that are its own justification, reflected in "wide disparities in some indicia of behavior across racial groups." (78) [Where would we be without those "indicia"? Presumably living in an epistemological void.]

Having discovered the existence of race and racism, Loury arrives at his most important revelation: that race history has some bearing on the condition of blacks in contemporary American society. For this we can be grateful, given the breathtaking ahistoricism of Loury's earlier work and of the conservative racial paradigm in general. This is the same man who wrote in 1990 that blacks "must let go of the past and take responsibility for our future." (*One by One*, 16) Now he concedes that "the conservative line on race is ahistorical." As he explains: "Contemporary American society has inherited a racial hierarchy -- the remnant of a system of racial domination that had been supported by an array of symbols and meanings deleterious to the reputation and self-image of blacks." (106) Again, we can be grateful that Loury acknowledges the existence of "a system of racial domination," but note the reductionism in his formulation. The crux of the problem is not the institutionalized inequalities between blacks and whites, but rather the "array of symbols and meanings deleterious to the reputation and self-image of blacks." Is the struggle against racism merely a matter of repairing "the reputation and self-image of blacks"? Is Loury still part of the chorus of black conservatives who oppose affirmative action because it sullies the reputation and undermines the self-image of blacks?

Impatient to find out where Loury's theoretical mishmash leads, I flipped to the concluding chapter. It begins as follows: "By now the reader knows that 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." (157) [Yo, man, that's you!] What was Loury thinking when he embarked on this mistaken journey into obscurantism? This is all the more puzzling because Loury's previous work is marked by clear and cogent prose. Is it that he wrote with crystal clarity when he spouted the conservative line that he now abjures, but cloaks his liberalism in unintelligible prose? Or is it that he felt compelled to reach for profundity on the occasion of Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois lectures? His audience must have been writhing in their seats (and Du Bois tossing in his

grave) as he plunged deeper into the miasma of unnecessary erudition. Thus, I felt a sense of relief when I encountered the following paragraph in his concluding chapter:

Faced with manifestations of extreme marginality and dysfunction among some of the racially marked, will the citizenry indignantly cry out, "What manner of people are they, who languish in that way?" Or will they be moved, perhaps after overcoming an instinctual revulsion, to ask reflectively and reflexively, "What manner of people are we who accept such degradation in our midst?" I have argued that the attainment of racial justice depends crucially on which narrative is settled upon. Reform becomes possible only when this second question is posed. (159)

Here, alas, Loury becomes intelligible and replaces soulless jargon with poignant imagery of a reified citizenry crying out for racial justice. He also blurts out, in this brief interlude, the major point of dissension with his erstwhile fellows on the right who have invoked a spurious agency to suggest that responsibility for America's race problems resides with blacks themselves.

Indeed, this is the line that Loury spouted for two decades, making him the darling of the conservative movement. In 1995, the same year of his break with the American Enterprise Institute, Loury published a compilation of his writings in a book entitled *One by One from the Inside Out*. The title encapsulated his main argument: that change has to come from within, and that black uplift would occur, not through race-based public policy, but by individuals clawing their way out of poverty, one by one. Here is a sampling of his victim-blaming allegations:

"The bottom stratum of the black community has compelling problems that can no longer be blamed solely on white racism, that will not yield to protest marches or court orders, and that force us to confront fundamental failures in lower-class black urban society." (16)

"Characterizing the problem of the ghetto poor as due to white racism is one variant of this argument that 'society' has caused the problem. It overlooks the extent to which values and behaviors of inner-city black youths are implicated in the difficulty." (18)

"I have spoken of the difference between the 'enemy without' -- racism -- and the 'enemy within' the black community -- those dysfunctional behaviors of youth blacks that perpetuate poverty and dependency." (21)

"Whatever fault may be placed upon racism in America, the responsibility for the behavior of black youngsters lies squarely on the shoulders of the black community itself." (37)

"Finally, self-help is critical to securing the sympathetic support of the rest of the political community... . This is why the movement toward welfare reform that focuses on placing some onus of responsibility on recipients does not threaten blacks. On the contrary, such developments are a godsend, for they help to diffuse a potentially damaging stigma associated with the disproportionate dependency of blacks on state-funded transfers." (80)
(italics added)

This last excerpt exposes the political dangers of Loury's reduction of racism to "stigma." To avoid inflaming white opinion and to shed the stigma of "welfare," Loury is willing to deprive destitute mothers and their children of the meager subsidies that barely provided shelter and food. And when a black economist from Harvard and a born-again Christian declares that the gutting of welfare is "a godsend," this provides the anti-welfare crusaders with precisely the cover that they need to camouflage their racist and immoral agenda.

This agenda included an assault on what was contemptuously called "the civil rights establishment," and Loury was a willing accomplice. In 1990 he testified before Congress in opposition to civil rights legislation that sought to strengthen legal protections against employment discrimination. Even though the legislation did not purport to address the problems of the "underclass," Loury illogically linked the two, arguing that antidiscrimination legislation would have little impact on "the real problem" which has to do with "drugs, criminal violence, educational failure, homelessness, and family instability." (134) He proudly included his testimony in his 1995 anthology, along with a review that he published in *The Public Interest* of John DiIulio's book *America's Black Crime Gap -- and How to Close It*. Loury responded warmly to DiIulio's proposal for longer incarceration of violent and career criminals, adding his cold-blooded cost-benefit analysis: "Keeping known bad guys in prison for a longer period of time would repay society far more than it would cost, with the poorest among us benefiting the most." (299)

Has Glenn Loury renounced these retrograde positions? What message does he now have for the droves of welfare mothers thrown onto the low-wage market, and their children who are deprived of the proverbial safety net? And to the multitude of black men and women who have been relegated to spend unconscionable years in prison, often for non-violent crimes? Perhaps this is why Loury has taken refuge in high-flown theory and obscure terminology: they allow him to avert the human consequences of his extended embrace of right-wing ideology and his implication in its repressive policy regime.

HOW FAR DOES LOURY'S TRUMPETED "political conversion" go? Judging from *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, not very far. His most trenchant attack on his erstwhile bedfellows is as follows [fasten your cognitive safety belts]: "The 'conservative line' on race in America today is simplistic. [S]uch 'pathological' behavior by these most marginal of Americans is deeply rooted in American history." (105) Loury explains: "[W]hile there may be a grain of truth in the insistence by conservatives that cultural differences lie at the root of racial disparity in the United States, the deeper truth is that, for some three centuries now, political, social, and economic institutions that by any measure must be seen as racially oppressive have distorted the communal experience of the slaves and their descendants." (104) Note the unmistakable parallels to Moynihan's screed on the black family. Like many liberals, Loury is willing to blame "history" for distorting the "communal experience" of

blacks, but has little to say about racism as a force in contemporary American society. And in an obvious paraphrase of William Julius Wilson, he writes that "the unfair treatment of persons based on race in formal economic transactions is no longer the most significant barrier to the full participation of blacks in American life." (168) In effect, Loury argues that we are still paying the price of the original sin of racism -- slavery -- and that we are today suffering "the tragedy of the vicious circle" and those self-reproducing "causal feedback loops" that "perpetuate racial inequality from one generation to the next." (10)

Still, Loury's concession that history has something to do with present-day patterns of racial inequality brings him to the threshold of racial liberalism. Time and again, however, he balks at crossing the forbidden line. For example, Loury repudiates liberal individualism, which insists on the autonomy of the individual, with this broadside: "I cannot abide the imposition of abstract strictures of neutrality upon a game in which systematically nonneutral practices have left so many raced and stigmatized outsiders with so few good cards to play." (122) Translation: the playing field between blacks and whites is far from level, precisely the logic behind affirmative action policy. But what do we hear from our convert to liberalism? In the very next sentence, Loury writes: "This is not some over-theorized discourse in defense of affirmative action policies. I desperately want to avoid having the far-reaching implications of my argument projected onto the narrow and partisan ground of the debate over racial preferences. I am not motivated here by a desire to preserve special treatment for blacks, or to keep someone's child from being admitted to a prestigious college." (122) Loury grants that his "raced and stigmatized outsiders" may have "few good cards to play," but he is not inclined to shuffle the deck.

In a section on "Historical Causation and Social Justice," Loury backs himself into yet another corner. He acknowledges the existence of "historically engendered economic differences between racial groups" and further allows that "as a matter of social ethics, policies should be undertaken to mitigate the economic marginality of an historically stigmatized racial group like black Americans." Again he hastens to add, in the very next sentence: "This is not an argument for reparations." (130)

If not affirmative action and reparations, what antiracist policies warrant the support of our supposed convert to liberalism? With bated breath, I approached the section under the heading "Some Thoughts on the Possibility of Racial Reform." Now gobbledeygook is carried to the rhetorical equivalent of a volcanic eruption. The reader is presented with a torrent of murky distinctions--between "racial stigma" and "racial stereotyping," between "racial discrimination" and "racial stigma," between external and non-external structures, and finally -- the mother of all distinctions -- race-blindness (bad!) and race-egalitarianism (good!). This last concept -- race egalitarianism -- envisions reducing inequalities of wealth and power between racial groups. At first blush, it might appear that Loury has taken the plunge into radical thought, and is prepared to confront the massive inequalities of

wealth and power between whites and blacks. However, on closer examination, Loury means only that we need to "attend to the race-mediated patterns of social intercourse that characterize interpersonal relations." (113) Let me explain. Because of terrible and tragic things that happened in the distant past, perpetuated by those insidious causal feedback loops, blacks still lack access to social resources through "informal, culturally mediated, race-influenced social intercourse." (168) For readers already worn down with mental fatigue, let me put it in plain language: it all depends on who you know, and few blacks are in a position to know the right people.

Alas, this was the revelation that Loury had as a doctoral student in economics at MIT, where he received his Ph.D. in 1976. Needless to say, Loury translated this nugget of folk wisdom -- "it's who you know" -- into respectable academic jargon, arguing that blacks suffered from a lack of "social capital."⁵ This notion may be trite but it is not politically innocent. By making lack of social capital the analytical focal point, Loury subtly shifted the focus of blame away from societal institutions onto an alleged deficiency among blacks themselves (however much this lack of social capital was a product of past racism). The "brilliant" black economist from MIT quickly received the attention of publishers and other powerbrokers within the conservative establishment, and by 1982, barely six years out of graduate school, Loury was a tenured full professor at Harvard.

Glenn Loury would probably deny that he ever "left home," in the sense that all along he considered himself "a race man" in the tradition of Booker T. Washington. Like Washington, he advocated self-help and economic development from within the black community, and like Washington, he was bitterly attacked by blacks who, in the tradition of W.E.B. Du Bois, favored a frontal assault against white racism. However, not all the fire directed against Loury came from people whom he could dismiss as ideological enemies. The family he left behind on Chicago's South Side also accused him as "selling out to the white man," as Loury divulged in interviews with Adam Shatz.⁶ Perhaps his break with the political right was his way of "coming home."

NOTWITHSTANDING THE RIDICULE heaped on him by conservatives, Loury has nothing to fear from "the loyalty trap." The solidarities that bind African Americans together as a people were forged through oppression, and the struggle for racial justice is anchored in both morality and truth. Loury has distanced himself from conservatives who trounced morality and truth in their relentless crusade against affirmative action and other policies designed to attack institutional racism. He has belatedly adopted some liberal stances on race, but he has yet to walk the walk, and to speak with clarity and force on behalf of policies that would liberate this nation, blacks and whites alike, from the bane of its past. Which is more to be feared -- the political enemy whose ideological proclivities are transparent or the convert who subverts his newfound allies with equivocation and sophistry? Derrick Bell's evocation still holds: "Come home, Glenn. We advocates of racial justice need you on our side, not in our way."

Notes

Derrick Bell, "The Strange Career of Randall Kennedy," *New Politics*, Vol. VII (Summer 1998), p. 66. [return](#)

Glenn C. Loury, "Leadership Failure and the Loyalty Trap," in *One by One from the Inside Out* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 190. [return](#)

Norman Podhoretz, "The Loyalty Trap," *National Review* (January 25, 1999), p. 10 (ProQuest version). [return](#)

Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 17. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations come from this text. [return](#)

In Loury's own words: "I formalized the observation that family and community backgrounds can play an important role, alongside factors like individual ability and human capital investments, in determining individual achievement," *Ibid.*, p. 102. [return](#)

Adam Shatz, "About Face," *New York Times Magazine* (January 20, 2002) pp. 5 and 8 (ProQuest Version). [return](#)

[Contents of No. 33](#)

[Go back to New Politics home page](#)