

EC 1370 Second Lecture on “The Anatomy of Racial Inequality,” March 4, 2010

A. What is “Race”? -- Embodied Social Signification

According to Loury: “race” refers *a cluster of inheritable bodily markings carried by a largely endogamous group of individuals – markings that can be observed by others with ease; that can be changed or misrepresented only with great difficulty; and that have come to be invested, within a particular society at a given historical moment, with social meaning.*’ (pp. 20-21)

So, “race” happens whenever inherited marks on people’s bodies become infused with social significance in a stable way that is reproduced across the generations. This is a view that sees the phenomenon of “race” as self-replicating, in the following sense: *there would be no “races” if individuals did not choose to persistently discriminate on a racial basis in their most intimate personal (i.e., reproductive) associations.* The existence of a settled practice of racial endogamy is a necessary condition for the reproduction of race-consciousness and race-signification as “equilibrium social behavior”. Some questions:

1. How do “others” perceive the subject? (Virtual Identities; Goffman)
 - a. “Passing”: virtual vs. actual social identities. (e.g., living ‘in the closet’)
 - b. “Mixing”; concept of bi-racial; racial ambiguity (Don’t ask, don’t tell!)
 - c. The “tragic mulatto;” (recall Leo Strauss’s ‘Why do we remain Jews!’)
 - d. “Ambiguity”: The case of Barack H. Obama! (All things to all people...)
 - e. “Invisibility”: Ralph Ellison’s brilliant trope. Dubois’s “amused contempt...”
2. How do subjects perceive themselves (as perceived by others...)? (Actual Identities)
 - a. Who am I? (To call myself African American I must prune the “family tree.”)
 - b. Who’s like me? Who are “my people?” (Are black Americans a ‘people’?)
 - c. Who is authentically black? Who decides? (Who’s a ‘real American’?)
 - d. The charge of “acting white.” Oppositional identities. Divided loyalties.
 - e. What is “racial solidarity” or “racial loyalty”?
 - f. Assimilation: is it a threat or an opportunity?
 - e. Is it ‘child abuse’ to pass racial identity consciousness on to one’s children?

B. Why Is Racial Inequality So Persistent? -- Biased Social Cognition

Loury writes: “‘Race’ may be a human product, but, because it is a social convention that emerged out of the complex interactions of myriad, autonomous human beings, it is not readily subjected to human agency. Between us reflective agents and our social artifacts stand mechanisms of social intercourse that are anything but transparent. 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.” (pp. 46-47)

Also: “People do not freely give the presumption of an equal humanity. Only philosophers do that, and may God love them... So, in an industrial society of some three hundred million people with a long history of racial subordination going back centuries, what happens when tens of millions of those people cannot in every situation of moral reflection and significant public deliberation rely on being extended the presumption of an equal humanity?” (page 87)

And, finally: *“It is a politically consequential cognitive distortion to ascribe the disadvantage to be observed among a group of people to qualities thought to be intrinsic to that group when, in fact, that disadvantage is the product of a system of social interactions. (p. 26)*

1. Here are some key conceptual differentiations developed in Loury’s Argument:
 - a. The distinction between specification and inference as cognitive activities.
 - b. The difference between reward bias and development bias.
 - c. Endogenous (systemic) vs. exogenous (endemic) “causes” of racial inequality.
 - d. The moral status of *discrimination in contract* versus *discrimination in contact*.

2. Here is the key conclusion from Loury’s Argument:

“Markings on the bodies of human beings – of no intrinsic significance in themselves – become invested through time with reasonable expectations and powerful social meaning ... because race conventions can seem natural and quite consistent with reason, and because they convey significant social meanings, people with particular race-markers may become stigmatized – seen by their fellows as ‘damaged goods,’ as THEM not US, as persons who lack the ability or the culture to succeed in society’s mainstream. Moreover, since legitimate public action in a democracy must comport with how observers interpret social experience, and because the meanings connected with race conventions can distort social-cognitive processes in the citizenry to the detriment of the stigmatized, reform policies that ameliorate the disadvantage of the racial other may fail to garner a majority’s support...” (pp. 111-112) Some implications of this view involve:

- a. “racial neglect”: problems of blacks garner less sympathy.
- b. “racial amnesia”: systemic forces ignored individuals/communities responsible.
- c. “racial injustice”: prefer blindness (procedure) over egalitarianism (substantive)

C. What’s Wrong with Liberal Individualism (when discussing racial justice?)

“...my problem with liberal individualism is that it fails to comprehend how stigma-influenced dynamics in the spheres of social interaction and self-image production can induce objective racial inequality, decoupled from contemporaneous discriminatory acts of individuals, carrying over across generations, shaping political and social-cognitive sensibilities in the citizenry, making racial disparity appear natural and non-dissonant, stymieing reform, and locking-in inequality. The core point for me is that those ‘selves’ who are the enshrined subjects of liberal theory – the autonomous, dignity-bearing individuals whose infinite value (ends in themselves, never means to an end) has been enshrined by Immanuel Kant at the center of the liberal project – these selves are not given a priori. They are, instead, products of social relations, and of economic and political institutions. That is, the selves at the center of liberal theory are, to a not inconsiderable degree, creatures of the very systems of laws, social intercourse, and economic relations that a normative theory is to assess. Neither their goals in life nor (crucial for my purposes here) their self-understandings as raced subjects come into being outside the flow of history and the web of culture. (pp. 121-122)

- a. *Infrangibility principle*: We’re all in this together! But, who are “We”?
- b. Color-blindness is NOT *closed to moral deviation*.
- c. You CANNOT “get beyond race” without “taking race into account.”
- d. Indeed, the very effort to do so is a RACIAL move (a kind of *White Power!*)