

Culture, Causation and Confusion: Why Bill Cosby is Wasting His Time

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- a. I wish to encourage some critical discussion of the “culture talk” which has insinuated itself into public discourses of politicians and social scientists alike about problems of racial inequality in the US – rhetoric that invokes categories such as “black community”; “black leaders”; “black culture”; “black crime;” and “black responsibility.”
- b. I am concerned that, this culture talk does not attend sufficiently to how public rhetoric about ‘race’ and ‘culture’ affects (i) the cognition of social facts; (ii) conclusions implied about social causation; (iii) contestations over historical narrative; or, (iv) the dynamic processes of public agenda setting. It mistakenly treats ‘culture’ as something racial groups have, while at the same time implying that it is something such groups can ‘fix.’
- c. Note that policy talk is not merely *instrumental*. It is also *expressive* and *constitutive*. There is an important distinction to be drawn between the public question, “What manner of people are WE?” and the (implicit) public question, “What manner of people are THEY?” Constitutive public policy talk promotes or retards the posing of such questions by the citizenry, and sets the agenda for public action by, among other means, marking out a boundary between civic and communal responsibility.
- d. Also, policy talk implicitly conveys a narrative about a nation’s history – not merely a recitation of past events, but an interpretation of their meaning – thereby establishing the significance of that history for the present-day agenda of public action.
- e. Talk about black *communal* responsibility in current US policy discourses (e.g., Bill Cosby’s crusade) ends by imputing agency where none exists, distracting from the urgent *public* business of framing and solving our nation’s common problems.
- f. Indeed, in my view, much of contemporary “black culture talk” borders on a fallacy of misplaced concreteness – imputing agency to an imagined racial collectivity when, in point of fact, no institutional means exists through which individuals in the group could actually implement a culture critic’s purported “solution.”
- g. At the most general theoretical level: group boundaries are endogenous; behavior norms within groups are a produced outcome of social interactions both within and between groups; *contact* discrimination is prior to *contract* discrimination. Indeed, I am still waiting to hear a coherent, non-circular definition of a racial group’s “culture.”
- h. These ideas are illustrated in some of my own theoretical work on race and inequality: network externalities and persistent group inequality (Bowles, Loury and Sethi 2008); the impact of ‘racial stigma’ and ‘biased social cognition’ on public policy discussions of racial inequality (Loury, 2002); the rationality of dysfunctional identities in socially marginal groups (Fang and Loury 2005); the self-confirming nature of racial stereotypes (Coate and Loury 1993). This work illustrates how society-wide, not communal-specific, processes can often lead to persistent group disparities, despite there being similar preferences and capacities between collectivities of individuals defined as belonging to different ‘races.’