

## ADDRESS

### INDIVIDUALISM BEFORE MULTICULTURALISM

GLENN C. LOURY\*

Since the Founding, America has struggled to incorporate the descendants of African slaves into an estate of equal citizenship. This process, though well advanced, remains incomplete. How shall we make further progress? To answer this question, we must first decide who “we” are. Who “we” are sometimes depends on who is talking and to whom. In our society, public race-talk is part of the larger political conversation concerning national affairs. But there also is private race-talk—among segregated confidants who speak with a candor not possible in public. These two levels of deliberation interact in important and complex ways. What is acceptable and effective to argue in one forum depends upon the nature of the discourse in the other. Prudent discussion of racial matters should attend to these interrelated contexts.

I am engaged here in two connected but distinct conversations, practicing a kind of “double speak.” On the one hand, I speak as a public man, an American, offering advice about how “we”—that is, all of us—should approach questions of race. As a black man, however, I will be seen (by whites and blacks) as addressing “my people” about how “we” should endeavor to make progress. This dual role limits what I can say without risk of misunderstanding by one or another audience.<sup>1</sup> As a veteran of the academic culture-wars, I often have struggled to balance my desire to fulfill others’ expectations with my conviction that one should live with integrity. Sometimes this has led me to act against my initial inclination in ways that would elicit approval

---

\* University Professor & Professor of Economics, Boston University.

1. For a more complete analysis of the subtleties of public argument with “multiple audiences,” see Glenn C. Loury, *Self-Censorship in Public Discourse: A Theory of “Political Correctness” and Related Phenomena*, in 6 *RATIONALITY & SOC’Y* 428-61 (1994).

from my peers. After many years, however, I came to understand that unless I was willing to risk the derision of the crowd, I would have no chance to discover the most important truths about myself or about life and to make the unique contribution to my family, my community, and my nation that God has endowed me to make.<sup>2</sup>

Although this is a small, private truth, it points toward some larger social truths: that the seductive call of the tribe can be a siren's call; that there are no group goals or purposes existing prior to, and independently of, the life plans and ideals of individual persons; that unless individualism is truly exalted, multiculturalism descends into crass ethnic cheerleading; that, after all is said and done, race is an epiphenomenon, even here in America, even for the descendants of slaves. I am not unmindful of the effects of history and culture; but even these must be reinterpreted, reinvented, and rediscovered by each successive generation.

Such talk is heresy for those I call racialists. These racialists (or, more precisely, racial essentialists) assert that "authentic" blacks must view themselves as having been victimized by whites and must share in a collective black consciousness of that victimization. Believers of this creed have shaped the broad public discussion of racial affairs in America over the last quarter century. They have argued, in effect, that the fellow feeling amongst blacks engendered by our common experience of racism should serve as the basis for our personal identities.<sup>3</sup> In this they have been monumentally, tragically wrong. They have sacrificed, on an altar of racial protest, the unlimited potential of countless black lives. And they are not alone. Whites who view blacks first as representatives of a group, and only secondly as individuals, are racialists too. Whether by the patronizing liberal or the contemptuous conservative,<sup>4</sup> the effect of such white racial essential-

---

2. This theme is developed at greater length in GLENN C. LOURY, *Free At Last? A Personal Perspective on Race and Identity in America*, in ONE BY ONE FROM THE INSIDE OUT: ESSAYS AND REVIEWS ON RACE AND RESPONSIBILITY IN AMERICA 1, 1-10 (1995).

3. See, e.g., A. Leon Higginbotham, *An Open Letter to Clarence Thomas from a Federal Judicial Colleague*, in RACE-ING JUSTICE, ENGENDERING POWER: ESSAYS ON ANITA HILL, CLARENCE THOMAS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY 3, 3-39 (Toni Morrison ed., 1992).

4. For a contemporary example of the "contemptuous conservative's" racialist attitudes, see DINESH D'SOUZA, *THE END OF RACISM: PRINCIPLES FOR A MULTIRACIAL SOCIETY* (1995). Conservative racialists are given to formulations in reference to blacks such as, "too many of those people have low IQ's, high illegitimacy rates, or high crime

ism is to diminish the humanity of blacks.

The ineluctable truth of the matter is that the most important challenges and opportunities confronting any person arise not from his racial condition, but from our common human condition. Group membership alone tells us nothing about how we should live. The old integrationists had it right with their ideal of the "beloved community." The social contingencies of race, gender, and class are merely the raw materials from which an individual constructs a life. The life project is what brings about the development and expression of an individual's personality. By devising and fulfilling our own life plan, we grow as human beings and give meaning and substance to our lives. Because we share this challenge—identical in essentials, different only in details—we can transcend racial difference, gain a genuine mutual understanding of our respective experiences and travails, and empathize with one another. As Sartre might have said, because we all confront the existential challenge of discovering how to live in "good faith," we are able to share love across the tribal boundaries.

The irony is that when we individual blacks see ourselves primarily through a racial lens, we limit the personal development that can further our collective racial interests. To labor under a self-definition shaped by our putative oppressor, confined to our oppression, is to abandon hope that we shall ever be truly free. In his address, Justice Thomas made it clear that his grandfather, who was nobody's victim, understood this point well.<sup>5</sup> So did the great novelist, Ralph Ellison. In his epic work, *Invisible Man*, he argues:

[Our] problem . . . [is] not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of [our] race, but of creating the uncreated features of [our] face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals . . . . We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created a culture. Why waste time creating a conscience for something which doesn't exist? For you see, blood and skin

---

rates," rather than saying "too many of *our people*" suffer these conditions. They advise blacks about "what *you people* must do," rather than speaking of "what *we Americans* must do." They see blacks as the Other, aliens, apart from and a threat to American civilization, rather than as inseparably interwoven constituents of the larger social fabric. Nobody who has spent more than half an hour with *The End of Racism* can fail to see that Mr. D'Souza is, in this sense, a racist.

5. See Clarence Thomas, *Victims and Heroes in the "Benevolent State"*, 19 HARV. J.L. & PUB. POL'Y 671, 681-82 (1996).

do not think.<sup>6</sup>

That is precisely the point. Skin and blood do not think, or dream, or pray. The "conscience of the race" must be constructed from the inside out, one person at a time. This is a social truth with important consequences for political life in America.

One frequently hears people declare with passion: "speaking as an *X*, I can inform you that *Y* . . ." where *X* is the name of the relevant group and *Y* stands for some description or evaluation of the condition or beliefs of *X*. An auditor not in group *X* cannot speak with any authority about that group; one must and usually does defer immediately. The moral authority embodied in statements preceded by "Speaking as an *X* stems in part from an epistemic premise that the point of view shared by all members of *X* is not accessible, or at least not sufficiently accessible, to non-*X* persons."<sup>7</sup>

I am interested in the paradox of these mutually insulated groups, neither capable of understanding the other, who nevertheless insist upon equal group recognition. This is an apt description of the current state of American pluralism. We must ask whether recognition reasonably can be demanded when understanding is denied to the outsider? How can genuine respect arise from mutual ignorance? How can the white, who has "no idea of what black people have endured in this country," really honor the accomplishment of blacks who have transcended the barriers of racial constraint? How can the black, who could "never see things the way the white man does," ever hope to persuade that "white man" to meet him half-way on a matter of mutual importance?

There can be no empathy and persuasion across racial lines unless we recognize that the conditions of particular human beings are universally shared. The problems facing poor, black Americans should not be presented as narrow racial claims, but should be conveyed to the rest of the polity in their essential human terms. The racist's assertion of epistemic privilege is more than a philosophical stance. In our pluralistic democracy,

---

6. RALPH ELLISON, *INVISIBLE MAN* 268 (1982).

7. See Charles Griswold, Adam Smith on "Sympathy" and the Moral Sentiments 22 (Nov. 1994) (unpublished manuscript on file with the Department of Philosophy, Boston University).

it leads to the destruction of any notion of community except as an arena within which war is waged for recognition and for the political and economic benefits that follow from recognition.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the wrong turn of black leadership was not the embrace of quotas. The prior, more fundamental mistake was the abandonment of the integrationist ideal and the embrace of black power. Racialists have waged a "war for recognition" under the banner of black victimization for the past twenty-some years. This war has now ended with a plaintive demand to be patronized. In a stunning attempt at political jujitsu, the voices of black authenticity insist that the group's very helplessness is evidence of whites' culpability, to which the only fit response is the recognition of black claims.

Especially since the 1994 elections, we can see that other white responses are possible. The racist strategy has proved disastrous.<sup>8</sup> Consider the issue of affirmative action. Advocates of blacks' interests are now reduced to insisting that affirmative action is just and necessary because, without special criteria for selection, the number of blacks in important societal institutions would be unbearably low. This argument is rooted in desperation.

Consider the pathetic position of the urban black poor. They are especially vulnerable politically. Democrats all, racist black leaders of inner-city communities have cast their lot with those seeking to expand the welfare state, to increase taxes, and to promulgate more regulations. Blacks reliably provide one-fourth of the Democratic votes in presidential contests. Black congressional representation is significantly dependent on districts that have been gerrymandered to ensure that ultraliberal black candidates are elected without the inconvenience of having to persuade any whites to support them.<sup>9</sup> This political dependence on the left has persisted despite the nation's white rightward drift for the last generation, and notwithstanding the cultural conservatism of a deeply religious black American population.

There is potential for an alliance between black and white re-

---

8. See generally PAUL SNIDERMAN & THOMAS PIAZZA, *THE SCAR OF RACE* 104 (1993) (discussing survey research showing that reference to "affirmative action" leads whites to perceive blacks as irresponsible).

9. See, e.g., *Holder v. Hall*, 114 S. Ct. 2581 (1994); Juan Williams, *Blacked Out in the Newt Congress*, WASH. POST, Nov. 20, 1994, at C1.

ligious conservatives, along the increasingly more important cultural fault line in American politics. But this has been ignored by black leaders.<sup>10</sup> Instead, black leaders have allied with feminists, gay activists, and civil libertarians, but have built few bridges to center-right political organizations. A conservative political majority can be constructed in this country, and can govern, without attending to the interests of urban minority voters. But such an outcome would be unhealthy for our democracy.

The paradigm of racial essentialism does damage beyond politics. In *The Bell Curve*,<sup>11</sup> Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray stirred controversy by pointing to a large gap in the average IQ scores between blacks and whites and by suggesting that this difference is fixed partly by genetic factors. Yet these authors can claim, with cause, that they are merely responding to the Zeitgeist: their analysis brew is expressed in the racial group terms previously anointed by the advocates of social equity. They can say, in effect, "Counting by race wasn't our idea; but since you've mentioned it, let's look at *all* of the numbers!"

Black racialists are hoisted on their own petard by the arguments and data of *The Bell Curve*. Having insisted on the primacy of the racial lens, they must now confront the specter of an intelligence accounting that offers a rather different explanation for the ambiguous achievements of blacks in the last generation. The question now, for blacks as well as whites, is whether given equal opportunity blacks are capable of gaining equal standing in society.<sup>12</sup> It is a peculiar mind which fails, in light of American history, to fathom how poisonous a question this is for our democracy. Some conservatives seem to believe that blacks can never pass this test; some blacks apparently agree, arguing that blacks should abandon "white America," go our own way, and burn a few things down in the process. At bottom, these racial essentialists share a similar perspective.

Yet, is it really such a radical thought to assert that the challenge confronting blacks today is not racial at all? Is it not pri-

---

10. For example, after the 1994 elections Jesse Jackson attacked the Christian Coalition as reminiscent of the Nazis—neither a fair, nor a smart thing to say! See Katharine Q. Seelye, *G.O.P. Freshmen Enter, Ready for Their Exits*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 1, 1994, at 34.

11. RICHARD HERRNSTEIN & CHARLES MURRAY, *THE BELL CURVE* (1994).

12. See generally W.E.B. DU BOIS, *Of Our Spiritual Strivings*, in *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK* 17 (1961) (discussing the idea that blacks have something to prove).

marily the human condition, rather than a racial condition, that we must *all* learn to cope with. What Paul wrote to the Corinthians many centuries ago remains true: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man; but God is faithful, He will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability, but when you are tempted He will provide a way out so that you can bear it."<sup>13</sup> The Greek word for "temptation" here can also be translated as "trial" or "test." If indeed blacks must now bear up under the weight of a great human trial, still God remains faithful.

Whatever are the merits and demerits of IQ tests, the scores need not be bandied about in aggregate terms of race. If low intelligence is a problem, then a change in racial identities of those at the top and bottom of the IQ scale would not lessen the problem. Similarly, the crime problem in our society has nothing to do with the skin colors of the perpetrators and victims. Why do we talk of "black crime?" This too easily adopts a racist perspective. Consider the construction "Jewish embezzlement." It shocks the ear, as it should.

It is a great—if common—moral and political error to advance the view that a person's race is his most important characteristic. For liberals to make victims of a handful of vicious criminals—who happen to be black and who prey disproportionately upon other blacks—is an egregious act of racist propaganda. The result is not to engender sympathy in the minds of whites, but instead to foster fear of and contempt for the communities from which these criminals have been advertised to have come. Smugly confident of their moral superiority in pursuit of "racial justice" for death row inmates, the racists are unable to see how shrill and hysterical their claims sound to the average American.

How can we begin to overcome this fragmentation of the "unum"<sup>14</sup> which is the result of racist politics? I propose that we suppress as much as possible the explicit use of racial categories in our discourses about public affairs. This will not erase ethnic identity as an important factor in the society, but a conscious effort to achieve a humanistic, universal public policy would redound to the social, political, and psychological benefit

---

13. 1 *Corinthians* 10:13.

14. See, e.g., Nathan Huggins, *Ethnic Americans*, 72 *YALE L. REV.* 86-87 (1982) (reviewing T. SOWELL, *ETHNIC AMERICA: A HISTORY* (1981)).

of the minority poor in America. Racialists, of course, will dispute this. Stubborn economic inequality between groups,<sup>15</sup> they will argue, gives the lie to the ideal of "E pluribus unum." But, just as with IQ scores or crime rates, why should we care about group economic inequality, per se? Why not just focus on inequality among individual persons, and leave it at that?

Martin Luther King, Jr. is justly famous for that 1963 speech in which he said: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."<sup>16</sup> Today, it is mainly conservatives who recall King's dream. How deeply ironic that a vigorous defense of the colorblind ideal is regarded by the liberal mind as an attack on blacks.<sup>17</sup> I submit, to the contrary, that establishing the colorblind principle is the *only* way to secure lasting civic equality for the descendants of slaves.

Moreover, this colorblind ideal should apply not only to the allocation of benefits—in education, employment, or government contracting—but also to the distribution of burdens and the imputation of maladies. Can we be colorblind as we gaze upon the welfare mothers, the juvenile felons, and the cognitively deficient in our society? In the face of such personal failings, do we see human beings with problems, or races of people plagued by pathology? I do not deny that certain cultural and sociological influences exist. But there remains a broad degree of discretion as to how we see, report on, and think about these problems. The challenge to be colorblind is, or at least should be, deeper than a mere restraint on government actions.

The fundamental idea I want to convey is that of *transcendence*—rising above our particularities, seeing beyond the parochial, looking more deeply perhaps than we are accustomed to. Of course there can exist real differences of religion and culture which clash so fundamentally that they cannot be transcended

---

15. See, e.g., THOMAS SOWELL, *THE ECONOMICS AND POLITICS OF RACE: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE* (1983) (noting that the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Indians in East Africa, and the Jews in Western Europe are groups that, though subjected to oppression, have economically surpassed their oppressors).

16. Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have A Dream*, in *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.* (James Melvin Washington ed., 1986).

17. See, e.g., JENNIFER HOCHSCHILD, *THE NEW AMERICAN DILEMMA: LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND SCHOOL DESEGREGATION* (1984); CORNEL WEST, *RACE MATTERS* 73 (1993).

by persons within the same society. But race in America is not, in itself, such a difference. We have chosen to make it so. The differences that really matter in America are rooted in social class. That all of us have chosen to view our world through a racial lens suggests something about our hypocrisy, as we advocate but do not live by the colorblind ideal.

