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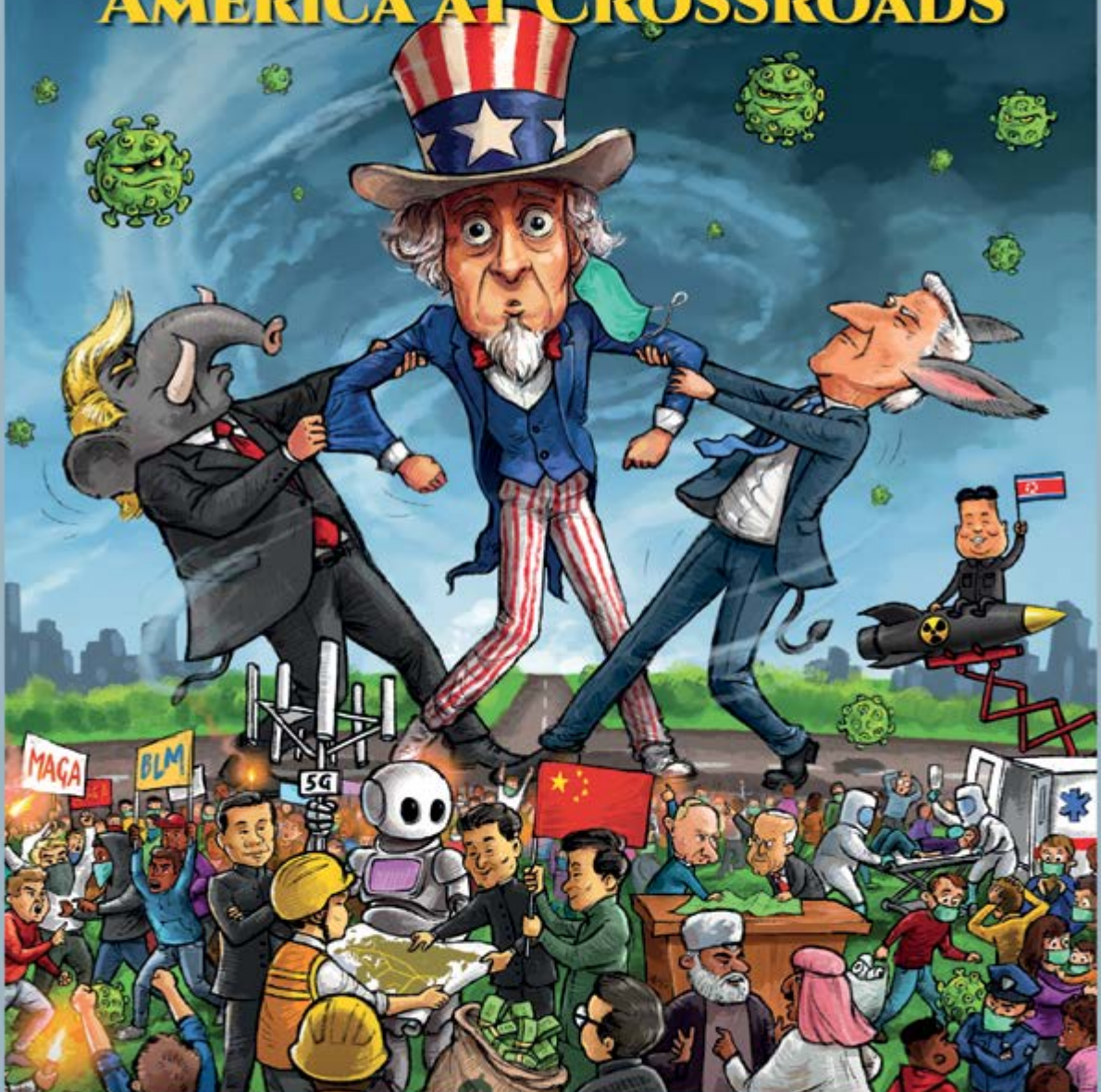
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WHEN BLACK LIVES MATTER

THOUGHTS ON THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY IN AMERICA

Glenn C. Loury

I AM an academic economist, not a sociologist. Nonetheless I believe that to understand the historical fact of black subordination and its implications for the future of American politics it is more useful to examine informal social relations than formal economic transactions. To develop this theme. I will begin by making two observations, one having to do with the dynamics of human development, and the other with the foundations of racial identity.

Why, I ask—the success of the civil-rights movement notwithstanding—has the subordinate status of black Americans persisted into the twenty-first century? Clear thinking about this intractable problem requires one to distinguish the role played by discrimination against Blacks from the

role of counter-productive patterns of behavior that can be found among some Blacks.

This, admittedly, puts what is a very sensitive issue rather starkly. Vocal advocates for racial equality refuse even to consider the possibility that problematic behavior could be an important factor contributing to the persisting disadvantaged status of black Americans. At the same time, observers on the right of American politics insist that anti-Black discrimination is no longer an important determinant of unequal social outcomes. I have tried to chart a middle course—acknowledging anti-Black biases that should be remedied but insisting on the imperative of addressing and reversing the behavior patterns preventing some Blacks from seizing newly opened opportunities.

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Photo: Private collection

In early June 2020 the mayor of Washington, DC, ordered the words “Black Lives Matter” to be painted on a street close to the White House

RIVAL CAUSAL NARRATIVES

These two positions can be recast as causal narratives. Under the “bias narrative,” one argues that racism and white supremacy are the culprits; Blacks cannot get ahead until they relent. Since, on this view, discrimination is the cause of racial inequality, we must continue urging the reform of American society toward that end.

Under the “development narrative,” by contrast, one emphasizes the need to consider how people acquire the skills, traits, habits, and orientations that foster an individual’s successful participation in American society. If Black

youngsters do not have the experiences, are not exposed to the influences, and do not benefit from the resources that foster and facilitate their human development—to that extent, they may fail to achieve their full human potential. On this view, this lack of development is the ultimate cause of stark racial disparities in income, wealth, education, family structure, and much else.

Of course, these two narratives—bias versus development—need not be mutually exclusive. What is clear, however, is that, in terms of prescribing interventions and remedies, they point in very different directions. The bias

narrative urges us to have “conversations about race.” America must reform itself in response to demands to end racism. We need more of this or that, whatever “this” or “that” may be on the social justice warrior’s agenda. One hears this kind of rhetoric and reads these exhortations in the media every day.

The development narrative puts more onus on the responsibilities of African Americans to act in ways that help realize our full human potential. It is not satisfied with wishful thinking like “if we could

only double the budget for some social program, then the homicide rate among young Black men would be less atrocious.” Or, “if we can just get this local police department investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice then....” The development narrative asks, *Then what*: it will become safe to walk on the south side of Chicago after midnight? As a social scientist who looks to the evidence for guidance, I find that to be an extremely dubious claim.

So, what are my two observations?

TWO OBSERVATIONS

Over four decades ago, in my 1976 doctoral dissertation at M.I.T., I had the good fortune to coin the term “social capital.” I did so by way of

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contrasting my concept, “social capital,” with what economists called “human capital.” Human capital theory, in short, imports into the study of human inequality an intellectual framework which had been developed primarily to explain the investment decisions by firms—a framework that focuses on the analysis of

formal economic transactions. In my dissertation I argued that this framework was inadequate to the problem of accounting for social inequality. Allow me to explain.

My fundamental point was that associating

business with human investments is merely an analogy—and not a particularly good one—if one seeks to explain persistent racial disparities. Business investments are transactional. Human investments are essentially relational. Important things having to do with informal social relations are missed in the human capital approach. Human capital theory is incomplete when it comes to explaining racial disparities, I argued. There were two central aspects of this incompleteness. Hence my two observations about the dynamics of human development and the nature of racial identity.

From this I derived two fundamental observations. First, I stressed that *all human development*

is socially situated and mediated. That is, I argued that the development of human beings occurs inside of social institutions. It takes place as between people, by way of human interactions. The family, community, school, peer group—these *cultural institutions* of human association are where development is achieved. Resources essential to human development—the attention that a parent gives to her child for instance—are not *alienable*. Developmental resources, for the most part, are not “commodities.”

In other words, the development of human beings is not up for sale. Rather, structured connections between individuals create the contexts within which developmental resources come to be allocated to individual persons. Opportunity travels along the synapses of these social networks. People are not machines. Their “productivities”—that is to say, the behavioral and cognitive capacities bearing on their social and economic functioning—are not merely the result of a mechanical infusion of material resources. Rather, these capacities are the byproducts of social processes mediated by networks of human affiliation and connectivity.

In my 1976 doctoral dissertation at M.I.T. I made two fundamental observations: all human development is socially situated and mediated; and what we are calling “race” in America is mainly a social, and only indirectly a biological, phenomenon.

This was fundamentally important, I thought and still think, for understanding persistent racial disparities in America. That was the first point I wanted to make, all those years ago, about the incompleteness of human capital theory.

My second observation was that *what we are calling “race” in America is mainly a social, and only indirectly a biological, phenomenon.* The persistence across generations of racial differentiation between large groups of people, in an open society where individuals live in close

proximity to one another, provides irrefutable indirect evidence of a profound separation between the racially defined networks of social affiliation within that society. Put directly: *there would be no “races” in the steady state of any dynamic social system unless, on a daily basis and in regard to their most intimate affairs, people paid assiduous attention to the boundaries separating themselves from racially distinct others.* Over time “race” would cease to exist unless people chose to act in a manner so as biologically to reproduce the variety of phenotypic expression that constitutes the substance of racial distinction.

I cannot over-emphasize this point. “Race” is not something simply given in nature. Rather, it is socially produced; it is an equilibrium outcome; it is something we are making; it is endogenous. It follows that, if the goal is to understand the roots of durable racial inequalities, we will need to attend in some detail to the processes that cause “race” to persist as a fact in the society under study, because such processes almost certainly will be closely related to the allocation of developmental resources in that society.

CULTURAL CONCEPTIONS

This way of thinking has an important implication, which is this: persistent racial inequality in any society ultimately rests upon a set of *cultural* conceptions about identity embraced by the people in that society—that is, upon convictions people affirm about who they are and about the legitimacy and desirability of conducting intimate relations with racially distinct others. (Here I do not only mean sexual relations.)

My impulse to contrast *human* and *social* capital all those years ago was rooted in my conviction that beliefs of this kind ultimately determine the access that people enjoy to the informal resources they required to develop their human potential. What I called “social capital” was, on this view, a critical prerequisite for creating what economists referred to as “human

capital.” This point is crucial, I believe, if we are to understand the persistence of racial inequality in America. I wish to insist, however, that by invoking the social effects that may limit individual achievement, in no way am I “blaming the victim.”

Historically oppressed groups, time and again, have evolved notions of identity that cut against the grain of their society’s mainstream. A culture can develop among them that inhibits talented youngsters from taking the actions needed to develop that talent.

Now, given such a situation, I wish to ask: Do kids in a racially segregated dysfunctional peer group simply have the wrong utility functions? It is a mistake to *attribute the dysfunctional behavior of an historically oppressed group of people to their simply having the wrong preferences when those “preferences” have emerged from a set of historical experiences that reflect the larger society’s social structures and activities.*

Another way of saying this is that when thinking about group disparities, social relations ought to have priority over economic transactions. If ethnic communities and their local cultures are not integrated across boundaries of race in a society—then racial inequalities can persist. Such persistent disparities are not just the product of

discrimination but, more fundamentally, they emerge from a complex, morally ambiguous and difficult-to-regulate set of phenomena embodying and reflecting what people in society see as the *meanings* that give significance to their lives and, most critically, from the structures of social connectivity to which those meanings will have given rise.

When thinking about group disparities, social relations ought to have priority over economic transactions.

DOWNPLAYING BEHAVIORAL DISPARITIES

Socially mediated behavioral issues are real and must be faced squarely if we are to grasp why racial disparities persist. People on the left of American politics who claim that “white supremacy,” “implicit bias,” and old-fashioned “anti-Black racism” suffice to account for Black disadvantage are daring you to disagree with them. Their implicit rebuke is that, if you do not accept their account, then you must believe that there is something intrinsically wrong with Black people. That is, unless you ascribe Black disadvantage to racial unfairness, you must be a racist who thinks Blacks are inferior. How else, they ask in effect, could one explain the disparities? “Blaming the victim” is the offense that they will accuse you of.

But this is nothing more than a bluff; a dare; a rhetorical move; a debater’s trick. Because, at the end of the

day, what are those folks saying when they declare that “mass incarceration” is “racism,” that the high number of Blacks in jails is, self-evidently, a sign of racial antipathy? If one responds, “no, it’s mainly a sign of the pathological behavior of criminals who happen to be Black,” then one risks being dismissed as a moral reprobate.

Yet, common sense (and much evidence) suggests that people are not being arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced because they are Black. Rather, jails are full of people who have broken the law, who have hurt other people, who stole something, who violated the basic rules of civility in society. Prison is not a conspiracy to confine Black people. No serious person really believes that it is, I maintain. Not really.

As a matter of fact—and self-evidently—the young men taking each other’s lives on the street of St. Louis, Baltimore, and Chicago are exhibiting behavioral pathology, plain and simple. Those bearing the cost of such pathology are mainly Black people; and the ideology which ascribes that behavior to racism is really a bluff; it is laughable; it cannot be taken seriously—at least not by serious people. Nobody believes it. Not really.

Or consider the educational test score data. The anti-racism advocates are, in effect, daring you to say that some groups send their children to the elite universities in outsized numbers compared to other groups due to the fact that their academic preparation is magnitudes higher and better and finer. Their excellence is an achievement. One is not born knowing these things. One acquires mastery over them through effort. Now, why have some youngsters acquired these skills while others have not? That is a very deep and interesting question, one which I am quite prepared to entertain. But the simple retort, “racism,” is laughable—as if such disparities have nothing to do with behavior, with cultural patterns, with what peer groups value, with how people spend their time, with what they identify as being critical to their own self-respect. Anyone who believes such nonsense is, I maintain, a fool.

Asians are said, sardonically, to be a “model minority.” Well, as a matter of fact, a pretty compelling case can be made that “culture” is critical to their success. Don’t just take my word for it. Read Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou’s book, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (2015). They interviewed Asian families in

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Southern California, trying to learn how their children get into Dartmouth and Columbia and Cornell with such high rates. What they find is that these families do, in fact, exhibit cultural patterns, embrace values, adopt practices, engage in behavior, and follow disciplines that orient them in such a way as to facilitate the achievements of their children. It defies common sense, as well as the evidence, to assert that they do not or, conversely, to assert that the paucity of African Americans performing at the top of the intellectual spectrum—I am talking here about excellence, and about the low relative numbers of Blacks who exhibit it—has nothing to do with behavior of Black people; that this outcome is due entirely to institutional forces. That is an absurdity. No serious person could believe it.

Neither does anybody believe that 70 percent of African American babies being born to a woman without a husband is, (1) a good thing—nobody really thinks this is okay; or (2) is due to anti-Black racism. They say it, but they do not believe it. They are bluffing—daring you to observe that the twenty-first century failures of African Americans to take full advantage of the opportunities created by the twentieth century’s

revolution of civil rights are palpable and damning. And yet, these failures are being denied at every turn. This is not a tenable position, I maintain. The end of Jim Crow segregation and the advent of equal rights for Blacks was a game-changer. That we are now a half century down the line from this, and we still have these disparities, is simply shameful. The plain fact of the matter is that a large part of the responsibility for this sorry state of affairs lies with the behaviors of Black people ourselves.

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Leftist critics tout the racial wealth gap. They act as if pointing to the absence of wealth in the African American community is, *ipso facto*, an indictment of the system—even as black Caribbean and African immigrants are starting businesses, penetrating the professions, presenting themselves at Ivy League institutions in outside numbers, and so forth. In doing so they behave like other immigrant groups in our nation’s past. Yes, they are immigrants, not natives. And yes, immigration can be positively selective. I acknowledge that. Still, something is dreadfully wrong when adverse patterns of behavior readily visible in the native-born black American population

go without being adequately discussed—to the point that anybody daring to mention them risks being labelled a racist. This is all a bluff which cannot be sustained indefinitely. We are, I believe, already beginning to see the collapse of this house of cards.

THE EMPTINESS OF “STRUCTURAL RACISM”

The invocation in political argument of “structural racism” is both a bluff and a bludgeon. It is a bluff in the sense that it offers an “explanation” that is not an explanation at all and, in effect, dares the listener to come back. So, for example, if someone says, “there are too many black Americans in prison in the United States, that’s due to structural racism,” what you’re being dared to say is, “no: Blacks are so many among criminals, and that’s why they’re in prison; it’s their fault, not the system’s fault.”

And it is a bludgeon in the sense that use of the phrase is mainly a rhetorical move. Users do not even pretend to offer evidence-based arguments beyond citing the fact of the racial disparity itself. It does not go into cause and effect. Rather, it asserts shadowy causes that are never fully specified, let alone

demonstrated. We are all just supposed to know that it's the fault of something called "structural racism," abetted by an environment of "white privilege," and furthered by an ideology of "white supremacy" that purportedly characterizes the society. It explains everything. Confronted with any racial disparity, the cause is asserted to be "structural racism."

History, I would argue, is rather more complicated than that. Many of these racial disparities must have multiple, interwoven, and interacting causes that range from culture, politics, and economic incentives, to historical accident, environmental influence and, yes, also to the nefarious doings of particular individuals who may or may not be racist, as well as systems of law and policy that are disadvantageous to some racial groups without having so been intended.

So, I want to know what they are talking about when they say "structural racism." In effect, use of the term expresses a disposition. It calls me to solidarity. It asks me for my fealty, for my affirmation of a system of belief.

I thus think it's a mischievous way of talking, especially in the university, although I understand why it might work well on Twitter.

ANTI-RACISM AS "RELIGION"

To some degree, the anti-racism craze now sweeping across American culture and politics is a moral panic—a kind of mass hysteria. People have an investment as African American victims of "structural racism," and as sympathetic white American who

understand themselves to be standing on the right side of history.

They have a catechism—things you are and are not supposed to say.

They have their hunt for apostates and heretics—people who, in a weak moment, say the wrong thing and are labelled believers in false doctrines and are punished with excommunication.

There is even an analog to baptism—or to "born again" moments—when a person finally owns-up to his or her racism.

There is talk about the need for our nation to come to terms with its past—in effect, a call for revival meetings. We are being exhorted to return to the "true faith."

This is all by way of saying that there are many points of commonality between conventional religious faith and belief in the crusade against anti-Black racism.

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PUTTING POLICE KILLINGS OF BLACKS IN AMERICA IN PERSPECTIVE

There are about 1,200 killings of people by the police in the United States each year, according to the carefully documented database kept by the *Washington Post* which enumerates, as best it can determine, every single instance of a police killing. Roughly 300 of those killed are African-Americans: that's about one fourth, while Blacks are about 13 percent of the population. So that's an overrepresentation, though still far less than a majority of the people who are killed.

More whites than Blacks are killed by police in the country every year. Now, 1,200 may be too many. I am prepared to entertain that idea. I'd be happy to discuss the training of police, the recruitment of them, the rules of engagement that they have with citizens, the accountability that they should face in the event they overstep their authority. These are all legitimate questions. And there is a racial disparity, although there is also a racial disparity in Blacks' participation in criminal activity, which must be reckoned with as well.

I am making no claims here, one way or the other, about the existence of discrimination against Blacks in the police use of

force. This is a debate. There is evidence that could be brought to bear. There well may be some discrimination in police use of force, especially non-lethal force.

But in terms of police killings, we are talking about three hundred victims per year who are African American. All of them are not unarmed, simply walking down the street. Many are engaged in violent conflict with police officers, which leads to their being killed. Yes, some are instances like George Floyd, which are problematic in the extreme without any question, and that deserve the scrutiny of concerned persons.

Still, we need to bear in mind that this is a country of more than three hundred million people. There are scores of concentrated urban areas where the police are interacting with the citizens. Tens of thousands of encounters occur between police and citizens daily in the United States. So, these events—which are extremely regrettable events and often do not reflect well on the police—are, nevertheless, quite rare. To put it in perspective, there are about 17,000 homicides in the United States every year, nearly half of which entail Black perpetrators. The vast majority of those have other Blacks as victims. Hence, for every Black killed by the police,

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more than 25 other Black people meet their end because of homicides committed by other Blacks. This is not to ignore the significance of holding police accountable for the exercise of their power vis-à-vis citizens. It is merely to notice how very easy it is to overstate the extent and the significance of this phenomenon, which I think the Black Lives Matter activists have done.

RACIALIZING POLICE-CITIZEN INTERACTIONS

I want to also to stress some of the dangers of seeing these police killings primarily through a racial lens. These events are regrettable regardless of the race of the people involved. Invoking race—emphasizing that the officer is white, and victim is Black—tacitly presumes that the reason the officer acted as he did was because the dead young man was Black, and we do not necessarily know that.

Moreover, once we get into the habit of racializing these events, we may not be able to contain that racialization merely to instances where white police officers kill Black citizens. We may find ourselves soon enough in a world where we talk about Black criminals who kill unarmed white victims. That is a world which no thoughtful person could welcome, because there are many, many such instances of Black criminals harming white people. They are criminals harming people and they should

be dealt with accordingly. They do not stand in for their race when they do so.

Neither should those white victims of crimes committed by black Americans see themselves primarily in racial terms if their automobile is stolen, or if someone beats them up and takes their wallet or breaks into their home and abuses them. Such things are happening on a daily basis in the country, and we don't want to live in a world where we see these events primarily through a racial lens.

People are playing with fire, I think, when they bring that sensibility to police-citizen interaction.

“WHITE FRAGILITY”

Likewise, I suspect that what we are seeing from the progressives in the academy and the media is but one side of the “whiteness” card. That is, I wonder if the “white-guilt” and “white-apologia” and “white-privilege” view of the world cannot exist except also to give birth to a “white-pride” backlash, even if the latter is seldom expressed overtly—it being politically incorrect to do so.

Confronted by someone who is constantly bludgeoning me about the evils of colonialism, urging me to tear down the statues of “dead white men,” insisting that I apologize for what my forebears did to the “peoples of color” in years past, demanding that I settle my

historical indebtedness via reparations, and so forth—I well might begin to ask myself, were I one of these “white oppressors,” exactly on what foundations does human civilization in the twenty-first century stand?

I might begin to enumerate the great works of philosophy, mathematics, and science that ushered in the Age of Enlightenment, that allowed modern medicine to exist, that gave rise to the core of our knowledge about the origins of the species and of the universe. I might begin to tick-off the great artistic achievements of European culture, the architectural innovations, the paintings, the symphonies, etc. And then, were I in a particularly agitated mood, I might even ask these “people of color,” who think that they can simply bully me into a state of guilt-ridden self-loathing: where is “their” civilization?

Now, everything I just said is absolutely “racist” and “white supremacist” rhetoric. I wish to stipulate that I would never say something like that myself. I am not here attempting to justify that position. I am simply saying that, if I were a white person, such a way of thinking might tempt me; and I cannot help but think that it is tempting a great many white people.

How can we make “whiteness” into a place of unrelenting moral indictment without also occasioning it to be the basis of pride, of identity and, ultimately, of self-affirmation?

We can wag our fingers at them all we want but, in a way, they are a part of the package. If we are going to go down this route, we have got to expect this. How can we make “whiteness” into a place of unrelenting moral indictment without

also occasioning it to be the basis of pride, of identity and, ultimately, of self-affirmation?

So, the right idea, I say, is the idea of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The right idea is striving to transcend our racial particularism, and to

stress the universality of our humanity. The right idea is, if only fitfully and by degrees, to carry on with our march toward the goal of “race-blindness”—i.e., to move toward a world where no person’s worth is contingent upon racial inheritance. That, it seems to me, is the only way effectively to address a legacy of historical racism without running into a reactionary chauvinism. If you effectively promote anti-whiteness (and Black Lives Matter often seems to flirt with this), you well may reap what you sow in a backlash of pro-whiteness.

THE “ASIAN PROBLEM”

I expect that many anti-racism crusaders would reject this argument, saying that white people knew that they were white before they got reminded of this by the Black Lives Matter movement.

They knew that they were white when they were enslaving Africans in North America; when they assimilated Catholic or Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe into a governing racial coalition of non-Black, non-brown people; and so on. However, in the America of the twenty-first century, there is one big problem with this argument: the Asians.

Just as important, I think, for the future of the country as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the de-racialization of America's immigration-control regime, which occurred at roughly the same time. Since then we have seen tens of millions of people from East and South Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa come to the country. The result has been, on the whole, an amazing and world-historic success story of the assimilation of ethnically distinct populations—racially distinct, if you will—in-termarriage rates through the roof, 30 to 40 percent of Asian-American young women married to Anglo, white men, and so on, penetration into the professions and all of that, accumulation of wealth, educational achievement.

Of course, they are not a random draw on the global population. There is a selective flow of people

coming—I have already touched on this point in an earlier section. They come with capital. They come with their values and their culture and so forth like that, but American society has been mostly open to them—not without some

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problems somewhere, admittedly. We know as a matter of historical record about the anti-Asian sentiment that met the Chinese who built the railroads in the late nineteenth century and the Japanese internment in the mid-twentieth century. We need to be aware of these things and not gloss over them,

not in the least, but I'm saying this is the real world that we live in. Perfection is not an option in the real world. But perfectibility is. And the success of Asian immigrants in America over the past half-century surely exemplifies this.

“BLACK FRAGILITY”

I would add that there is an assumption of “Black fragility”—or at least of Black lack of resilience lurking behind these anti-racism arguments. Blacks are being treated like infants whom one dares not to touch. One dares not say the wrong word in front of us; to ask any question that might offend us; or to demand anything from us, for fear that we will be so adversely impacted by that.

The presumption is that Blacks cannot be disagreed with, criticized, called to account, or asked for anything. No one asks Black people: “what do you owe America?” How about not just “what does America owe us” (for instance, reparations for slavery)? But also: “what do we owe America?”

How about duty? How about honor? When you take agency away from people, you remove the possibility of holding them to account and the capacity to maintain judgment and standards so that you can evaluate what they do. If a youngster who

happens to be Black has no choice about whether or not to join a gang, pick up a gun, and become a criminal (since society has failed him by not providing adequate housing, health care, income support, job opportunities, and so on) then it becomes impossible to discriminate as between the Black youngsters who do and do not pick up guns and become members of a gang in those conditions, to maintain within African-American society a judgment of our fellows' behavior, and to affirm expectations of right-living—since, after all, we are the victims of anti-Black racism.

As a result, we are leveled down by a presumed lack of control over our lives and lack of accountability for what we do.

Name another country on the planet where so many people with differences of this kind could be so effectively assimilated into the population over the course of a lifetime. So those who would indict America as systematically racist have got a problem.

What is more, there is a deep irony in first declaring white America to be systemically and essentially racist, and then mounting a campaign to demand that whites recognize their own racism and deliver us from the consequences of it. If, indeed, you are right that your oppressors are racist, why would you expect them to respond to a moral appeal? You are, in effect, putting yourself on the mercy of the court, while simultaneously decrying that the court is biased.

Much of the anti-racism arguments that

I've seen people make that have become very widely accepted—Ta-Nehisi Coates comes to mind, the author of this book *Between the World and Me* (2015), which is written in the form of an open letter to his son, where he basically preaches to his son that American society is so unrelentingly determined to deny his son's humanity that he must never lose sight of the fact that he's a hated, hunted species of human. There's no hope. There's no possibility. Don't believe in the American dream. Don't drink the Kool-Aid. Don't buy the narrative. Don't believe the hype.

Frankly, this kind of idea is disempowering; it's disempowering in the extreme.

ACHIEVING “TRUE EQUALITY”

I am reminded, amidst the con-temporary turmoil, of the period after the Emancipation more than 150 years ago. There was a brief moment of pro-freedmen sentiment during Reconstruction, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, but it was washed-away and the long, dark night of Jim Crow emerged. Blacks were set back. But, in the wake of this set back emerged some of the greatest achievements of African American history. Thus, the freedmen who had been liberated from slavery in 1863 were almost univer-sally illiterate. Within a half-century, their increased literacy rate rivals any-thing that has been seen, in terms of a mass population acquiring the capac-ity to read. Now, that was really very significant, for it helped bring black Americans into the modern world.

We now look at the Black family lamenting, perhaps, the high rate of births to mothers who are not mar-ried and so forth—but that is a mod-ern, post-1960 phenomenon. In fact, the health of the African American social fiber coming out of slavery was remarkable. Books have been writ-ten about this: businesses were built,

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people acquired land, people educated their children, people acquired skills. They constantly faced opposition at every step along the way: “no Blacks need apply,” “white only,” this and that and the other; and nevertheless they built a foundation from which could be launched a Civil Rights Movement in the mid-twentieth century that would change the politics of the country.

Such potentiality is now, in a way, forgotten as we throw ourselves, as I say, on the mercy of the court. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“We’re prostrate here.” “Our kids are not doing as well, our communities are troubled, but here we are, and we ask that you save us.”

This is the very same population of extraordinary accomplishment under unimaginably adverse condi-tions could be told. Yes, I know very well that the expression “pull your-self up by the bootstraps” is a kind of cliché: people will laugh when you say it, and they’ll roll their eyes and whatnot. But that is in fact the gist of my argument: take responsibil-ity for your life. No one’s coming to save you. It’s not anybody else’s job to

raise your children. It’s not anybody else’s job to pick the trash up from in front of your home, and so on and so forth. Take responsibility for your life. It’s not fair, and this is another, I think, delusion.

People think there is some benevolent being up in the sky who will make sure everything works out fairly, but it is not so. Life is full of tragedy and atrocity and barbarity. This is not fair. It is not right. But such is the way of the world. If you want to walk with dignity, if you want to be truly equal—people talk about equal-ity. White people cannot give Black people equality. Black people have to actually earn equal status.

Please don’t get angry with me, because I’m on the side of Black people here. But I’m saying equality of dignity, equality of standing and respect, equality of feeling secure in your position in society, equality of being able to command the respect of others—none of these things can be handed over to you. That’s something that you have to wrest with the hard work. With your bare hands you have to make yourselves equal. No one can make you equal.

I have argued that the problems of racial inequality have some basis in disparate patterns of behavior by race. But I also wish to insist that this is a quintessentially American affair, not simply a measure of the inadequacy of “black culture.”

RELATIONS BEFORE TRANSACTIONS

Let me conclude on a somewhat dif-ferent note: How a diverse society answers the question, “Who are we?” is a fundamentally significant issue. It is certainly an important question in the United States today. Who are we? Whose country is it?

When we talk about crime, violence, school failure, urban decay, etc., we need to ask ourselves: are these matters, in the back of our minds, such that we understand them as being *us* against *them*? Because if it is *us*

against *them*, then anything is possible. It becomes possible to say about those people languishing in the ghettos of our great cities: “that’s not my country. That’s some third world thing.” By the way, this was actually said during the flood of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. But it’s a lie. Black people in New Orleans had been there for 250 years. They were not aliens. They were and are as American as you can get, as American as anybody can be. That was *us* down there crawling up on the rooftops. That was *us* huddled in the Superdome. That was *us*.

I have argued that the problems of racial inequality have some basis in disparate patterns of behavior by race.

But I also wish to insist that this is a quintessentially American affair, not simply a measure of the inadequacy of “black culture.” It reflects upon *our* social inadequacies, not only *theirs*. I buttress that argument by observing that human development is socially situated and stressing the fundamental role “race” plays in all of this. This is what I mean when I, being an economist, nevertheless insist on placing relations before transactions.

Consider the poor central-city dwellers who make up perhaps a quarter of the African-American population.

The dysfunctional behavior of many in this population is a big part of the problem here, to be sure. So, conservatives’ demand for greater personal responsibility in these quarters is both necessary and proper. And yet, confronted with the despair, violence, and self-destructive folly of so many people, it is morally and intellectually superficial in the extreme to argue, as many have done, that “those people should just get their acts together like many of the poor immigrants. If they did we would not have such a horrific problem in our cities.” To the contrary, any morally astute response to the “social pathology” of

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American history’s losers should conclude that, while we cannot change our ignoble past, we need not and must not be indifferent to contemporary suffering issuing directly from that past. *Their* culture may be implicated in their dif-

ficulties, but then so too is *our* culture complicit in their troubles: we bear collective responsibility for the form and texture of our social relations.

Thus, while we can’t ignore the behavioral problems of this so-called underclass we should discuss and react to them as if we were talking about our own children, neighbors,

and friends, which is to say: this is an *American* tragedy. It is a national, not merely a communal disgrace. Changing the definition of the American “we” is a first step toward rectifying the relational discrimination that afflicts our society. And this will require adjusting ways of thinking on all sides of the racial divide. Ultimately, we need to get beyond race and, as Martin Luther King, Jr. prophetically envisioned, to ground our civic discourse in an unwavering commitment to trans-racial humanism. Achieving a society where all members are thought of as being among *us* should be the goal. ●