One by One From the Inside Out: Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America
Glenn C. Loury

My fellow racialists, it is a pleasure to be able to address you on this occasion. Convened here as we are, having our “second thoughts about race,” we do well to remember that no one in America can afford to be truly color-blind. The very fact that I stand here before you, defined as a black neoconservative, being praised and honored for the courage to “do the right (wing) thing,” even as I am branded a traitor by many blacks, reveals the power of race in our political lives today...My racial identity is useful to you; it is an important part of what commends me to your attention. My breaking ranks confirms you in your own apostasy. It helps you to see your deviation from the “progressive” ranks as valid and nonracist because here I am, a prominent black, agreeing with you. If by some magic I were suddenly to become white, my brilliant, perceptive, and courageous insights would just as suddenly be reduced to pedestrian, commonplace complaints, of little political or personal comfort to you.

As a member of Harvard University’s faculty, I know something about this phenomenon. I know how people posture; how they see what is going on, despise it, and yet sit quietly and wait for me—a man of courage—to do their work. Well, I’m tired of doing y’all’s work (pp. 195, 197, 203).

Former President Nixon once proclaimed that “We are all Keynesians now.” In like fashion Glenn C. Loury announces that “We are all racialists now,” where racialism is the universal awareness and fixation with racial identity (p. 197). For over a decade, and in this racialized setting, Loury has written on the issues of race, racism, affirmative action and the black underclass. Now under one title the reader has access to his ideas. Divided into three major sections (Part I: Race and Responsibility in the Post-Civil Rights Era, Part II: Can We Talk?, Part III: A Critical Look at the Field) and surrounded by a Prologue and Epilogue,
One By One chronicles Loury’s commentary. Of the twenty-six pieces, the Prologue and nine of the eleven chapters of Parts I and II are previously published, as are the thirteen book reviews (Part III). This leaves two chapters (Part II) and the Epilogue (his Christian journey of faith) as newly in print. We will focus on Parts I and II.

Loury begins with the propositions that we are a racialized nation and that though there has been significant improvement over the last forty years, we are still struggling to achieve true equality between African Americans and whites. How, then, should Americans address the “pain, frustration, anger, and self-doubt...felt [by African Americans] upon encountering the intractability of American racism”? (p. 30). How should Americans address the “deep scars” left from “[t]he complicity of the federal and state governments in sustaining Jim Crow laws and the de facto system of racial cast, and the ubiquity of racist assumptions and practices throughout American life”? (p. 60). Loury’s game plan is simple, but not simplistic. There must be an inside game and an outside game, each addressing an enemy which threatens the black community’s goal of attaining true equality.

The outside game focuses on the enemy of racism, requiring that the federal government make good on the civil rights of its citizens. Here one locates the accomplishments of the civil rights movement, for which Loury is grateful. But he believes that the racial issue in the post-civil rights era is the black underclass. Here the income-inequality question is a supply-side problem, “more a matter of kids being poorly educated and having little work experience, few work skills, damaging peer influences, unstable family lives, and so forth” than demand-side discrimination against African Americans offering the same skills to white employers (p. 100). In this context affirmative action will do little social and economic good. Chapter 6 (“Economic Discrimination”), and to some extent its Appendix (“The Effect of Affirmative Action on the Incentive to Acquire Skills: Some Negative Unintended Consequences”), informs the reader how Loury reaches this conclusion.

Loury holds that classical economic discrimination (e.g., white demanders of labor discriminating between same-skilled white and black suppliers of labor, where blacks are paid less and/or are not hired) is no longer the major cause of racial inequalities. Civil rights, desegregation and affirmative action have done much to open doors which were closed. The result is that discriminatory (white) demand does little to define the problems of the black underclass. The salient issues here are of a social nature, prodding Loury to admit that “economists must modify [their] models to take account of the basic fact of social segmentation along ethnic and racial lines” (p. 115). This social segmentation, having its history in chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws and a racialized social system, perpetuates itself in ways seemingly impervious to traditional civil rights efforts. Precisely because the “deep effects of past discrimination, namely, poor skills, disrupted family life, communities in decline (in part because of opportunities for mobility for better-off blacks, which desegregation has provided), and the poor quality of inner-city public education” are seen as supply-side issues, Loury does not advocate demand-side affirmative action policies as the focus of efforts to reach the black underclass (p. 110). Instead, addressing the racial inequality problem anchored in the black underclass may necessitate increased efforts targeting the enhancement of human capital.

Having made his case for targeted supply-side (human capital) efforts, which, due to our history, properly can be race-specific, Loury uses the aforementioned Appendix to discuss the possibility of unintended consequences stemming from affirmative action policies (hiring and promotion standards based in part on race) placed upon white-owned/managed concerns (business, schools, government). Using a “simple, stylized model of
worker–employer interaction under racial hiring guidelines” Loury concludes that white employers may patronize blacks by permanently setting incentives for obtaining necessary skills below those of the white population (p. 131). Neither white patronization nor its expected consequence of fewer acquired skills by African Americans are desirable. As a demand-side analysis the worker-employer model does not underscore Loury’s emphasis on personal and community supply-side changes, except by identifying the possibility of fewer acquired skills as an unintended supply-side consequence. However, this issue at best only marginally affects those of the black underclass.

Thus Loury calls for the civil rights movement born in the 1950s and 1960s to re-focus on activities which will directly benefit the black underclass. The inside game of self-help and personal responsibility addresses the other enemy, behaviors within the black underclass which contribute to the cycle of poverty and dependency. Given the achievements of the civil rights movement (making substantial progress on classical demand-side discrimination), the inside game underscores his “social capital” (supply-side) hypothesis: “Whom you know affects what you come to know and what you can do with what you know” (pp. 104, 103).

This is Loury’s view of race and responsibility in the post-civil rights era: the key racial issue is the black underclass, and fundamentally, people of this class will find improvement one by one from the inside out.

In Part II, Loury asks “Can We Talk?” Freedom of speech seems to preclude the necessity of such a question, yet the climate of political correctness mandates Loury’s asking it. Throughout the book one feels the tension of Loury wanting to be read and heard first and foremost as a person and not as a black person, to be judged by the merit of his work and ideas, not by the color of his skin. Because a personal identity primarily constructed with the building blocks of race is accompanied by significant limitations, Loury rejects this racialized identity. Yet, he can not escape the issue of race. Loury’s message leaves him open to an audiences’ (black and white) “ad hominem impulse,” where a “speaker’s violation of protocol turns attention from the worth of his case toward an inquiry into his character, the outcome of which depends on what is known about the character of others who have spoken in a similar way” (p. 154).

Loury knows (experientially) that “[t]o criticize the civil rights leadership openly for their ineffective response to the social dissolution of much of black America is to invite being called a traitor, an Uncle Tom, or even a racist” (p. 191, emphasis added). Although he finds it understandable that many blacks and whites are suspicious of those who, in mixed-race audiences, focus on “dysfunctional” behaviors within the black underclass, he refuses the self-censorship which is prevalent in the black community (p. 21). Loury asks for civility and proceeds to discuss the issues as he sees them.

Readers should spend time with One By One. Here we have an author who is willing to look the “ad hominem impulse” straight in the eye and not blink. This is invigorating. He is correct when arguing that the PC environment stifles our learning of and contribution to the issues at hand. I, too, ask the question, “Can we talk?” And as we talk (write) let us be charitable, allowing our understanding to be like a tree, growing well through pruning. He also accurately contends that there are significant problems facing the black underclass and that the historical civil rights agenda (non-discrimination and affirmative action) will not greatly improve the political and economic conditions of the black underclass.

Loury is correct on other points as well. Americans should “confront the saliency, the power, the inescapability of race.” We are “stuck with the race question.” The black underclass does represent an “extraordinary waste of human potential.”
The statements "[our] society is fundamentally racist" and "[w]e are all racist now" are helpful when discussing the issues (pp. 196, 197). But my support for Loury's argument is tempered. As a white person, I ask myself how might moderate to conservative white people respond to Loury's vision of personal responsibility within the black underclass, coupled with appropriate conservative government actions, and his rejection of benign neglect of the underclass by those of the middle and upper classes? What would be their impressions? More specifically, what would they think the "marching orders" for them might be? As Loury uses his being raised on the South Side of Chicago when advantageous (e.g., pp. 20, 195), so I will leverage my past six years living in "inner city" America. Certainly my neighborhood has a significant population of people in the underclass, persons in a cycle of poverty and dependency. There are many people (whites, too) who are woefully negligent in leading theirs and the next generation into a more civil and just society, with real political, economic and social options for all. But it is here that Loury leaves the white reader nearly empty-handed. He tags liberals with faulty thinking and policies, is pessimistic about what social scientists can contribute, and pleads for personal involvement. But he gives few practical steps for those so persuaded.

Loury writes that the problems of the black underclass constitute "truly an American problem; we all have a stake in its alleviation; we all have a responsibility to address it forthrightly" (p. 22). But one wonders if he has convinced the moderate to conservative white person that there is an unfulfilled responsibility. Even if convinced, there is a dilemma. Loury states that solutions "can be undertaken only by the black community itself" (p. 34, emphasis added). What are white suburban people to do? They should vote for conservative politicians having an acceptable list of government initiatives (see note 7), argue the conservative position, and participate in a hand washing (the very benign neglect he fears). Are there no concrete suggestions beyond these for the non-black person and communities? If past racism has "left deep scars," what are the steps beyond voting, arguing, and thinking in a particular way? How does one avoid benign neglect?

Loury does not question "the existence of a link between behavioral difficulties of some African Americans and the effects of [white] racism" (p. 35). Might a white person be challenged to unlearn the negative aspects of his or her racist thoughts, attitudes and actions? He acknowledges that "when [his] black critics are able to say: 'But your argument plays into the hands of those who are looking for an excuse to abandon the black poor'; ... he is] unable to contradict them credibly" (p. 21). Might not a white person be challenged to help facilitate within the black underclass the gaining of social capital so necessary in our political economy?

Although Loury has a general audience in mind, his inclusion of the Epilogue tells me that he could have made his plea for involvement more demanding—perhaps along the lines suggested by John Perkins. Many of us are encouraged by the work, writings, and life of Perkins as they address the issues of the underclass. Perkins argues that middle and upper class people (of all colors) must "overcom[e] an attitude of charity [and] demand more of themselves than good will." He challenges us to be involved in one or more of his three R's: relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. With Perkins, one cannot easily escape the Christian obligation to love your neighbor. There is no doubt that Perkins talks openly of Loury's inside game—in the context of what the civil rights movement has gained, for those of the black underclass the inside game is most important. But his practical advice to all who do not wish to remain in benign neglect is a welcome complement to Loury's argument.
One final observation. Why has Loury written (spoken) and why will he (likely) continue to write (speak) so many non-neoclassical-looking pages on these topics? Sometimes after his tension-filled talk at Vassar College (circa 1990) Loury confronted anew the issues of race and responsibility:

I thought to myself, “Man, this race thing is deep.” I wondered how I got myself into the habit of standing before such audiences—after all, I am trained in economic theory, not conflict resolution! “What the hell was I doing there?” I asked myself out loud. How did I get to this point of brokerage, and why am I standing astride this cultural/racial fault line? I am not sure I know the answer to those questions. Perhaps after a decade in analysis I would be better able to say. It seems clear, though, that the saliency and the power and depth of race, in our society and in my own life, have compelled me to take up these matters such as I have. To some extent, I am trapped; I simply cannot ignore racial issues. As a society we are trapped, too; there is no easy way out. The great temptation that we Americans must all resist is the belief that we can escape the dilemmas and discomforts of race by embracing some great transcendent truth, some fundamental principle (p. 202).

I have two thoughts. First, how many white people are convinced of the “saliency and the power and depth of race” such that they are “compelled... to take up these matters”? (How many of the convinced have the tools to do so?) Second, there is a temptation by most white Christians to hope that by kneeling before the “transcendent truth” of Jesus we will “escape the dilemmas and discomforts of race.” The bumper sticker “no Jesus no peace; know Jesus know peace” declares some truth. Of course Jesus is the answer. And yet we do well to ponder the reality that many of us have had Jesus for generations and yet in the life of his church and in its life within society we find the negative outworking of race.

One By One is an excellent conservative position on how racialized Americans should think about race, racism, affirmative action, and the black underclass. The essays and reviews engage the reader, even compel a second reading and/or contemplation. But its intellectual argument needs to be complemented by some practical steps offered by Perkins.

ENDNOTES

1 Loury defines true equality as “approximately equal material provision [and] equal respect in the eyes of one’s fellow citizens” (p. 22).

2 It is good to remember that One By One is not an economics book. The articles and reviews are Loury’s voice in the multidisciplinary and national debate on race, racism, affirmative action, and the black underclass. Therefore, despite the use of neoclassical analysis throughout this Appendix, that form of economic scholarship can be a limiting language to use when trying to gain access to a wide audience. Furthermore, much of what Loury writes is not amenable to its formal methodology.

3 In the specific case of African American youth Loury writes that “[w]hatever fault may be placed upon racism in America, the responsibility for [their behaviors] lies squarely on the shoulders of the black community itself” (p. 37).

4 A poignant example of this is the interaction that Wilson Goode, former mayor of Philadelphia, and Loury had at the “Welfare Responsibility” conference hosted by the Center for Public Justice (Washington, D.C., May 1994). At one point the debate focused on race and political persuasions. Goode commented that he did not know what a “black conservative is.” Loury stepped to the microphone and...
responded, in good neoclassical fashion, “let’s assume one can be black and conservative.”

5 Suspicions arise because “family instability, criminal behavior, and academic performance ... are seized on as evidence by those who subscribe to racist propositions about black inferiority” (p. 43–44).

6 My assumption is that liberals will likely not spend much time with this book and that the target audience is the moderate to conservative crowd.

7 Loury has “gladly joined the Republican side on some highly partisan policy debates: on federal enterprise zones, on a youth opportunity wage, on educational vouchers for low-income students, on stimulating ownership among responsible public housing tenants, on requiring work from able-bodied welfare recipients, on dealing sternly with those who violently brutalized their neighbors” (p. 20).

8 Loury criticizes many socioeconomic studies of government policy vis-à-vis the black underclass because they “smack of a mechanistic determinism wherein the mysteries of human motivation are susceptible to calculated intervention.” “Mechanistic determinism” arises because the analyses “fail to engage questions of personal morality, of character and values, and of moral leadership in the public sphere” (p. 211). He “reluctantly concluded after many [conferences on poverty] that the solutions to the problems of poverty are not going to be found inside conference rooms. Rather, solutions, if any are to be had, must be sought out in the communities, in the lives of the individuals who are subject to some of the forces and conditions discussed in these academic gatherings. [And he] confesses to being pessimistic about the prospects that social science analyses can ultimately contribute very much here” (p. 205).

9 The vast majority of middle and upper class white people are not convinced of this. They only know the problem intellectually, if that, and not empirically. They do not know a person of the black underclass and have no experience with people of underclass neighborhoods. They do not know, choose to ignore or deny, and/or have sufficient resources to avoid the “American problem.”

10 Similarly, Loury writes that “the black business, academic, and political elites must press for improvement in their own peoples’ lives through the building of constructive internal institutions, whether government participates or not” (p. 49, emphasis added).

11 Certainly many (most?) people on college campuses could make more progress here.