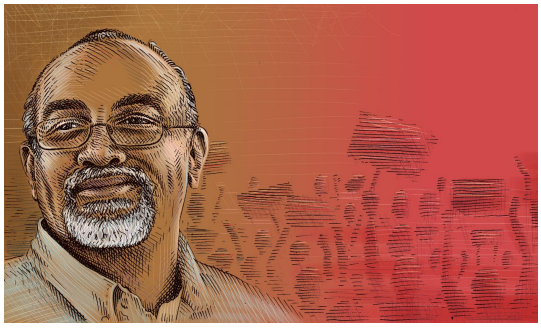
OPINION | THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

A Challenger of the Woke 'Company Policy'

Glenn Loury, the Brown economist, on his winding journey from South Side Chicago to Reagan Republican, to the left and back to the right.

By *Tunku Varadarajan*
July 10, 2020 2:30 pm ET



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Next spring Glenn Loury will teach a new course on freedom of expression to students at Brown University, where he's a professor of economics. "We'll read Plato, Socrates, Milton, John Stuart Mill, George Orwell and Allan Bloom, " he says, stressing that Bloom's best-known work, "The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students," is as relevant as it was when published in 1987.

Mr. Loury is thinking about adding "the Paxson letter" to his syllabus, so that his students might critique it. That June 1 missive to "the Brown Community" from Christina H. Paxson, Brown's president, asserted that "oppression, as well as prejudice, outright bigotry and hate, directly and personally affect the lives of millions of people in this nation every minute and every hour." It committed the university to "programming, courses, and research opportunities" that promote "equity and justice."

Mr. Loury scorns the letter as Ms. Paxson's "company policy" and "the Black Lives Matter view of the world reflected from the Brown University college president's office." On June 5, he published a rebuttal in City Journal. Ms. Paxson's letter was signed "by everybody," from deans to the general counsel and even the investment manager for Brown's $4.2 billion endowment, Mr. Loury tells me by Zoom from his home in Providence, R.I. "That made it an official policy," he says. "I don't think universities should have official policies about contentious political issues."

If they do—"if we foreclose debate over contentious issues by declaring that there's only one way for a decent person at this university to think about them"—"how can we fulfill

our mission of teaching our students to think critically?" Scholarly inquiry ought to consist of an exploration of the evidence, the "moral commitments," the political issues and the historical context. The Paxson letter makes these "hard questions" more perilous to ask.

"I'm 71," he says. "I have tenure. I have a chair. That doesn't mean that the McCarthyism can't get me, but I'm as secure as anybody is ever going to be." What if he were 32, an untenured assistant professor of English or history? "Dare I even mumble a contrary word once this kind of thing has been put out into the air? Universities shouldn't be handing down a party-line document." Few have dared dissent: Of his "500 professorial colleagues here at Brown," he says, only three responded to his rebuttal by saying "good job."

He refers to McCarthyism advisedly, to "evoke a sense of witch hunt, of a moral consensus that tramples over people who dissent: I hunt back through the yearbooks to find out what you said when you were in high school, and say, 'You see, you're a racist.' " The "self-righteous, smug tyranny" is familiar: "It used to be, 'You don't think like me, you must be Communist.' Now remove 'Communist' and put in 'racist.' "

Mr. Loury says he "politely declined" an invitation to sign "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" published by Harper's on Tuesday. Endorsed by some 150 liberal academics and writers, it denounces President Trump as "a real threat to democracy" before criticizing leftist repression.

"I declined for two reasons," Mr. Loury says. "First, I'm not 'on the left' and felt no need to signal solidarity with the left before criticizing cancel culture. And second, I don't view Trump as the greatest threat to democracy in this country." The truth, he adds, is "quite the opposite. It has been the refusal of the left to accept the democratic outcome of 2016 which precipitated the intolerance about which [the signatories] were complaining. So I did not sign."

Mr. Loury is a hard man to pigeonhole. He belongs to no party and says he isn't "partisan in the electoral process," so " 'on the right' doesn't quite suit me." Yet on the issues that he cares about most—race, inequality and social justice in America—he is, he says, "right of center for sure, and considerably right of the center of opinion amongst African-Americans."

Parsing the politics of black America, he says that the prevailing orthodoxy requires him to support the payment of reparations to descendants of slaves, to assert that "voter suppression" today is comparable to Jim Crow, that the overrepresentation of blacks in prisons is "ipso facto an expression of white supremacy and structural racism," and that preferential treatment is "entirely appropriate, and indeed imperative, as a matter of racial justice."

A black person who takes issue with these premises is largely ostracized. Here, an impassioned Mr. Loury delivers a small speech without pausing for breath: "If you don't think that systemic racism accounts for the high rate of outside-marriage births amongst African-American women, if you don't think the school-to-prison pipeline cultivates the incarceration of black youngsters, if you have doubts about affirmative action, if you think self-reliance is important, if you think the coherence of the family is an elemental aspect of any social group's being able to function adequately in the world, if you're religious, and if you think that blacks' obeisance to the Democratic Party is unhealthy for their long-

term political interests—you'll be dismissed as being on the right. And that's where I find myself."

Mr. Loury's trajectory has been complex and mercurial. He grew up in Chicago in the 1950s and '60s, "a typical young man from the South Side, left of center, emphasizing blackness and our African heritage." His mother was a secretary and his father managed 5,000 employees at an Internal Revenue Service office. His parents divorced when Glenn was 5, and he was raised by his mother's extended family in "a small apartment upstairs, in the back of a grand house that my mother's sister owned."

That aunt's husband was a prosperous barber, master of the house, and his nephew's role model. Another uncle, his mother's brother, was a steelworker who fathered 22 children. "He lived as a polygamist," Mr. Loury says, "with multiple wives and families."

Mr. Loury earned a bachelor's in mathematics from Northwestern, then a doctorate in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He read Hayek alongside "moderate economics" at MIT, and was attracted to the ideas of Milton Friedman. In 1982, at 33, he became Harvard's youngest ever tenured black economics professor. By the mid-1980s, he says, "I'm a Reagan Republican. I'm closeted—I'm voting for Reagan, but I won't tell anybody that I am." His family would have been aghast—and soon enough was.

Mr. Loury acquired a national profile as a notable opponent of racial preferences. His uncle—the father of 22—took him aside and said: "'We could only send the one [to college]. We sent you. I don't see us in anything you do.' " Mr. Loury calls it "a terrible reprimand. He says, 'You've betrayed your people.' I was making white people feel good about their views of black people instead of working for the struggle on behalf of blacks."

In 1987 Mr. Loury was to be nominated as an undersecretary of education, but the offer was withdrawn owing to a personal crisis involving an extramarital affair and a sexual-assault charge (which was quickly dropped after he pleaded not guilty). Mr. Loury capsized into cocaine addiction, which ended when he experienced a Christian awakening.

He remained in the conservative fold until 1995. But eventually "my Christian faith caused me to back away from my laissez-faire posture and to ask about social justice in a different kind of way." Disillusioned by what he saw as some racially inflammatory writings—in particular, Dinesh D'Souza's "The End of Racism" (1995) and Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein's "The Bell Curve" (1994)—he drifted leftward. He recalls reviewing critically "America in Black and White" (1997) by Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom, "because I thought the conservative line on race didn't have enough compassion."

He "equivocated on some of the issues," he says. "Affirmative action was one. I wasn't necessarily in favor of every affirmative-action program, but I was against being against every affirmative-action program." Criminal justice was another: "I was fuming 15 to 20 years ago. I'm looking at the statistics, the overrepresentation of blacks. Even though crime rates have been falling from the early '90s, incarceration rates continued to rise throughout Bill Clinton's presidency." That trend "radicalized" Mr. Loury.

Looking back, Mr. Loury also attributes his break with conservatism to "a desire to rehabilitate myself with the conventional African-American intellectual leadership"—and with his own family. He wanted "to be invited back into the fold. I wasn't at home on the right anymore." As a result, "I was able to go home to Chicago and show myself to my

family, those who were still living, and feel that I had something that I could be proud of."

He supported Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012. "Oh my God!" he remembers thinking, "we have a black president. What a wonderful thing it is." But he began to drift back in Mr. Obama's second term: "I kind of soured on him, soured on the cult of personality I saw, especially among African-Americans."

Black Lives Matter also contributed to his rift with the left. "I became disillusioned," he says, "with a lot of the rhetoric. I came to think that the incarceration issue is vastly more complicated than I'd come to regard it." Black people in cities needed protection from the criminals in their midst. Individuals had to be held accountable for their lawbreaking. "The left's deterministic argument—'Well, there's poverty, so of course there's going to be crime'—left out human agency, and it left out morality."

As the center of America's racial politics moved left, says Mr. Loury, "and as wokeness came into being," he was reminded of why he had been on the right in the first place. "I began to repair back to some of my earlier positions in reaction against the excesses of the racial liberals."

There are, Mr. Loury stresses, many aspects of American life "in which race will assert itself. And I want not to seem to be failing to acknowledge that." There is certainly some discrimination in policing and the courts, he says. "But it can explain maybe 15% or 20% of the gap between black and white incarceration rates, not the whole thing." Most of the difference, he insists, turns on the behavior of people.

"If you want to call that racism, then you're calling everything racism."

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