What Kind of Bootstraps?

ONE BY ONE FROM THE INSIDE OUT: Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America. *By Glenn C. Loury. Free Press. 332 pp. $25*

Glenn Loury has lived an amazing life, and the resulting temptation to interpret his life rather than his work is almost irresistible. Loury himself heightens the temptation by ending his book of essays on "race and responsibility in America" with a very intimate epilogue exploring his experience of being "born again": "Because of this encounter with Jesus Christ, the death and vacancy, the emptiness of my life, has been relieved." His final paragraphs offer a personal testimony to the truth of the Gospel: "I know primarily, and I affirm this truth to you, on the basis of what I have witnessed in my own life. This knowledge of God's unconditional love for humankind provides moral grounding for my work in cultural justice and racial reconciliation, economics, and social justice."

Loury, a professor of economics at Boston University, had enjoyed great secular success: "I had reached the pinnacle of my profession. When I went to Washington, people in the halls of power knew my name. I had research grants. I had prestige." The oblique remark reminds us that, in March 1987, President Ronald Reagan had nominated him—a child of Chicago's South Side, born to a black, solidly working-class family in 1948—to be deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. His public fall from secular grace began when he withdrew his name from consideration a few days before assault charges were filed against him by his mistress. Drug charges followed in November. In early 1988, Loury checked himself into McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, to start drug rehabilitation. There he was helped to begin the reconnection with Christianity that has brought him to a new state of spiritual grace.

These private facts, made public in part through Loury's all-too-brief period of candidacy for high public office, are bound to be in the background of every response to these essays. For in them he addresses the crisis of the black ghetto, and his authority to speak of the necessity for moral reform in the life of the drug abuser, the unwed father, and the unfaithful husband derives, in some measure, whether he likes it or not, from the fact that he can say, "I am the man, I suffered, I was there."

The pathos of Loury's public tragedy and private triumph has another unavoidable consequence: it raises the stakes in criticizing his work. Don't kick a man when he's down, we say. But it's not much more attractive to kick a man who has just gotten up.

Still, I think we should resist the temptation to take Loury's life as an emblem of anything, least of all the state of black America. He is an extraordinary individual—a man of prodigious intellectual gifts, in particular—and we will learn more from engaging with his ideas than from reading his life. If we must face the question of Loury's life at the start, it is so that, in the end, we can put it aside.

The ruling idea developed in these essays is that black Americans should heed the call of Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) and act in their own communities to address the crisis of values in the ghetto by "religious, civic, and voluntary efforts of all sorts." This is what Loury calls the "inside game," and its players are the black community and its leaders. Instead of debating what actions the government should take to help black people, black leaders should be guiding them to their own salvation. Self-help, not state intervention,

should be the primary focus.

Loury admits that Washington's call for such a focus may have been mistaken in its own day. Then there was still the task of undoing the work of Jim Crow segregation, and Loury is clear that black Americans were right to insist on equality under the Constitution. But the civil rights war is largely won, he thinks, and simply insisting that America still owes a debt to black people is both undignified and politically counterproductive.

It is undignified, Loury thinks, because the gesture of petition keeps black Americans in the subordinate position that has its roots in slavery; it is counterproductive because the behavior of some young black men and women—the latter irresponsibly giving birth to children they cannot afford because the former do not face their responsibilities as fathers, preferring to live lives of violent crime—has alienated many white Americans. So too has the failure of black political leaders to condemn this behavior. Loury believes, with Washington, that black Americans have to earn from the rest of the country "honor, respect, equal standing . . . and worthiness as subjects of national concern."

So far, so conservative. But Loury also insists that the state does have a role in helping to deal with black poverty: "Medical care for the poor, education in the inner city, job training for welfare mothers, discipline for criminally offending youths, funding for improvement of community infrastructure and for housing, nutrition for infants, drug treatment for addicts seeking help—all of these and more require the provision of public funds and are essential to black progress." The rub is that, to get these desperately needed services funded, there has to be a public will to pay for them. And that can be created, Loury argues, only if Americans generally believe that the black poor *deserve* their help. To persuade white Americans of this black Americans must—as Loury puts the matter in deliberately old-fashioned language—"comport themselves" in a more dignified way.

Persuading Americans generally to attend to the problems of the most disadvantaged is the object of what Loury calls the "outside game," and his critique of the civil rights leadership is both that they have played this game badly and that it has led them to ignore the essential "inside game."

Moral reform, the objective of the inside game, "is not a task for the state in our liberal society," Loury argues, but requires instead, "religious, civic, and voluntary efforts of all sorts." It is such skepticism about state action that makes Loury an American conservative. Yet Loury's opposition to current civil rights policy—and to affirmative action in particular—is unlike that of many conservatives. It is not based on the idea that America's debt to black people has been paid; nor is it rooted in the notion that anti-black racial discrimination is gone (though he *does* think its persistence is exaggerated by the black political leadership). Rather, Loury believes that affirmative action hurts black Americans more than it helps them.

Loury's opposition to much affirmative action—in particular, preferential hiring of blacks—is not driven by what drives those many (mostly white) conservatives who rail against "reverse discrimination." His worry is not that affirmative action is unfair to white men but that it is ultimately bad for blacks, and for the worst-off blacks particularly. When Loury argues that welfare is bad for the poor, it is clear that he is not just another guy who will use any argument, fair or foul, to reduce his taxes.

Loury is unmistakably a "race man": an African American who is deeply—and, in the end, unapologetically—preoccupied with the well-being of black people, especially those who are trapped by poverty and by crime. In the prologue, he writes:

> Who am I, then? Foremost, I am a child of God . . . I am a husband, a father, a son, a teacher, an intellectual, a Christian, a citizen. In none of these roles is my race irrelevant, but neither can racial identity alone provide much guidance for my quest to discharge these responsibilities adequately.

But the cool tone here is a little misleading. "Not irrelevant" doesn't quite capture how central racial identification is in Loury's life. What captures it better is his subsequent confession that he was worried when his middle-class, suburban son took up hockey, a "white man's game." "My aversion to my son's involvement...was rooted in my own sense of identity as a black American man who grew up when and where I did." I rather suspect that Loury would go along with another of Booker T. Washington's sentiments: "From any point of view, I had rather be what I am, a member of the Negro race, than be able to claim membership with the most favored of any other race." *That* remark has the kind of grand, dignified sense of self that Loury wants to see in the children of the ghetto. And he wants them to be helped to live lives that *merit* that self-respect.

The claim that affirmative action has bad effects is, of course, familiar. There is the self-doubt of some beneficiaries of affirmative action, made familiar by Shelby Steele and Stephen Carter (whose books are reviewed here by Loury). There is the anger of white Americans, the legitimacy of whose "competing interests" is ignored, Loury says, by the "entitlement-oriented" rhetoric of affirmative action's defenders. There is the fact that the major black beneficiaries of affirmative action have been middle and upper-middle class, with little trickle down to the black working poor. There is the way affirmative action encourages everyone to think of other people not as individuals but as members of races. Loury makes these points strongly and carefully.

But he also develops a novel argument to the effect that holding blacks to lower standards than whites reduces the incentives for black self-improvement, thus perversely making belief in black underachievement a self-fulfilling prophecy. Loury is at pains to insist that "*this discussion is theoretical*," denying that he has evidence of its significance in the real world. Yet because he devotes an appendix of 15 pages—about the length of some of the chapters, and much longer than most of the book reviews—to these ideas, we are presumably to take them seriously.

To be sure, no one can deny that affirmative action has negative effects. The question, though, is whether they outweigh the positive ones. And that can be addressed only by someone who seeks to measure evenhandedly what affirmative action achieves as well. Spending 15 pages on a confessedly "theoretical" objection (however elegantly developed) in an essay that doesn't say much about what good affirmative action has done leaves one suspecting that Loury's discussion is not the fair-minded exploration of the issues we so desperately need.

The claim that blacks would be better off, on average, if racial preferences were abolished tomorrow strikes me as wildly implausible. But Loury's view would trouble me less if he had more plausible things to say about what policies should replace affirmative action. He correctly insists that it is not "enough merely to be right about liberals having been wrong." He recognizes that we cannot just abolish affirmative action, reduce welfare, and leave the ghetto to its own devices. Yet the solution he does see—the "inside game"—is addressed to a recovery of values within black communities, a recovery that he believes must begin "one by one, from the inside out," a consummation that would best be advanced, he clearly thinks, by the revival of Christian faith.

Loury does not seek to promote this course as a matter of government policy. Indeed, in his discussion of the work of Stephen Carter, he defends—against Carter—a fairly tough separation of church and state. He insists, like a good liberal, that public policies should be defended by appeal to secular principle. One can invoke moral principles that are rooted in religious experience and conviction in Loury's public sphere, but one cannot invoke the religious grounds themselves. It follows that public policy can play only a secondary role even in the worldly salvation of the truly disadvantaged.

If Loury's conclusions seem a little thin, his skepticism about the value of government action challenges liberals to find policies that will be more successful than past efforts have been. Still, nothing he says persuades me that we *cannot* do better, or that racial and gender preferences will not continue to be a useful (if minor) part of the policy mix. The failures of government action are grounds for better action, not for the abandonment of the task. And the continuing challenge of Glenn Loury—the smart, morally engaged race man—is more a spur than an impediment to that enterprise.

—*Kwame Anthony Appiah is professor of Afro-American studies and philosophy at Harvard University. His most recent book is* Another Death in Venice *(1995).*

Rebirth of a Nation

THE NEXT AMERICAN NATION: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution. *By Michael Lind. 300 pp. Free Press. $23*

Michael Lind is a renegade among American political thinkers, as independent in his reflections upon the state of the nation as his fellow Texan C. Wright Mills was in his earlier readings of American society. Lind, who recently became a senior editor of the *New Republic* after a brief stint at *Harper's*, has even created something of a stir among the intellectuals by publishing two scathing critiques of conservatives and conservatism in *Dissent* and the *New York Review of Books*. To some this was treason, or at least apostasy, for Lind in an even earlier incarnation was executive editor of the *National Interest*, the foreign policy journal founded by neoconservative Irving Kristol.

The book under review will not do much to restore Lind's relations with his former colleagues on the right. But his newfound liberal friends may find much to disagree with as well, especially his trenchant critique of affirmative action. No matter whose ox he gores, though, Lind has produced a highly original polemic, flawed and uneven but always provocative.

Lind's manifesto, calling for "a third way between laissez-faire capitalism and unworkable socialism," quite consciously follows the model of Herbert Croly's *Promise of American Life* (1909), the influential progressive blueprint for an activist national government. Like Croly, he offers a reinterpretation of American history, dividing the nation's political past into "three republics," or regimes—Anglo-America, Euro-America, and Multicultural America. After describing each, he posits a desirable fourth regime, the "Trans-American Melt-