

What's Wrong with the Race Debate in America Today?
(Hint: It's Profoundly Dishonest!)

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I am a Black American Intellectual living in an age of persistent racial inequality in my country. As a Black man I feel compelled to represent the interests of 'my people.' (But that reference is not unambiguous!) As an intellectual, I feel that I must seek out the truth and speak such truths as I am given to know. As an American at this critical moment of "racial reckoning" I feel these imperatives even more urgently. But, I ask, what are my responsibilities in these varied roles? Do they conflict with one another? I explore this question tonight, and conclude that my responsibilities as Black man, as American and as intellectual are not in conflict. In every case it is my responsibility to speak the truth, as best I can discern it. In what follows I will defend this position by saying out loud what have become some unspeakable truths. So, brace yourselves!

I begin with a provocation: Consider this story from my hometown newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*, that ran some years ago. (Things have only gotten worse since.) I ask you to bear with me here because these details matter. We must look them squarely in the face:

"Six people were killed including a 15-year-old girl and at least 63 others were wounded in shootings across Chicago over Memorial Day weekend." (That's one city. That's one weekend.) "The total number of people shot during the weekend this year surpassed (last year's) holiday when 55 people were shot, 12 fatally... The most recent homicide happened late Monday in the Washington Park neighborhood on the south side. Officers responding to a call of shots

fired at 11:00 pm found James Taylor” – he had a name. Can we say his name? – “James Taylor lying on the ground near his vehicle on the 5100 block of South Calumet Avenue, according to the Chicago police and the Cook County medical examiner’s office. Taylor lived about a mile and a half away at the 6500 block of South Ellis. He had been shot in the chest and was pronounced dead at the scene, authorities said. Witnesses at the scene were not cooperating with detectives. About the same time a man was shot to death In the West Rogers Park neighborhood on the North Side. Officers responding to a call of shots fired at about 11:00 pm found 39-year-old Johann John lying in a gangway in the 6400 block of North Rockwell, authorities said. John, who lived in the 100 block of North Ashland in Evanston, was shot in the neck and taken to the Presence St. Francis Hospital in Evanston where he was later pronounced dead, authorities said. Police said he was 25 years old. A source said the shooting stemmed from a dispute between two women. One of them has a child with the man and the other was his girlfriend. The women were armed and the man was eventually shot during the argument. No weapons were recovered from the scene.” Finally, “About 5:20 pm on Saturday a man was shot to death in the Fuller Park neighborhood on the south side. Gavin Whitmore, 27, was sitting in the driver’s seat of a vehicle with a passenger, 26-year-old Ashley Harrison, in the 200 block of West Root Street when someone walked up to the vehicle and shot him in the head, according to the police and the medical examiner’s office. Whitmore, of the 5800 block of West 63rd Place, was pronounced dead at the scene at 5:29 pm, authorities said.”

All of the victims were Black people. Sixty-three shot, 6 dead, one weekend, one city. Here’s the thing: reports such as this could be multiplied dozens of times, effortlessly. If a black

intellectual truly believes that “Black Lives Matter,” then what is he supposed to say in response to such nauseating reports – that “there is nothing to see here?” I think not.

Violence on such a scale involving Blacks as both perpetrators and victims poses a dilemma to someone like myself. On the one hand, as the Harvard legal scholar Randall Kennedy has observed, we black elites need to represent the decent law-abiding majority of African-Americans cowering fearfully inside their homes in the face of such violence. We must do so not just to enhance our group’s reputation – as in the “politics of respectability” – but mainly as a precondition for our own dignity and self-respect. On the other hand, we elites must also counter the demonization of young black men which the larger American culture has for some time now been feverishly engaged in. Even as we condemn murderers, we cannot help but view with sympathy the plight of many youngsters who, though not incorrigible, have nonetheless committed crimes. We must wrestle with complex historical and contemporary causes internal and external to the Black experience that help to account for this pathology. (And, let me just say: there’s no way around it. This is pathological. The behavior in question here is not okay. That one can adduce social-psychological explanations does not resolve all moral questions...) Where is the self-respecting Black intellectual to take his stand? Must he simply act as a mouthpiece for movement propaganda aiming to counteract “white supremacy”? Has he nothing to say to his own people about how some of us are living? Is there no space within American public discourses for nuanced, subtle and sophisticated moral engagement with these questions? Or, are they mere fodder for what amount to tendentious, cynical and overtly politically partisan arguments on behalf of something called “racial equity”? (And what about those so-called “white intellectuals”? Do they have to remain mute? Must they limit themselves to the incantation of anti-racist slogans?)

I don't know all of the answers here, but I know that those victims had names. I know they had families. I know they did not deserve their fate. I know that Black intellectuals must bear witness to what is actually taking place in our midst; must wrestle with complex historical and contemporary causes both within and outside the Black community that bear on these tragedies; must tell truths about what is happening and must not hide from the truth with platitudes, euphemisms and lies. I know, despite whatever causal factors may be at play, that Black intellectuals must insist each youngster is capable of choosing a moral way of life. I know that, for the sake of the dignity and self-respect of my people and for the future of my country, we American intellectuals of all colors must never lose sight of what a moral way of life consists in. And yet, we are in imminent danger of doing precisely that, I fear. Here's why: because we refuse to tell the truth about what is actually going on. Well, as far as I'm concerned, that stops right here and right now! It's time to tell some unspeakable truths about race in America.

My First Unspeakable Truth: Downplaying Behavioral Disparities by Race Is Actually a “Bluff”

Socially mediated behavioral issues lie at the root of today's racial inequality problem. They are real and must be faced squarely if we are to grasp why racial disparities persist. Activists on the left of American politics claim that “white supremacy,” “implicit bias” and old-fashioned “anti-black racism” are sufficient to account for black disadvantage. But this is a bluff that relies on ‘cancel culture’ to be sustained. Those making such arguments are, in effect, daring you to disagree with them. They are threatening to ‘cancel’ you if you do not accept their account: You must be a ‘racist’; you must believe something is intrinsically wrong with black people if you do not attribute pathological behavior among them to systemic injustice. You must

think Blacks are inferior, for how else could one explain the disparities? “Blaming the victim” is the offense they will convict you of, if you’re lucky.

I claim this is all a dare; 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? To respond, “No. It’s mainly a sign of anti-social behavior by criminals who happen to be black,” one risks being dismissed as a moral reprobate. This is so, even if the speaker is Black. Just ask Justice Clarence Thomas. Nobody wants to be cancelled!

But we should all want to stay in touch with reality! Commonsense, and much evidence, suggest that on the whole people are not being arrested, convicted and sentenced because of their race. Those in prison are, in the main, those who hurt others, or stolen things, or otherwise violated basic behavioral norms which make civil society possible. Seeing prisons as a racist conspiracy to confine Black people is an absurd proposition. No serious person could believe it. Not really. Indeed, it is self-evident that those taking lives on the street of St. Louis, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Chicago, to a man, are behaving despicably. Moreover, those bearing the cost of such pathology, almost exclusively, are other Blacks. An ideology that ascribes this violent behavior to racism is laughable. Of course, this is an unspeakable truth – but no writer or social critic, of whatever race, should be cancelled for saying so.

Or, consider the educational achievement gap. Anti-racism advocates – those who demand that we get rid of admissions tests – in effect, are daring you to notice that some groups send their children to elite colleges and universities in outsized numbers compared to other groups due to the fact that their academic preparation is magnitudes higher and better and finer. They are daring you to declare such excellence to be an admirable achievement. One isn’t born

knowing these things. One acquires such intellectual mastery through effort. Why are some youngsters acquiring these skills and others not? That is a very deep and interesting question, one which I am quite prepared to entertain at length. 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 what parents are doing, with how people spend their time, with what they identify as being critical to their own self-respect. Anyone believing such nonsense is a fool, I maintain.

Asians are said, sardonically, according to the politically correct script, 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. Read Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou’s book, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*.¹ They have interviewed Asian families in Southern California, trying to learn how these kids get into Dartmouth and Columbia and Cornell with such high rates. They find that these families 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 commonsense, as well as the evidence, to assert that they do not or, conversely, to assert that the paucity of African Americans performing near 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 to institutional forces alone. That, quite frankly, is an absurdity. No serious person could believe it.

¹ Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2015

Neither does anybody actually believe that 70% 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. People say this, but they don't believe it. They are bluffing – daring you to observe this unspeakable truth: that *the 21st century failures of African Americans to take full advantage of the opportunities created by the 20th century's revolution of civil rights are palpable and damning*. This failure is being denied at every turn, and these denials are sustained by a threat to 'cancel' dissenters as being 'racists.' But this position is simply not tenable. The advent of the civil rights era was transformative for Blacks. And now – a half century down the line – we still have these disparities. This is a shameful blight on our society, to be sure. But the plain fact of the matter is that a considerable responsibility for this sorry state of affairs lies with Black people ourselves. Dare we Americans acknowledge this?

This point is much more general. E.g., 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 outsize numbers. In doing so they behave like other immigrant groups in our nation's past. Yes, they are immigrants, not natives. And yes, I admit, immigration is positively selective. 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 called a 'racist.' This bluff can't be sustained indefinitely. Indeed, with the growing backlash against CRT, I believe we are already beginning to see the collapse of this house of cards.

A Second Unspeakable Truth: “Structural Racism” Isn’t an Explanation. Rather, It’s an Empty Category

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, in effect, daring a listener to notice this. As mentioned, the person who says, “There are too many Blacks in prison in the U.S. and this is due to structural racism,” is daring the listener to say, “No. Blacks are too many among the criminals. That’s why they’re in prison. It’s their fault, not the system’s fault.” And it’s a bludgeon in sense that invoking “structural racism” is mainly a bully’s rhetorical move. Users do not even pretend to offer evidence-based arguments beyond citing the fact of the racial disparity itself. They do not delve into cause and effect. Rather, they assert shadowy causes that are never fully specified, let alone demonstrated. We are all just supposed to know it is the fault of something called “structural racism,” abetted by “white privilege,” furthered by an ideology of “white supremacy” that purportedly characterizes our society. On this account, confronted with any racial disparity whatsoever, the alleged cause is, “structural racism.” Amazingly, this tautological doctrine is being taught to our children under the guise of “anti-racism training.”

History, I would argue, is rather more complicated (and more interesting!) than such ‘just so’ stories would suggest. Racial disparities have multiple, interwoven and interacting causes – from culture to politics to economics to historical accident to environmental influence and, yes, also to the nefarious doings of particular actors who may or may not be ‘racists,’ as well as systems of law and policy that may disadvantage some groups without having been so intended. I’m left wanting to know exactly 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 for my fealty,

for my affirmation of a system of belief. And if I don't agree, the implied threat is to label me as a "racist." This is a very mischievous way of arguing, especially in a university, although I can certainly understand why it might work well on Twitter.

Here's Another Unspeakable Truth: We Must Put the Police Killings of Black Americans into Perspective

There are about 1,200 killings of people by the police in the U.S. 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 – about one fourth – while Blacks are about 13 percent of the population. So that's an overrepresentation, though it is still far less than a majority of the people killed. (Blacks are also overrepresented, and to roughly the same extent, among those committing violent crime.) In any case, many more whites than Blacks are killed by police in America every year. I repeat: most of those killed by police in this country are white. So, how did police killings get to be the huge racial issue that it has become? How did people like George Floyd or Jacob Blake become national heroes in the minds of so many? How has their injury or death at the hands of police officers been allowed to provoke racial conflagration, rioting, arson and even more death in this country? Our national discourse on this issue reeks of dishonesty in my view.

Now, 1,200 in a year may be too many people to die at the hands of the police. 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, as I have noted, there is also a comparable disparity in Blacks' rate of violent criminal activity. That 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 about which evidence could be brought to bear. There well may be some racial 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 Black. All of them are not unarmed innocents. Some are engaged in violent conflict with police officers that leads to them being killed. Some are instances like George Floyd – problematic in the extreme without question – 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 with scores of concentrated urban areas where police interact with citizens. Tens of thousands of arrests occur 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 were nearly 20,000 homicides in the United States last year, about half of which entail Black perpetrators and Blacks victims. For every Black killed by the police, 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 how they exercise their power vis-à-vis citizens. It is merely to notice how very easy it is to overstate the significance and the extent of this phenomenon, precisely as the Black Lives Matter activists, abetted by the press and by opportunistic politicians, have done. The narrative that something called “white supremacy” and “systemic racism” have put a metaphorical “knee on the neck” of Black America – that it is now “open season” on black people – these claims are simply false. They are lies. The idea that, as a Black person, I dare not step from my door for fear that the police would round me up or

gun me down or bludgeon me to death because of my race is ridiculous. It is patently absurd – akin to not going outdoors for fear of being struck by lightning. The tendentious interpretation of every one of these incidents where violent conflict emerges between police and an African American, such that the incident is read as if it were the latter-day instantiation of the lynching of Emmett Till – that posture, I am obliged to report, is simply preposterous. Fear of being ‘cancelled’ is the only thing that keeps many white people outside of the alt-Right from saying so out loud!

Here’s another unspeakable truth: ‘White Silence’ about Anti-Racism May Not Be ‘Violence’. Nor Is It Tacit Agreement. But It Should Worry Us.

There are dangers to viewing police killings primarily through a racial lens, because these events are regrettable regardless of the race of the people involved. Invoking race – emphasizing that an officer is white, and a victim is Black – tacitly presumes that the reason the white officer acted as he did was because the dead young man was Black. But, we do not necessarily know that. There is no evidence, for instance, that Derek Chauvin, convicted by a Minnesota jury of killing George Floyd, acted out of racial animus. And yet, people routinely discuss that case as though anti-black racism was the motivating factor. Why? Such dishonesty is a very dangerous for our republic.

For, once we get into the habit of racializing such events, we may not be able to contain that racialization merely to instances of white police officers killing Black citizens. We may find ourselves soon enough in a world where we talk about Black criminals who kill, rape or maim unarmed white victims – a world no thoughtful person should welcome, because there are a great

many instances of Black criminals harming white people. These are criminals harming people. They should be dealt with accordingly. They do not stand in for their race when they act badly. White victims of crimes committed by Blacks oughtn't to see themselves mainly in racial terms if their automobile is stolen at gunpoint, 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 this country. We shouldn't want to live in a world where such events are interpreted primarily via a racial lens. Self-declared progressives are playing with fire, I think, when they bring a reflexive, racializing sensibility to police-citizen interaction. Indicting the police as "racists" will not be the end of this racial story, I assure you.

And, Here Is Yet Another Unspeakable Truth: There Is A Dark Side To the "White Fragility" Blame Game

Likewise, I suspect that the blanket indictment of "whiteness" that we are seeing from the progressives in the academy and the media is but one side of that card, too. 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 statue 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 21st century stand? I might begin to enumerate the great works of philosophy, mathematics and of science that ushered in the "age of Enlightenment," that allowed

modern medicine to exist, that gave rise to the core of human knowledge about the origins of the species or the origins 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 exemplifies “white supremacist” rhetoric. I wish to stipulate that I would never actually say something like that myself. Neither am I here attempting to justify that position. I am simply noticing that, if I were a white person, it might tempt me, and I cannot help but think that it is tempting a great many white people. We can wag our fingers at them all we want but they are part and parcel of the racism-monger’s package. If one is going to go down this route of constantly and gratuitously making race the issue, and making “whiteness” the villain, then one has got to expect this sort of backlash. How can you make “whiteness” a site of unrelenting moral indictment without also occasioning it – in acts of “self-defense” by many white people – to be the basis of pride, of identity and, ultimately, of self-affirmation? That, my friends, would be an unmitigated disaster for our country. And yet, that’s where we seem to be headed, with college professors, newspaper editors and ambitious politicians leading the way.

I have a modest proposal – not at all original, but one that nevertheless bears repeating. I risk cancellation for saying this, but I’ll say it nonetheless: The right idea here is the idea of Gandhi and Martin Luther King – that we Americans should try to transcend racial particularism while stressing the universality of our humanity. That is, the right idea – if only fitfully and by degrees – is to carry on with our march toward some form of “race-blindness,” moving toward a world where no person’s significance is contingent upon racial inheritance. This, I believe, is the only way to address a legacy of historical racism effectively without running into a reactionary

chauvinism. Promoting anti-whiteness (and Black Lives Matter openly flirts with this) may cause them to reap what they have sown in a backlash of pro-whiteness. Here we have yet another unspeakable truth which, as a responsible black American intellectual, it is my duty to apprise you of.

On the Unspeakable Infantilization of “Black Fragility”

In closing, I would add that there is an assumption of “Black fragility,” or at least of Blacks’ lack of resilience, lurking behind these anti-racism arguments. Blacks are presenting ourselves and 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; to demand anything from us, for fear that we will be so adversely impacted by that. The presumption is that Black people cannot be disagreed with, criticized, called to account, or asked for anything – that we cannot handle the truth. No one asks Black people, “What do you owe America?” How about not just, what does America owe us -- reparations for slavery, e.g.? What do we owe America? How about duty? How about honor? Anyone who takes black people seriously and who cares about the future of this republic should be willing to ask such questions, especially in the wake of the abominable George Floyd riots of the summer of 2020.

Here’s the crux of the matter: When you take agency away from people, you remove the possibility of holding them to account, and you stultify their capacity to maintain judgment and standards, so as to critically evaluate what they do. If a black youngster has no choice about whether or not to join a gang, pick up a gun, and become a criminal – because society has failed him by not providing adequate housing, health care, income support, job opportunities, anti-

racism training etc. – then it is no longer impossible to discriminate as between those Black youngsters who do and do not pick up guns and become members of a gang in those conditions, so as to maintain judgment of the behaviors of our people within African-American society; so as to affirm our communal expectations of right-living. In other words, moral relativism is the inevitable end result of thinking that we are all the victims of anti-black racism: we black people are literally demoralizing ourselves, to the extent that we allow ourselves to be corrupted by a presumed lack of control over our lives, by lack of accountability for how we conduct ourselves, and for how we raise our children.

What is more, there is a deep logical contradiction in first declaring white America to be systemically racist, but then mounting a campaign to demand that whites recognize their own racism and deliver us Blacks from its consequences. I want to say to such advocates: “If, indeed, you are right that your oppressors are racists, 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 unrelentingly biased.” The logic of that position escapes me. It is, in a word, pathetic.

It is certainly no way to attain “equality” in American society. This, at the end of the day, reveals what is so profoundly wrong about the race debate in America today. In its dishonesty, it misses the point entirely. The problem confronting black Americans is not “systemic racism.” Rather, it is facing-up to and accepting the burdens of our freedom. Freedom, not oppression, is the existential challenge confronting us. Here then is a final unspeakable truth, which I utter now in defiance of ‘cancel culture’: If we Blacks want to walk with dignity – if we want to be truly equal – then we must realize that white America cannot give us that equality. We Blacks have to actually earn our equal status. Please don’t cancel me just yet, because I am on the side of Black

people here. But I feel obliged to report that equality of dignity, of standing, of honor and of security in one's position in society – the ability to command the respect of others – this is not something that can be handed over to us. Rather, it is something that we have to wrest from a cruel and indifferent world with hard work, with our bare hands, inspired by the example of our enslaved and newly freed ancestors. We have to make ourselves equal. No one can do it for us.

Thank you, GL