

Stigma of otherness

by [Anthony B. Pinn](#) in the [November 20, 2002](#) issue

Centuries after the end of slavery and decades after the civil rights movement, why is the United States, which proclaims its profound commitment to a democratic vision of life, still marked by racial inequality and stratification? This nagging question has shaped much of our national discourse.

Glenn Loury, a Boston University professor of economics, wants to shift the discussion from the issue of discrimination to the issue of racial stigma as the basis of inequality. He presents his highly theoretical justification for this shift by examining three principles that undergird the conversation about race-based disparity: that race is socially constructed and used to categorize individuals and communities through "marks on the body" such as color; that racial inequality is not based on intrinsic qualities and intellectual capabilities; and that the "otherness" of black Americans entails a stigma that warps American social consciousness.

While it is vital to recognize race as a social construct and to discredit essentialism, Loury is preoccupied with establishing the third principle. This move from evidential analysis--focusing on the economic signs of discrimination--to asserting the presence of a damaging stigma informing those signs marks Loury's contribution to the ongoing debate.

Because the social world is uncertain, people do a number of things in order to make sense of their surroundings. Classifying individuals based on visual markers is an unavoidable part of this process. This practice in and of itself does not bring about race-based disadvantage. However, classifications often rest on social meanings that allow for racial stereotypes and foster differentiated actions, practices and events. This "biased social cognition" and its consequences seem reasonable and justifiable because people expect it and confirm these expectations through their actions. This process allows us to miss the information that can break the cycle. Not even attention to nonracial markers is sufficient, since it does not address *how* people think--the realm of meaning--but only *what* they think.

Loury gives priority to racial stigma, analyzing disadvantage because it points to an ontological grounding for racial inequality, an overdetermining or fixing of identity that goes unchallenged as it warps "perception, representation, and standing." It thus prohibits full and equal participation in the best of life for many black Americans. This, Loury argues, is an old problem firmly lodged in slavery when enslaved Africans underwent a process of social death marked by a denial of their humanity.

This move on Loury's part provides a useful link between social scientists like Orlando Patterson and students of religion. For example, Loury's depiction of humans as "hungry for meaning" echoes views of human nature found in theological discussions. This assumption anchors Loury's argument and lends itself to the implicit ontological considerations that shape his perception of history and the "race problem." It also grounds his ethics in more than socioeconomic and political concerns.

Loury is unwilling to consider that racial stigma affects all black Americans. But if we are talking about ontologically significant meanings that shape social ways of knowing and acting, wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that these meanings have some influence on the social existence of all blacks? If this stigma allows people to think that blacks deserve what they get, don't exceptions to the general rule (you're not like the others) also entail a problem for realizing black humanity and community? In both instances, isn't the black body given a significance by which problematic circumstances are justified ?

What to do? Loury acknowledges that structural modes of inequality can be addressed through economic and political reform. However, this is not enough, he argues. Such reform does not address the racial stigma that feeds discrimination in the first place, and does not approach questions of public morality that shape social policy. We must first recognize that current inequalities result from an historical failure to recognize the full humanity of blacks and act accordingly. Only when racial stigma is addressed can there be real reform, reform that attacks both resource-based disparities and the construction of social meanings.