

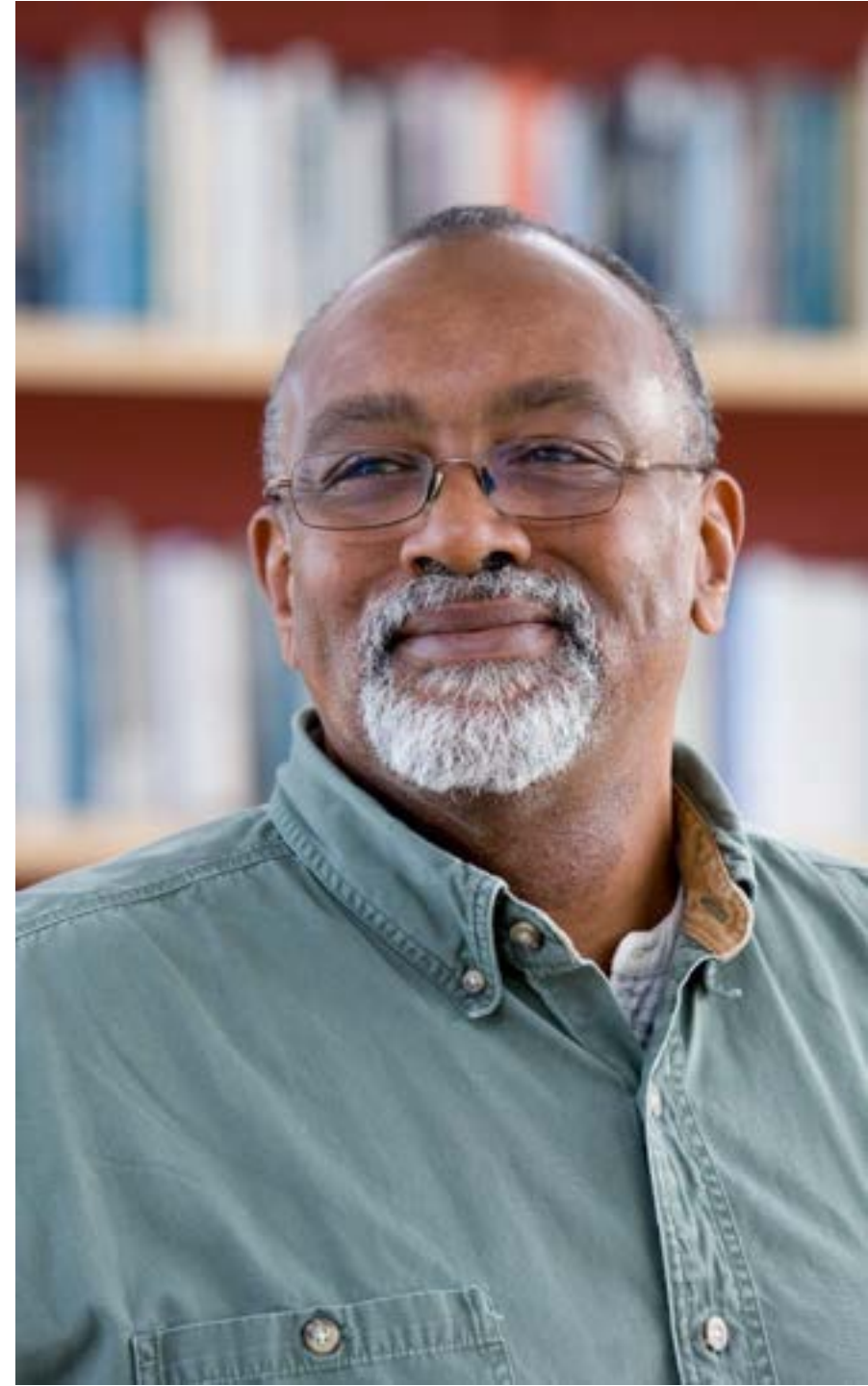
Glenn Loury:

An Independent Mind

(b. 1948)

- Groundbreaking Economist
- Social Policy Critic
- Black Conservative
- Online Media Personality

Contemporary Scholars: **Lesson 3**



Glenn C. Loury



*Glenn Loury,
c. 2010.*

Glenn Cartman Loury is an accomplished economist, essayist, and media personality. He is known for challenging government responses to issues like race and poverty.

In his books, essays, and popular YouTube program, *The Glenn Show*, Loury argues that policies designed to reduce racial inequality have instead made the problem worse.

Glenn C. Loury

At times he has considered himself a **conservative**, and at others, a **progressive**. But he is consistently known to his admiring followers as a thought-inspiring critic of popular ideas.

Glenn Loury with writer Ravi Shankar for Brown Alumni Magazine (Philip Keith, 2023).



South Side of Chicago



Loury and his family lived in Park Manor on the South Side of Chicago. Loury remembers his community in the 1950s as one with “values instilled and sustained by church, the family, and common sense.”

Loury inherited his father Everett’s work ethic and his mother Gloria’s lust for life.

Regal Theatre in Bronzeville, a major hub of Black culture in Chicago, just north of Loury’s home neighborhood, c. 1951.

South Side of Chicago



After his parents divorced when he was five, Glenn lived with his mother, but remained close to his father. He later described his dad as a “self-made man who labored hard all his life.”

Loury shared this early family photo on his Substack:

“I’m actually in this photo, though not visibly so. It was taken in April 1948, and I was born in September of that very same year! My uncle Adlert looks over my mother’s left shoulder, Uncle Alfred looks over my father’s right shoulder.”

Have you seen family photos from before you were born? Do you still know or remember the people in them?

Inspiring Uncles



Loury's heroes growing up were his uncles, the charismatic Alfred and Adlert. Both men were intelligent and enterprising. Adlert had a law degree from Northwestern University.

Loury was drawn to his uncle Adlert's practical approach to life. He told an interviewer in 1995 "Other guys were always talking about stuff that just wasn't going to happen – like the **revolution** – while [Adlert] would tell me about the law and how to work it to your advantage. That appealed to me."

Northwestern University Law School c. 1950.

Lives of the Mind



Though many of Loury's neighbors did not have much formal education, the community had a rich knowledge of Black history and **intellectualism**.

Black-owned bookstores on the South Side stocked books by Black intellectuals and energetic discussions of the issues of the day were part of Loury's everyday life.

Newsboy selling copies of the Chicago Defender, one of the most influential African American newspapers in the country, c. 1942.

Lost World

As an older man, Louri sadly noticed the changes in his neighborhood:

“The alleys where we played stickball, the homes in whose backyards stood the apple trees ... are now, most of them, overrun by poverty and crime. I would not walk through those neighborhoods myself, much less allow a child to play in them unsupervised.”

Chicago's South Side, mid-1970s. (John H. White.)



Advanced Studies

Loury started high school at the early age of twelve. While it was hard for him to fit in with his older classmates, he had no problem with his schoolwork. He loved the logic of mathematics and improved at chess, a game he was first introduced to by his father and that would be a part of his life even as an adult.



*Loury and Shankar
playing chess during
their 2023 interview.*

A Job in Print

After high school, Loury briefly attended college, working in the kitchen at Burger King.

When he was just 18, he learned that he was going to become a father and paused his education to work full time. At his new job at the R.R. Donnelley and Sons printing plant, he quickly made friends who shared his interests in music, **philosophy**, and chess.

R.R. Donnelley and Sons lakeside printing plant in the Calumet area of Chicago.



On to Northwestern



Soon, Louri was married to his high school girlfriend, Charlene, and had two children. While still working at the printing plant, he started taking community college courses.

It was there that his calculus teacher recognized Louri's intellectual gifts and encouraged him to apply to Northwestern University. In 1970, he was accepted on **scholarship**.

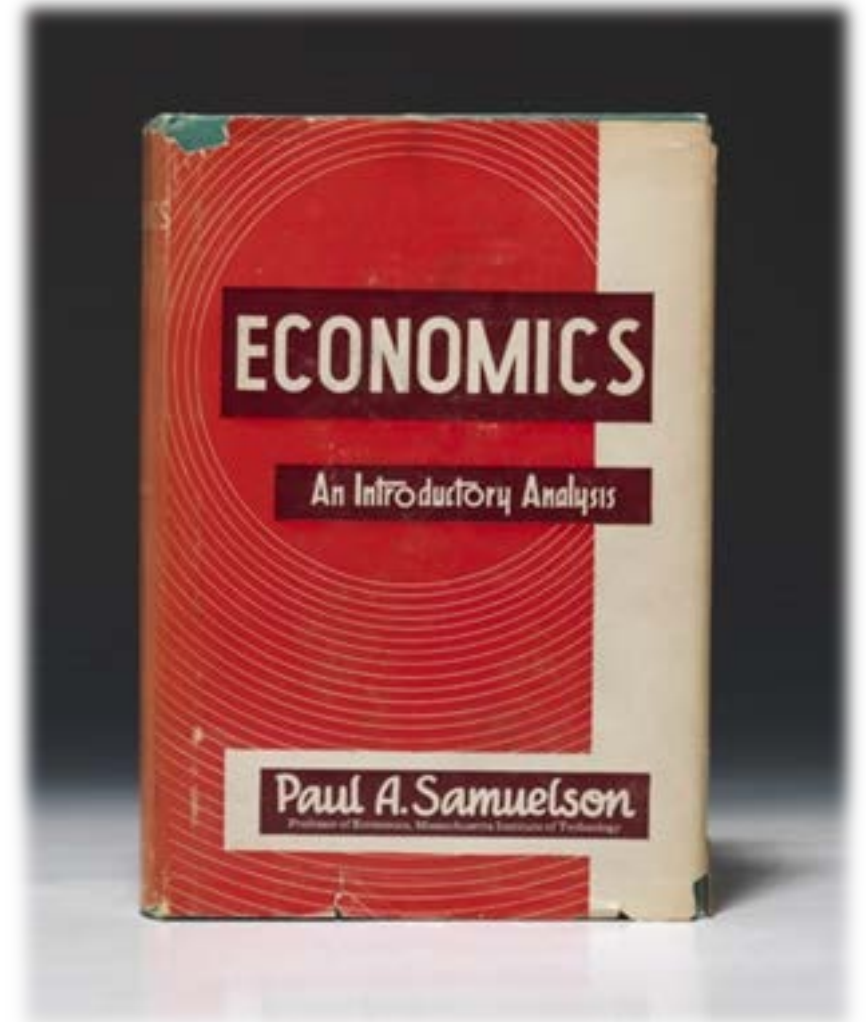
Northwestern University Library, completed in 1970, the year Louri began his studies.

An Economist Rises

At Northwestern, Louri studied economics and political theory. He enjoyed **abstract**, highly technical economic work, using math to find unexpected patterns and order in ordinary human behavior.

Soon he was taking graduate-level courses in mathematics and economics.

Economics textbook by Louri's future professor, Paul Samuelson.



An Economist Rises



*Aerial view of the MIT campus
in Cambridge, MA.*

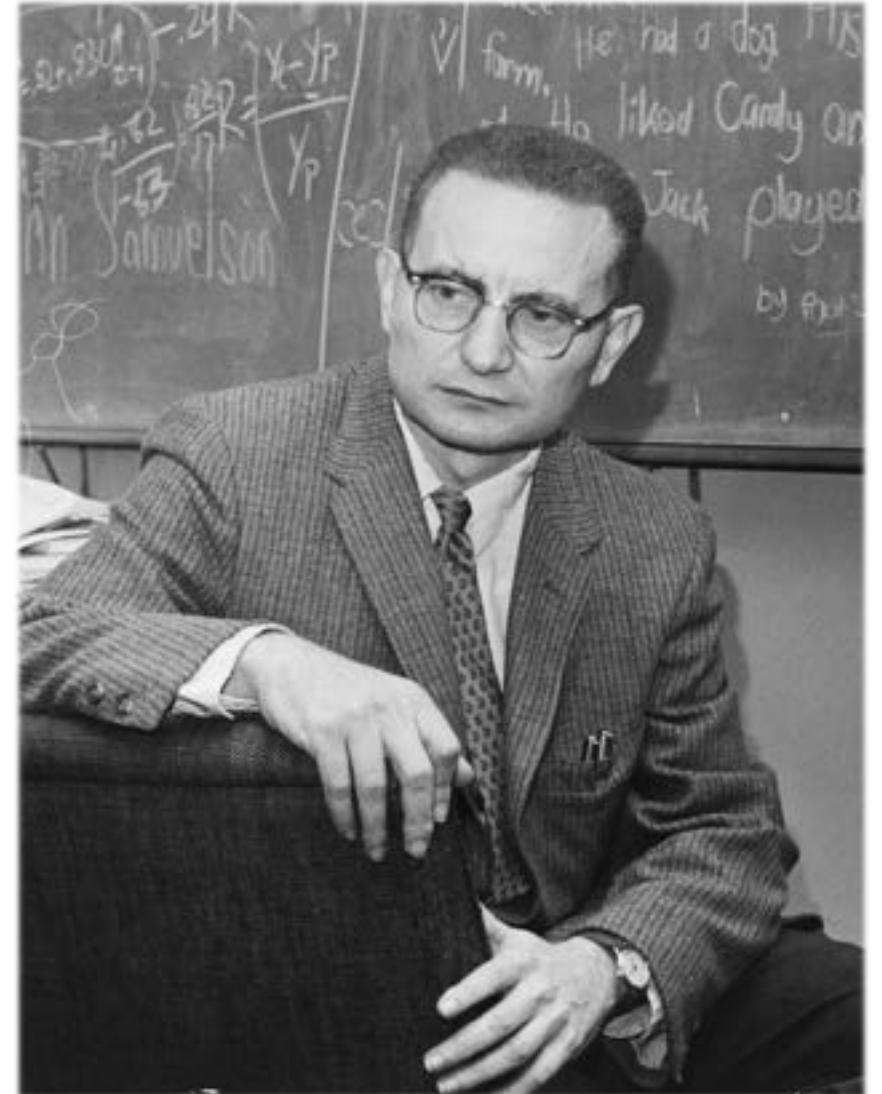
In 1972, Loury was encouraged by his professors to apply to graduate school. All the major universities he applied to – Harvard, University of Chicago, UC Berkeley – accepted Loury's application. He chose to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), likely the best economics program in the world.

Cambridge and MIT

Loury moved to Cambridge with his family. They had never lived outside Chicago before, but Loury was confident, ambitious, and hard-working.

He impressed his classmates and his teachers, who included Paul Samuelson, a Nobel Prize winner.

Paul Samuelson c. 1973



Cambridge and MIT

Loury thrived in the Cambridge academic environment. Though often the only Black man in the room at social events, he could hold his own in a conversation about almost anything; when he did find himself unable to contribute on a particular subject, he would read up on it so that he'd be able to contribute the next time.

But Charlene did not adjust as well to their new life. They soon separated and divorced.



A Meeting of Minds



At MIT, Loury met Linda Datcher. They were both economic students from working-class backgrounds; both were academically gifted, and both were fiercely competitive.

They started as friends, but the relationship became romantic and, eventually, Loury and Datcher married and raised two sons. Linda conducted groundbreaking work in social economics, which is the study of how social behaviors affect economic outcomes.

Linda Datcher c. 1990s.

Discussion Paper 225
June, 1976

"A Dynamic Theory of Racial
Income Differences"

Glenn C. Loury
Northwestern University

Social Capital

One of Loury's most important contributions to economic theory was the concept of "social capital." He was one of the first people to use this term, in his PhD **dissertation** in the late 1970s.

Social capital is the value we gain from our connections with people: family, neighbors, friends, and members of civic and religious community. The trust, cooperation, and opportunities generated by these connections can be just as valuable as other, more easily measured forms of wealth.

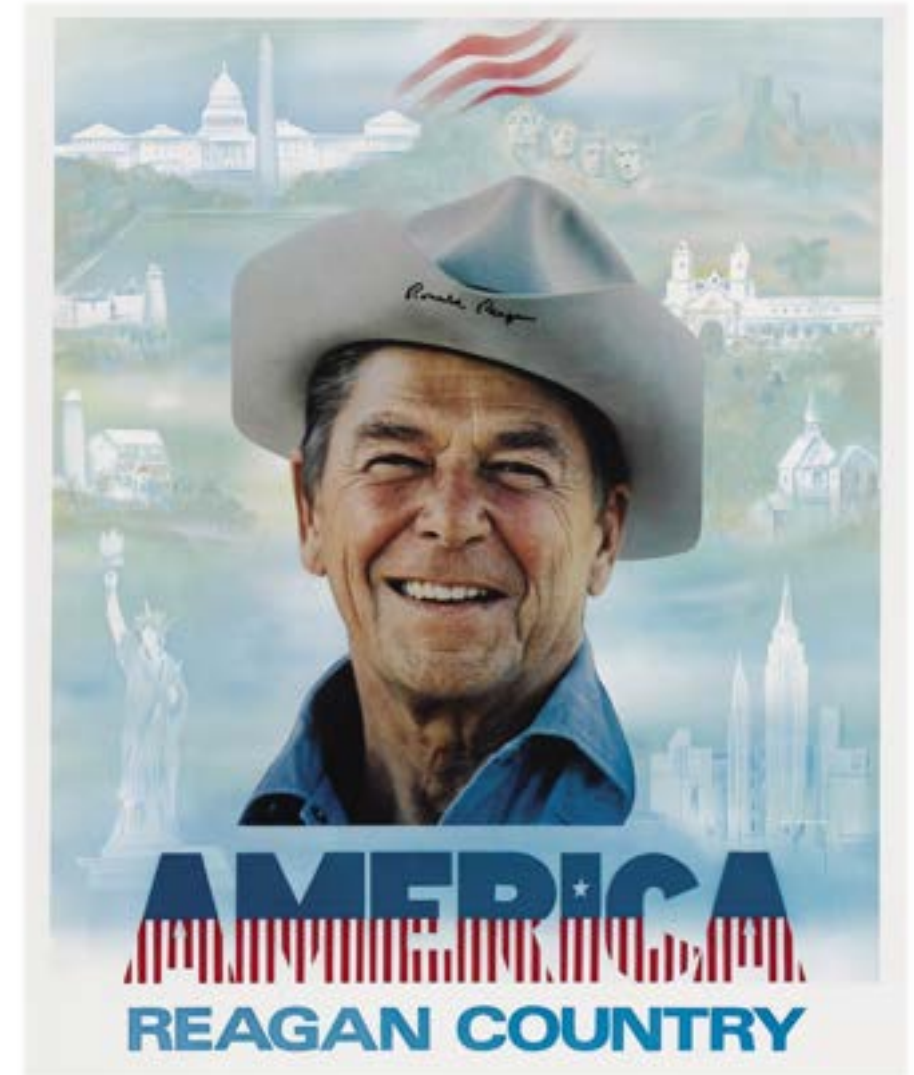
What are the sources of "social capital" in your life?

Loury the Reaganite

In 1982, when he was only 33 years old, Loury became Harvard University's first-ever African American tenured professor of economics.

At this time, Loury began to say publicly what he had once kept private: that he was a political conservative who voted for Ronald Reagan.

Autographed Reagan campaign poster, 1980.



Breaking Ranks

Loury disagreed with Black political leaders who denounced racism and police brutality but ignored the realities of crime, dysfunction, and moral decay in America's poorest neighborhoods.

In the summer of 1984, Loury gave a talk to Black leaders in Washington, D.C., called "A New American **Dilemma**," in which he argued that these negative behaviors, not white racism, were responsible for racial inequality in America.

Skeptical headline in the New York Times announces President Reagan's meeting with Black Conservatives like Loury and his longtime friend Bob Woodson, January 16, 1985.



Public and Personal Critics



Loury's conservative social and economic views drew criticism from high-profile liberal Black intellectuals like political scientist Martin Kilson and law professor Derrick Bell.



Even his own family distanced themselves from his opinions.

“We could only send one of us to Northwestern and MIT,” his Uncle Alfred told him. “We sent you. I don’t see us in anything you do.”

Professors Bell (above) and Kilson (below), two prominent critics of Loury.

A Double Life

As one of the few Black conservatives who vocally supported the Republican agenda, the late 1980s were years of crisis for Loury.



He was nominated as Deputy Secretary of Education in 1987, after years of building connections in Washington. But he was living a double life. By day he was an Ivy-League academic, by night he was spending time in dangerous parts of Boston and began using cocaine.

Old Dover Station in Boston's South End, demolished in 1987.

Night Life



*Iconic First Church
of Roxbury at night,
c. 2000s.*

Hanging out in places like the Roxbury neighborhood put him back in touch with working-class Black America. Well-off liberals were likely to avoid these poorer, higher-crime neighborhoods, while claiming to represent their interests.

Loury was spending his nights there playing chess with his blue-collar pals, blending in with the kind of Black people his opponents claimed he had betrayed. But he was also indulging his self-destructive habits.

Withdrawals



*Glenn Loury after withdrawing
from consideration in 1987.*

In June of 1987, Loury withdrew himself from consideration for Deputy Secretary, knowing that a series of personal failings were about to become public: infidelity, drug abuse, and trouble with the law.

Months later, as his addiction worsened and his life spiraled out of control, he entered a drug **rehabilitation** program.

Against D'Souza



In the early 1990s, Loury grew more critical of conservative attitudes towards race.

He was angered by the harsh language conservatives like Dinesh D'Souza used to describe African Americans. In addition, the familiar refrain of "I don't see race" and unqualified embrace of "colorblind" policies irritated him.

"While that may have been, in some ways, a worthy ideal," Loury later wrote, "America has never been colorblind."

Dinesh D'Souza, c. 2010s, and the cover of his 1995 book.

A Shift to the Left



Loury in the late 1990s.

In the next couple decades of his life, Loury would adopt progressive views that were more in line with the majority of Black Americans – including those family members and academic peers who had once criticized his support for Reagan.

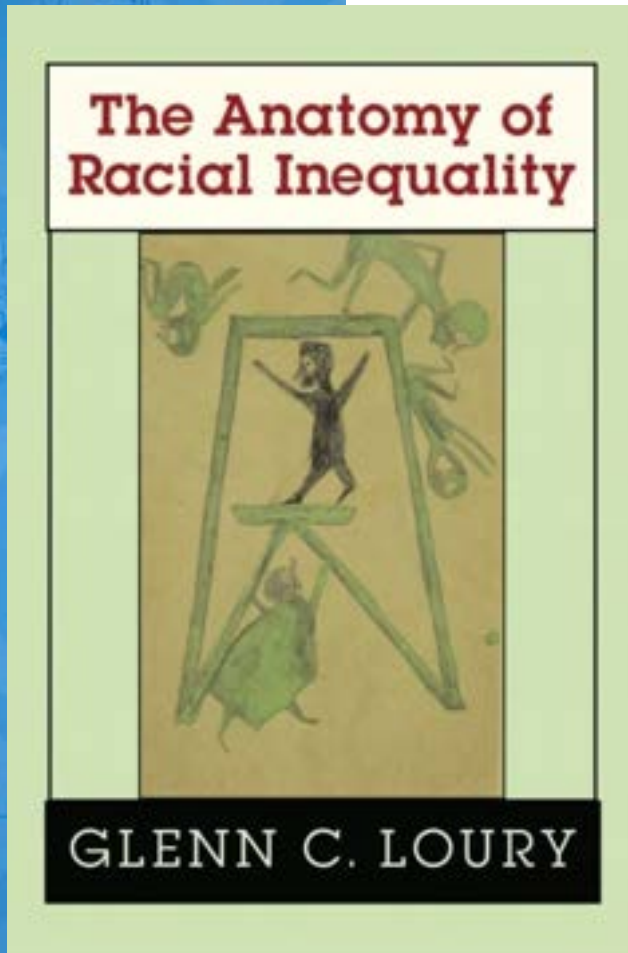
A Shift to the Left

He publicly supported affirmative action (though with some lingering reservations) and argued in favor of **reparations** for slavery. Inspired in part by the compassionate neighborhood outreach demonstrated by his local church, he spoke out against the mass incarceration of Black men in America.



Lounsbury in the 2000s.

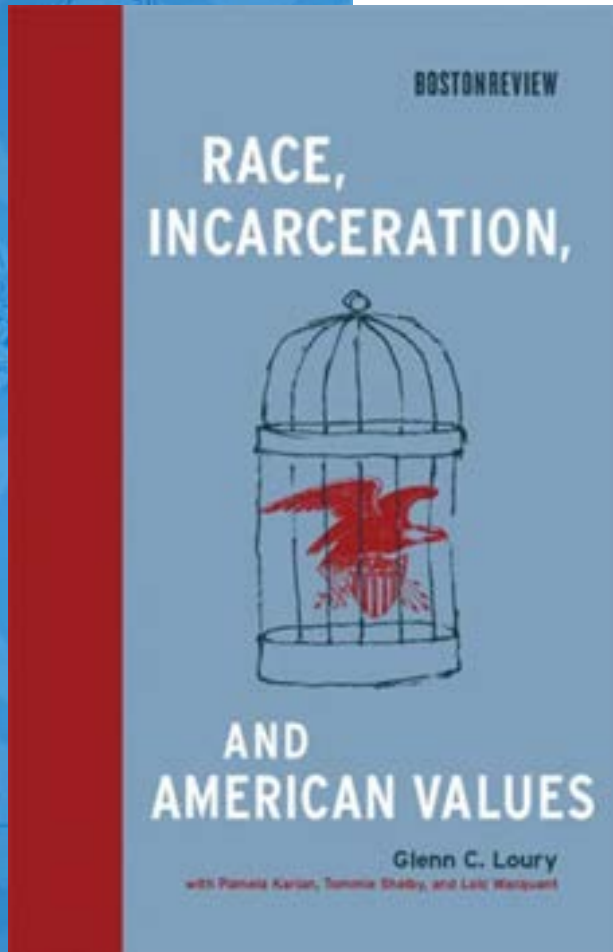
The Anatomy of Racial Inequality



In 2000, Loury was invited to deliver the prestigious W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures at Harvard. In his presentations, Loury said that instead of using the emotionally-charged word “racism” we should focus on “biased social cognition.” He used this term to argue that racial bias and discrimination could lead to inequality even without race-based hatred. The talks were collected as a book that was warmly received by liberals and progressives.

The Anatomy of Racial Inequality, First Edition, 2002.

A Nation of Jailers?



A few years later, a series of lectures in which Loury condemned mass incarceration were collected and published.

He made the moral argument that America simply could not lock up millions of Black men without addressing the problems of poverty and despair in high-crime neighborhoods. While not denying the individual guilt and responsibility of those in prison, he also insisted on the responsibility of the state to treat all its citizens with dignity.

Race, Incarceration, and American Values, 2008.

Talking Heads

Because of this book, Louri became friends with philosopher Joshua Cohen, an editor of *Boston Review*. Cohen invited Louri to an online discussion with him on a new platform called *Bloggingheads*.

Louri began to participate regularly.

Screen shot from Bloggingheads in 2007, Louri's first public conversation with linguist John McWhorter.



Glenn and John



Title screen from an episode of The Glenn Show in August 2023.

One early conversation partner on *Bloggingheads* was John McWhorter, a linguistics professor at Columbia, whose political views were moderately conservative. While challenging McWhorter on his conservative views, Loury reluctantly admitted to himself that he agreed with some of McWhorter's opinions.

More than 15 years later, McWhorter and Loury are continuing their conversation on *The Glenn Show*, Loury's popular YouTube series.

Hope and Change?



When Illinois Senator Barack Obama was elected as America's first Black president, many argued that it was the beginning of a "post-racial" America.

But during Obama's second term, new controversies and the rise of movements like Black Lives Matter would make race-focused topics central in American politics again – and would lead Louri to break with the progressive beliefs he adopted in the mid-1990s.

Famous "Hope" poster by Shepard Fairey from Obama's 2008 presidential run.



Tough Questions

Some saw righteous anger in the protests that erupted after these events, but Louri was disgusted by the chaos and violence that descended on many American cities – especially in Black majority neighborhoods where the widespread destruction of property seemed to be inflicted by those from outside the community.



Protestors defy a police order to disperse in Ferguson, Missouri. November 2014, AP/Charlie Riedel.

Tough Questions

Now the Merton P. Stoltz Professor of the Social Sciences and Professor of Economics at Brown University, Loury was even more troubled by the threat to free speech and open inquiry on college campuses and beyond, writing:



BROWN

“[I]f 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?”

What is the value of debating contentious issues in the classroom? What limits, if any, should be placed on such debate?

Prized Fellow



In 2022, Loury received the Bradley Prize, a grant recognizing exceptional intellectual achievements by conservative and libertarian intellectuals and was named the John Kenneth Galbraith Fellow from the American Academy of Political & Social Science.

Glenn Loury receives the Bradley Prize in 2023.

Late Admissions

He continues to produce The Glenn Show through his Substack newsletter, which has tens of thousands of subscribers.

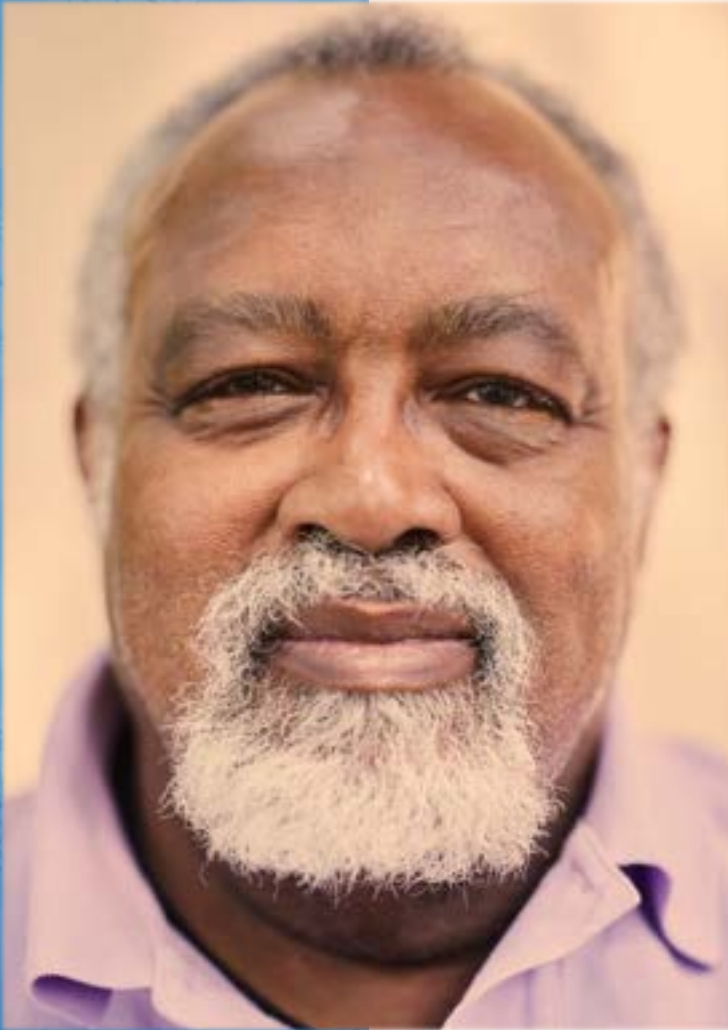
In 2024, at age 75, he released *Late Admissions*, a memoir reflecting on the winding path of his intellectual journey – and the centrality of Black American culture and identity in his life.



THE GLENN SHOW

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Black Identity



“For all my desire to see America get past its resurgent obsession with racial identity,” he wrote in its conclusion, “I could not disavow the central role my experience, my social being, as a black man played in my critique.

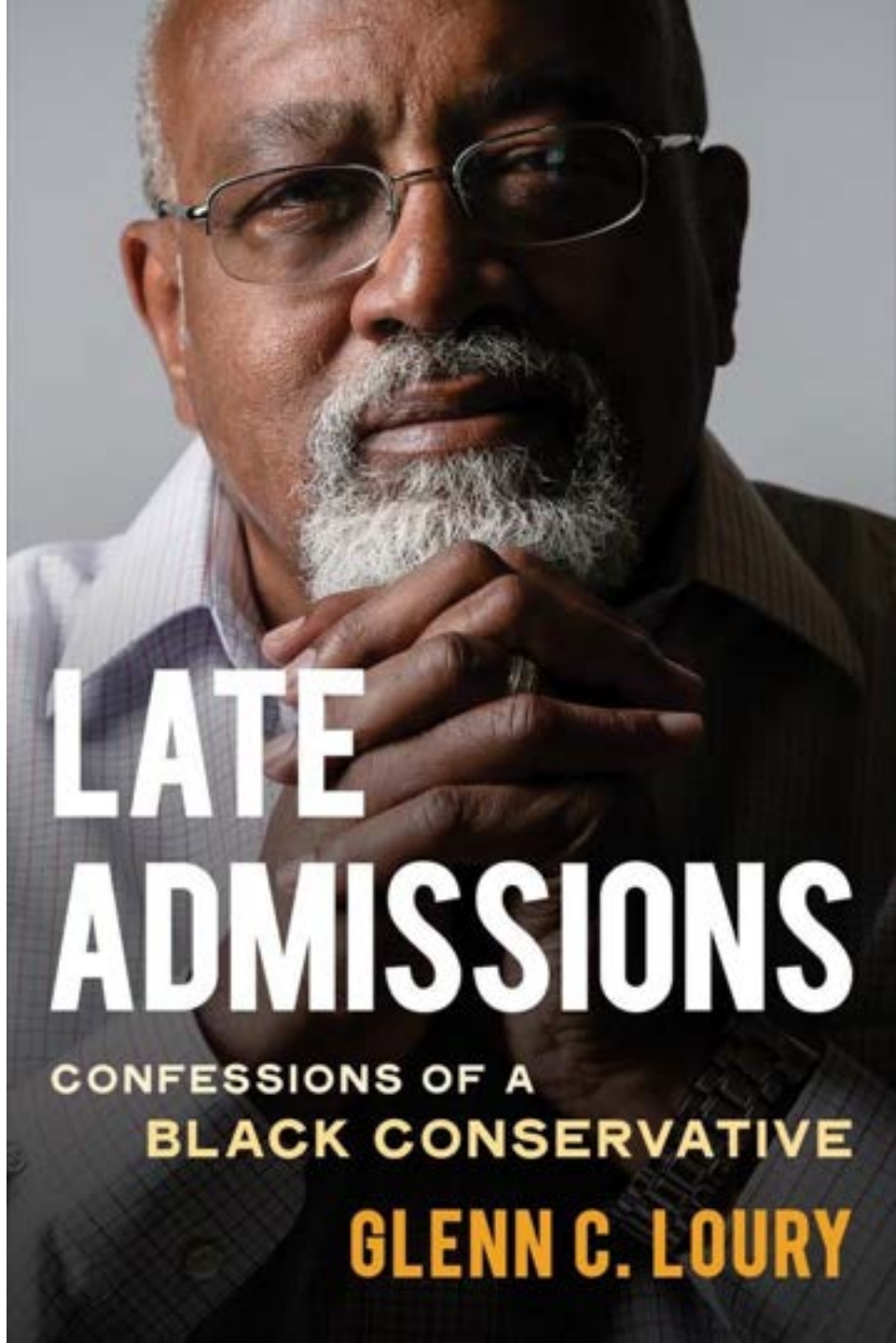
The unique history of African-descended peoples on the North American continent has **ineradicably** shaped my consciousness and self-understanding. My blackness is at the core of my being.”

Glenn Loury in 2021. (Beeld Bart Heynen.)



Vocabulary

abstract
conservative
dilemma
dissertation
ineradicably
intellectualism
philosophy
progressive
rehabilitation
reparations
revolution
scholarship





WOODSON
CENTER

BLACK *History* *and* EXCELLENCE