

February 27, 2007
EC 137, Racial Inequality in the US
Prof. Glenn C. Loury
Writing Assignment #2

This assignment involves writing a review essay of 3-4 double-spaced pages on *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*. This assignment is due in one week -- next Tuesday, Mar. 6. To fix ideas, here are two quotes lifted from the argument in my book:

(1) 'Race' may be a human product, but, because it is a social convention that emerges out of the complex interactions of myriad, autonomous decision-makers, it is not readily subjected to human agency. Between us reflective agents and our social artifacts stand mechanisms of social intercourse that are anything but transparent. Because we filter social experience through racial categories, and given the ancillary meanings with which those categories are freighted, we can be led to interpret our data in such a way that the arbitrariness of the race convention remains hidden from our view, leaving us "cognitive prisoners" inside a symbolic world of our own unwitting construction. (chp. 2)

(2) By now the reader knows I take a constructivist position in regard to the ontological status of 'race': A field of human subjects characterized by morphological variability comes through concrete historical experience to be partitioned into subgroups defined by some cluster of physical markers. Information-hungry agents hang expectations around these markers, beliefs that can ... become self-confirming. Meaning-hungry agents invest these markers with social, psychological, and even spiritual significance. Race-markers come to form the core of personal and social identities. Narrative accounts of descent are constructed around them. And so groups of subjects, identifying with one another, sharing feelings of pride, (dis)honor, shame, loyalty, and hope—and defined in some measure by their holding these race-markers in common—come into existence. This vesting of reasonable expectation and ineffable meaning in objectively arbitrary markings on human bodies comes to be reproduced over the generations, takes on a social life of its own, seems natural and not merely conventional, and ends up having profound consequences for social relations among individuals in the raced society. (chp. 5)

Those "profound consequences," Loury argues, include "biased social cognition" (chp 2). They entail the possibility that the elimination of "reward bias" can be consistent with the continuation of "development bias" (chp. 3). And, they lead Loury to distinguish (in chp. 2) between the cognitive activities of "specification" and "inference."

You should compose a short essay that critically evaluates the approach to 'race' and racial inequality summarized above. You should be specific regarding what you take to be the virtues and inadequacies of Loury's view, and you should illustrate your points with examples drawn from the other readings we've been doing in the course to date.