

bhtv-2014-01-23-loury-mcwhorter2

MCWHORTER: Glenn Loury, how are you doing?

LOURY: Doing well, welcome back to the Glenn Show, John.

Happy 2014 to you.

MCWHORTER: That's right. You know, I think we've been doing this officially for seven years now. This is year seven, if --

LOURY: Oh my God.

MCWHORTER: -- we started this in '07, and so it's actually now been that long.

LOURY: It has been. It's been a good run John.

MCWHORTER: It has, it has. We're still here.

LOURY: Yeah.

MCWHORTER: Many people are not.

LOURY: So, now you wanted to talk about inequality this morning.

MCWHORTER: I do.

LOURY: Did you not?

MCWHORTER: I do, and I'll --

LOURY: Yeah, why don't you set us up?

MCWHORTER: What I want to talk about is something that has always worried me about the way we talk about what you might call inequality, or manifestations of inequality.

And that is something that the media seems to abuzz about right now, and so I thought it would be a good time for us to talk it. And that is that I think we need a way of talking about what is sometimes euphemistically called family structure. And how it affects poverty. And I'm going to play my cards right here, for the very simple reason that I think that we have a debate over justice in society where we say she's a mother, she has three children, she's single, and she's having trouble finding a job that will allow her to take care of her kids and live a decent life. Now that is a very serious problem. But I think that we are taught that as thoughtful people, we're supposed to say that she made some reproductive choices, and that we can't talk about those choices in terms of whether she should have made them or not. And frankly, we have to remember that the choice involves not only having one child, but two or three, sometimes four. And we're not supposed to talk about that, that was the choice she made, and now we just have to talk about what we're going to do about that woman's current situation. And as far as I'm concerned, moralizing over her situation once she's in it is pointless. And I personally have no particular interest in fostering marriage between people, as opposed to it being clearly better according to so very many studies,

that children be raised by two people, whatever the marital arrangement happens to be. And yet, one is told that to even bring this up into -- instead of just saying reproductive choices and talking about these things only in the present, is to be anti-woman, or to not understand how the economy works, or to be a right-wing fire breathing moralizer, etc. And my interest in it has always simply been that I think people would be happier if we had a new perspective on single parenthood, and how to perhaps prevent it, keep it from being a growing trend, which it now is, race neutrally. Now the rates of it among whites are as much as among blacks. And so to finish, I think this is a useful time to start talking about it, because it used to be that if you tried to bring this up as, for example, Moynihan did in 1965, you were open to the charge of being racist. And as we both know, being black does not make you immune from that charge. But at this point, maybe that's harder. And so we can just talk about it as an American problem, but I think it's a problem. Do you? Or should we just talk around it, and talk about say, inequality, or other sorts of things?

LOURY: Well OK, let me say a few things. First of all, I don't think it's true that the rate of single parenthood is as high amongst whites as it is amongst blacks. What I

think is true is that the rate of single parenthood amongst whites is as high today as it had been amongst blacks in the 1960s, when Moynihan wrote that infamous report. Namely, north of 25%, maybe close to 30% out of children born -- being born to a mother unmarried, amongst whites today, and that's about what it was amongst blacks, you know, 50 years ago. The rate amongst blacks today is over two thirds.

MCWHORTER: Yes.

LOURY: It's over two thirds, more than two out of three children born to a mother unmarried. You said a number of things. Maybe it's better for children if there are two adults in the household, although we don't have to quibble about whether or not those adults are married to one another. Can we separate out the moral debate, marriage is a good thing, people should marry before they have children, it's sinful to have children out of marriage, a woman who has children and no husband is a loose woman, blah-blah-blah. Can we take that kind of talk off the table and still valorize the idea that to get ahead in life, to have the best shot, to have the most solid developmental platform on which to stand, a child is better served by a household that has two functioning adults in it

who can attend to the child, whose incomes can help to underwrite the child's needs, and so on.

MCWHORTER: That's right.

LOURY: And I do think you can separate those things, and I do believe, as a social scientist, I'm not an expert on demography or family matters, but I've looked at some of this literature that the evidence is fairly strong that two parents are better than one from the point of view of, as a statistical matter, the outcomes for children. I mean this is, in a way, only common sense, 48 hours per day of adult supervisory time is more than 24 hours, two incomes are more than one, and so forth. So the idea that children might be better served to have that two parent environment is not a silly or strange notion, it's a common sense notion, and I think the evidence bears it out. But there's also the issue of the role that this kind of thing, this kind of thing being children born out of wedlock, plays in accounting for the poverty and the inequality problems that we confront today. And whether or not a solution to the poverty and inequality problems necessitates taking this kind of behavioral dimension onboard. And there, I think, the political correctness problem is really quite severe on the left. Because I think it's only, again, common sense that poverty -- poverty, I mean low wage, lack of skill,

long-term unemployment, the -- all of these negative things that we associate with people having very low incomes, is -- sure, it's partly about the availability of jobs, but it's also partly about whether or not somebody stuck it out at community college and learned how to run one of those machines in the hospital. I mean it's partly about the minimum wage being not as high as some people might want it to be, but it's also partly about whether or not a person stuck with that job that they didn't much care for, and looked really hard for another one if they lost the one that they had, or whether or not they allowed themselves to languish outside of the labor market for a year or two, or three. It's about who they choose to have as their peers. Whether or not they accumulated a criminal record when they were 17 or 19 years old, and so on. So to take the view that the poverty issue is simply a matter of the economy not serving the middle or the lower middle class, and something that can be simply fixed by Washington-based legislation that raises the minimum wage, or expands job opportunity, and to ignore the role that might be played in long-term and intergenerational poverty by the behaviors and the values embraced among some who are poor, is to my mind, to be blinded by political correctness. Because of course those behavioral and normative issues bear on the

incidence and the duration of poverty. Or so it would seem to me.

MCWHORTER: And that means that if we're really going to create a difference, then the question becomes, is there anything that one could do to discourage people who are not married -- and this doesn't have to be a woman, depending on what (inaudible) people make -- anybody raising a child singly who doesn't have to, and certainly -- and this is what moves me in particular, discouraging people from having more than one child under those conditions. That's something that has bothered me for 30 years, that as a society, we haven't gotten past a barrier towards questioning that. Let's say that a child comes, and there are all sorts of reasons why a child might come. Somebody might be in a relationship that they have all reason to believe is going to be permanent. Somebody might think that their prospects are better than they turn out to be, especially when they're young. That I completely get. What has always struck me as a difference between, you know, the old days -- and we don't want to mythologize them, and the new days, is how unexceptional it's now considered for a person like that to have another child, and another, and often another, even when they're wiser as to what the prospects of that child is going to be.

LOURY: Hold on a minute John. I just want to flag something. I don't think you want to be too casual about the three and the four kid phenomenon, because my recollection of the data from many years ago, when I looked at this more carefully, was that that was an extremely rare phenomena. And of course, you could find it. You could find the welfare mother with no husband and with four children to feed, you can certainly find her. I'm not saying that she doesn't exist, but I wouldn't lead with her, because I think she's a miniscule fraction of the overall population. I think it may be that half of the people who have a child -- have children out of wedlock have one or two out of wedlock. And it may be that only 5% of them have four out of wedlock or something like that. I make that number up, but I'll bet you that that's not far off. We don't want to -- you know, we don't -- OK, but that's just an observation, go ahead, (inaudible).

MCWHORTER: Yeah, that's interesting, you just taught me something. Because notice, I never said five. I actually thought four was a very common number, and if that's not true, that is definitely new on me. And so, let's say that the normal number is two. And I should flag, the last thing I'm trying to imply when I talk about this single mother is that she is consciously trying to bilk the

system, I don't mean that at all. And welfare mothers have a hard time, welfare has never made anybody rich, it keeps the wolf from the door. So no, the idea is not that anybody is doing this with some kind of glint in their eye. Life happens week by week, and things just happen. And so yeah, no welfare mother, there's no morality here. But it does strike me that it has become -- it's become normal to have more than one child under conditions like this. And the reason that it worries me is because very often, the person is not in a position to give that person a good life, and that person grows up and has trouble adjusting to conditions such as they are. And so, it seems to me --

LOURY: Well I'm sorry John, what do you want her to do, stop having sex? Have an abortion?

MCWHORTER: No, no. That, that, there are two things.

LOURY: So I'm not sure --

MCWHORTER: Yeah, that's the problem. Either use more contraception, and I'm happy to see that there are structures in place now that are trying to increase access to what's called family planning for poor people, but I also know that people have been talking a lot about that, since about 1980. But then also, one of the hardest problems, and I really mean it's hard, and I don't have a glib answer to it, is the abortion part. Because abortion

is something where if you take a pro-choice person like me, it's very easy to talk about it. But then as you start to make a family of your own, and you look at actual couples, for example, who are dealing with whether or not to abort, it's not to be taken lightly, even if you're somebody who calls yourself pro-choice, when there is a child growing inside of you, or your partner, the idea that it's not a convenient time, and so we're just going to get rid of it, that's not as blithe as I think many particularly young people think. But then on the other hand, one does think that sometimes, that decision may have been more appropriate for people who really aren't in a position to provide a good life for the child, and it's certainly documented that in many communities, for example black communities, there's a religious sense that you do not murder. That's how they think of abortion, as many pro-life people do, and therefore, once a child is happening, there is no question of ending its life. And that's a tough one, because that means that obviously, maybe contraception is something more to be stressed. But we -- that has to be talked about. Part of the reason why say the college student who gets pregnant, and there are so many, does not typically drop out and have a child is because she makes a different kind of choice than often

somebody who is in much less of a position to take care of the child than that college student would be. You know what I mean?

LOURY: I know what you mean, but I wonder why the following argument isn't relevant. Which is to say, so the child didn't ask to be conceived, and there the child is, in the womb of the mother. The mother is going to be burdened if she carries the child through to delivery, because perhaps she's not in a financially secure position, doesn't have a partner that she can rely on, and so on. Why isn't there a social interest in supporting the child after the child is born? Perhaps you're not denying that there is. Why wouldn't we want to encourage mothers, or I mean, we may want to encourage them in the first instance not to become pregnant. They may elect to become pregnant for reasons of their own, not that they overlooked the possibility --

MCWHORTER: That can happen.

LOURY: -- of contraception. But that they chose to bring life into the world, because they wanted to, you know, they wanted to raise a child, regardless of whether or not they had a partner. But why isn't there a social interest in encouraging, you know, natality, motherhood, and in supporting women who take on this burden, even if they do so without husbands?

MCWHORTER: What do you mean by the word support?

LOURY: And why is it a problem? Well, by the word support, I mean providing resources necessary to the sustenance and, you know, the -- being able to live --

MCWHORTER: So just child care?

LOURY: -- in a decent way. Well, it's child care, it's education, it's income maintenance, it's food stamps, it's health services, it's what people who raise families generally pay for with their income if they have enough of it. I'm not advocating, I'm asking.

MCWHORTER: You know --

LOURY: I'm trying to put the question, because I can see, looking at it in a different way, why aren't more children more and more healthy and well-raised children better, and more adults who know the joys of parenthood a better thing for society? Why is this a problem?

MCWHORTER: And it seems to me that we have a -- with this short-sighted government that we have, the current gridlock that we have in particular, that gridlock created largely at the hands of people who do have a moralizing view about these things, as opposed to the discussion that I'm trying to have with you. It seems that it's unlikely that we're going to see a significant change in availability and quality of childcare in this country any time soon.

Something like what happened in the '60s does not quite seem to be on the horizon. And there's so many other socioeconomic factors that are changing only slowly, and one would assume therefore that a better choice at this time, for somebody who was facing a rather heartless system, and does not happen to be partnered, and does not have a great education, would be to resist creating new people, and that's the way it used to be. For example, there were plenty of out of wedlock children in the old days. The number of them went down during the Depression. For example, I happened to study this in poor black neighborhoods about 10 years ago. The number of children went down. Now I hope that that wasn't because of things such as back alley abortions and things like that, if it was we certainly don't want to go back to that. But the idea seemed to be you're going to want fewer children. Whereas today, that does not seem to be the case. It's hard to find evidence that people are thinking times are hard, and so I'm not going to bring any children into the world. And I think that some of it is a matter of -- and here's another word that's become so fraught, it's hard to talk about it, cultural, in that -- and it's not that there's anything pathological about the culture, but one hears anecdotally, I've read this in about three

ethnographic studies of underserved communities, that when women grow up in communities where it's normal to have a kid when they're 19, that seems normal, and so you do it because that's what women do. It's not extraordinary, if anything it's part of what being a woman in that community is, although you wouldn't put it in so many words. So it's not that you're doing it say because society doesn't like you, which is what some people say. Or you need something to love you. But because well, your sister did it, your cousin did it, the girl across the street did it, that's what we do. And by the time you realize that maybe it wasn't optimal, you're already taking care of a being. And so that's what's really tough about it, I think. Norms have changed. And sometimes the norms are not in response to economic conditions, it's just all you know, just like you grow up with a language, and that's a tough thing to cut through.

LOURY: Yeah, OK. So people live in the society, they are connected to other people, they are concerned about their standing in the eyes of others, and so their behavior is influenced -- their behavior is influenced by what they imagine others to think normal or acceptable behavior to be. Those norms can change over time, they are changing in our society. Norms around marriage and childbearing being

one instance of that. And they have become more tolerant of the bearing of children out of wedlock. This is true across the society. It's also true within particular communities, such as urban African American communities and so on. And then the question, or a question can become, well is that just the weather? Norms come and they go, or is it something against which we should be pushing if we think the shift in norms is moving in a direction that's unhealthy? It seems to me that much of the culture war kind of verbal conflict and argument in societies between people who have different views about whether or not, you know, the shifting of normative consensus around sexuality or childbearing or whatever is a good or a bad thing. Some thinking it's good, it's liberation, that you know, there's a kind of teleological dynamic and history, and we're moving toward ever higher and more progressive ground. And others think that it's bad, it's a loss of traditional value, it's a moving away from the mores, and patterns, and practices that served our parents and grandparents very well. They call the former liberals, and they call the latter conservatives. Where do you stand on that?

MCWHORTER: Well, you know, I think that we are at a point where we have to realize that there is a difference between moralizing in the idle sense, and really being concerned

with the welfare -- and there's another loaded word, the welfare of people. And that doesn't mean that there aren't moralizers out there. But it's very often the case that if this topic even comes up, it's assumed that you have evil or small-minded intent. For example, my sense, if I could wave a magic wand, and change what I see as a really serious problem. It would be not whether or not people have sex, and how, and how much of it, but just that people abided by, I believe it traces back to James Q. Wilson, and it's the idea that in order to not be poor, pretty much you're guaranteed not to be poor if you finish high school and you don't have children -- one formulation is you don't have children until you're 21, and when you do that, be married. And I would amend it by saying not necessarily be married, but be with somebody. And it's hard to say that that's a Republican statement. It's hard to say that that's a moral majority or hidebound, or ugly, or critical kind of statement, it's just simple advice that I think any parents of any color, of any socioeconomic class, would consider wise in itself. And so you can have a community where there are all sorts of things going on in terms of whether or not people are having sex, and with who. But the idea would be, you don't have kids yet, until you are either very much on your feet in a particular -- in a

position to provide a middle-class existence on your own, or when you can make two heads better than one. I don't -- that's not moral.

LOURY: Let me comment.

MCWHORTER: Go ahead.

LOURY: Let me comment John. OK, it's not moralizing to pragmatically observe that some ways of living are associated with more successful outcomes than others. And I take that point, I don't disagree with it at all. On the historical record, I just wanted to observe, I believe it was Charles Murray who, at least in my memory, sometime during the welfare reform debate of the early, mid 1990s, came up with this formulation, because he had looked at some census data, and he had observed if you classify people, that poverty rates are much lower under some classifications. And he observed if you finish high school, if you avoid trouble with the law, if you don't have a child out of wedlock, maybe it's delaying childbearing until after 21, and so on, you're very, very much less likely to be poor than if you're not in that category of people. And the only observation that I want to make, it's the social scientist point, but I do think it has to be made, is that it doesn't follow from that, that if an individual person -- it doesn't follow from observing

that poverty rates are very low amongst the classification defined by completed high school, didn't bear children until at least 21, and were married at that time, and had no criminal record, that poverty rates are very low in that group. It doesn't follow from that, that if a given individual in a public housing project in a particular urban, low-income community, sticks through high school, they're not going to be poor. That -- in other words, the correlation doesn't necessarily imply a causal relationship, because the population is heterogeneous. So the set of people who fall within the box -- I grew up in an inner-city neighborhood, but I finished high school, I didn't get in trouble with the law, and I did not get pregnant before, or bear a child, or father a child before I was 21 years old. That's not a random draw on the inner-city population. Those people could be really quite special in other ways. They may have very high IQs, for example. They may have had an unusually supportive home background for the neighborhood in which they grew up. I mean I can think of a lot of reasons why those people might be different, and so they avoided high school dropout status. They avoided early unwed pregnancy status. And they avoided getting arrested. But that doesn't mean that another kid who didn't have the benefit of their high

native intelligence, or of their unusually supportive extended family background who get exactly those same actions, but have the same outcome. So there's a little bit of a logical fallacy, if we're going to be prescriptive about it, as description, it's not that interesting to observe the poverty rate varies significantly, even among people all from the same neighborhood, based upon their behavior. But as prescription, if you don't want to be poor, do this, I think one has to be careful. That's -- so that's -- yeah.

MCWHORTER: I get that completely. But I will toss at you a thought experiment. Let's say somebody comes from -- oh God, I don't know. They come from Georgia, in Asia. I'm trying to pick somewhere that's far, far off, and a father comes with his teenaged son who's, you know, kind of bright and observant, and they're walking around the streets of an American big city. He's about 13. No, let's make him younger, I want somebody who's really kind of naïve, he's 10. And the two of them are internalizing this discussion that we're having lately about inequality, and the idea that what we need to change is the fact that there is such a radical disproportion of income between the top and the bottom. And let's say that that kid goes to a certain kind of neighborhood, and he asks his father, in Georgian, well

inequality, that clearly isn't quite right. But if that kid asked, why do so many of these women who are single and only have high school educations have two or three children, why do they have them in the first place, Daddy? We wonder whether the daddy could really say that's not the point. The point is the inequality. I think that that 10 year old boy from Georgia in Asia would immediately think hmm, this is something that needs to be fixed as much as the inequality, for the simple reason that it would seem that addressing the inequality is some -- it would seem that the reason that the women have the kids is not the inequality. If anything, the inequality would discourage people from having the kids. Unless, and I'm almost done, unless the problem is in adequate access to contraception. That contraception is so expensive that it's hard for inner city people to use them consistently. And I haven't been able to find data that shows that that's what the problem is. Are you aware of data along those lines?

LOURY: I know nothing about the inadequate access to contraception being a significant factor in out of wedlock birth. Especially among the poor. I know of no evidence to support that. I'm not saying it's not true, I've just not seen it.

MCWHORTER: Right, right.

LOURY: But I do want to say something here, which is, you know, I'm not putting this forward as some panacea or broad explanation, but I can imagine a person whose life is surrounded by despair thinking that giving birth to a child, conceiving, carrying, and giving birth to a child, would be a meaningful project to them.

MCWHORTER: Sure.

LOURY: That would bring some kind of hope or affirmation at a personal level into their lives, and that that might even be more so the less opportunity that they had for moving into the middle class. That is, the kid who's in college, and then decides to have the abortion after she becomes pregnant, may do so because she anticipates, you know, making 80 grand a year when she graduates from college, and going off to a life somewhere. A kid who is at the top floor of some tenement somewhere, and surrounded by drug selling gangs, and you know, unwed mothers with three or four children who are collecting public benefits, and unemployed people and so on, may feel that having a little baby to come home to, or to bring home from the hospital and take care of, and to raise up, a companion, a charge, a future for herself through this child, may find meaning in that. May find meaning in that, and so -- and I'm not impugning anything to you here, this is not against you, I

just want to say, you know, that hypothetical Russian kid whose reflex might be oh man, what is she doing with those kids? I mean, you know, there is something to say in response to that. The reason she had those kids is because it brought meaning into her life, a person might say. Not that she stumbled into it, not that the, you know, the condom broke, and this was an accident, or something like that. And a person might say well, she has no money, she can't afford to raise the kids, she dare not have it, she's having that kid on me. That would be one kind of response. Another kind of response would be, we're a decent society, we're all in this together, all right, that's the way it's turned out, no kid goes without a decent education or a hot meal at night, and we're going to take care of it.

MCWHORTER: You know, it's -- and see, this is -- I asked you this for a reason, because where that takes us, and I think just as people say, there is some of that. I mean, in the ethnographies of this sort of thing, there are women who say, I wanted something to love. And you can completely understand why somebody would do that under those conditions and even, you know, more than one thing to love, I can surely get that having now had a baby, daughter of my own, you understand the parent child relationship more. But then, the fact is that 80 years ago, that choice was

much less likely among people who were living in despair, frankly, even more concrete and implacable than most poor people face now. It just -- it wasn't done, and you know, there's a whole sociology literature showing that there was single parenthood in the past. And I think we're all aware, but the important thing is there was much, much less. Now, maybe one thing that that means is that what we need today, because we certainly wouldn't want the shaming that went on back then. A lot of the reason you didn't do it then is because you could barely walk down some streets. You couldn't hold your head up as a respectable person, and that put a brake on it.

LOURY: And your kid was going to be called a bastard.

MCWHORTER: Right. Yeah, the whole idea, you got teased.

LOURY: You know, the shame has gone -- yeah, the shame is going to follow in through the next generation, that's what I'm saying. The normative opposition to this was very, verily deeply etched in society.

MCWHORTER: And we don't want that.

LOURY: Go on, I'm sorry.

MCWHORTER: Yeah. And so maybe the answer is that we just allow this, but then our governmental priority has to be, for example, better and wider child care. Maybe that's the answer. So it's not going to change, we don't want to go

back to the shaming. But then on the other hand, we have to acknowledge that there are these children, there are going to be these children, a lot of them, and they need -- we as a society need to be prepared to take care of children of single parents in a way that we haven't before, and that that is part of this inequality that we're talking about. And so it's not just about minimum wage and corporate malfeasance, etc. But that it's also about adjusting to this profound shift in cultural norms. But you have to acknowledge that that shift is there. And maybe just decide that it's not going away, but inequality alone, unless this inequality extends to addressing this issue of the now normalness of single parenthood among the poor, then we're not having a real debate. Being angry at how much money some CEO makes is easy. But I think in terms of helping people who really need help, we need to help all of these children who are born into circumstances which I don't think any adult would choose. And this makes as much sense to me as hoping for some sort of moral change. But it just strikes me as an urgent problem, and I think David Brooks is right. It's not just being angry at CEOs, it shouldn't even, frankly, I think, principally be that, if we're really interested.

LOURY: OK. Let me review the bidding here a little bit on the journalist side. So we're talking here on the 23rd of January, in this morning's *New York Times*, Nicholas Kristof has a column in which he observes that people are beginning again to talk about out of wedlock births as a neglected problem in society that warrants our attention. And he gingerly opens up such a discussion, observing that political correctness, particularly on the left, has made it taboo to even utter any concern about behavior as a factor in engendering people's troubles in life. And especially around behaviors bearing on sexuality, and childbearing, but he thinks it may be necessary for us to carefully enter in, and then a week ago, on Friday, that would have been the 17th of January, David Brooks had a column in the *New York Times* in which he made the point that you just summarized. Namely, we're going to be hearing a great deal about inequality, president's state of the union, obviously the Democrats are going to try to organize a political campaign around this issue, but let's be careful how we talk about it, because it's not just money, it's not just the 1%, there's the poor, and amongst the poor, it's not just the lack of jobs or the low level of the minimum wage, it's also about their behavior. We need to talk about the problems of the poor in a more

holistic way. And I gather that you have some sympathy for David Brooks. Now I just want to finally mention that at Salon.com, Robert ReichReich put up a critique of David Brooks' column --

MCWHORTER: Titled, "David Brooks is Full of it," yeah.

LOURY: Yeah. (laughter) Exactly. "David Brooks is Full of it," he said David Brooks is what passes for a thoughtful conservative these days, and there aren't so many thoughtful conservatives, but even David Brooks is not very thoughtful on this particular issue, and he goes on from there. And I just have to say that I have very little sympathy for Robert Reich's tirade, even though I wouldn't necessarily identify myself wholly with David Brooks' position, and David has written many columns that I didn't like. But I thought, like you, on this point, it's at least worth discussing. And Reich's vituperation, you know, David Brooks is full of it, how dare David Brooks even begin to talk about the behavior of the poor? Don't you know that inequality is what it is, all the gains have gone to the top 1%, and so forth. A bunch of clichés, and we're going to be hearing a lot of them these days. It's not as if Robert Reich is some profound social scientist, OK? Whose insights into the causal dynamics at work in generating inequality are relevant to thinking about what

the solutions might be. He is a kind of political hack himself. I say --

MCWHORTER: That's pushing it.

LOURY: -- you know, I said cautiously, oh come on, I mean Robert Reich is not an economist. OK, I know how people are going to react to this, Loury up on his high horse, and so forth, and so on. OK? Robert Reich is not an economist. Robert Reich in that tirade against Brooks says, the problem with inequality is it keeps the middle class from having spending power, and it perpetuates the recession, and so forth, and so on. Economists don't agree about that. That's not something that I think could be demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt. And the fact that poverty, long-term poverty, and all of the social pathology that surrounds it, is merely a consequence of the political power of the 1%, and the way that the tax system has been arranged, and the way that wages are flat, and so forth, and so on, I mean that's silly. That's silly, it can't be right. So, you know, I don't regard -- I mean, what am I saying? I'm saying Bob Reich is a political guy, the party has a line, and he's taking it. And that David Brooks is not always right, his mouth is no prayer book, but by mentioning that poverty is a complicated socioeconomic phenomenon, and that we do ourselves a

disservice to the extent that we think of it only in terms of well, not enough has trickled down from the rich to the poor. I mean, that's a point that I believe has every right to be taken quite seriously in our discussions.

MCWHORTER: You know Glenn, it's interesting. I agree with you almost completely, and I remember reading Brooks' piece last week and thinking he is going to -- boy are they going to rip him a new one for this one, but I'm glad that he kicked this off. There is -- Jacques Barzun, the scholar of everything who lived to be about 117 and taught here at Columbia, he had a line that he would use in some of his books where he would say the book to read is, and of course, he had read every book ever written. I was like that, the book to read on this one is one where of course, I'm sitting here now, and I can't even say that it's because it's too early in the morning, because it's like 11:30. I can't remember the title, *American something*. And it was written by the *New York Times* reporter Jason DeParle about eight years ago now, where he followed three single black moms who were, you know, on and off welfare, and really telling their story. And it was --

LOURY: I know the book.

MCWHORTER: *American Dream?*

LOURY: Go ahead.

MCWHORTER: Not *American Skin*. Something. And -- I think *American Dream*. And I really enjoyed it, I think he really gets at what the problems are, and aren't. And DeParle openly admits in his introduction, he went into it expecting to tell a certain story, which we would now call a story about inequality, and the 1%, etc. But that he found that it was more --

LOURY: It's called *American Dream*.

MCWHORTER: *American Dream*, right.

LOURY: The book is -- the title of the book is *American Dream*. Yes, go ahead.

MCWHORTER: *American Dream*. And he found it was more complicated. And of course, inequality is a part of it. But you go through that book, living and breathing the lives of these women, you fall in love with all three of them. You feel that you understand them, and yet you cannot come out of that book thinking that the only reason, or frankly, even the main reason, if you ask me, that these women were having the problems they were having, was because society was implacably set against them doing any better than awful. And you can't help coming out of it thinking boy, it would have been better if there hadn't been these children so early, and in this number. And I thought that it really did say a lot, because it made me

think one, there's a problem with jobs, and the minimum wage, and flexibility of hours, etc. But then I thought, there's also a problem just with what people think of as normal, and this was the payoff on it. I read that book thinking that it was going to end with evidence that those women's children, under the new regime, the welfare reform of 1996, where nominally, you can only stay on it for five years, etc. I thought that their children were going to make different choices, but there was no evidence in that book that that's what was going on. And it lead me to think well OK, if the norm is now so set to have the children very early on, then a major aspect of making society better is going to be having the structures in place to do that, and we can't do that if we can't have an honest discussion about the whole topic, and instead step around it by saying reproductive choices. And one other word I think we need to get rid of, family planning. That is the most --

LOURY: Hold on John, hold on John, before you go onto another point, let me just get something in here. OK, you want to talk about family planning (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

MCWHORTER: Not extensively. I just wanted to very quickly say, it's a Soviet 1984 euphemism. We need to say contraception. Anyway, go ahead.

LOURY: (laughter) OK. So you're against euphemism, OK. No, what I was going to say is, we've got certain natural experiments, or quasi-natural experiments right at hand. Because the poor are not a single homogeneous aggregate. There are poor communities of immigrants from various places in the world. And you can compare the incidence of criminal offending, the degree of out of wedlock child bearing, the educational achievements of their children, the employment rates, the self-employment rates, the entrepreneurialism. Across these different poor communities, OK? And what you see is a large variation. Latino immigrants from Puerto Rico, from Cuba, from Mexico, from Central America, from South America, have on the whole, different dynamics and experiences in the United States. Asian immigrants from the Philippines, from Korea, from China, coming at different times, have different experiences. And they can be documented. Those communities can be compared in the demographic and socioeconomic trajectory that they enjoy, to the patterns that you can observe amongst low-income indigenous American. By indigenous American, I mean African American,

or white American, or Appalachian, or whatever, communities. And so when you see a great deal lower incidence of pathology and a great deal higher degree of overall success and economic assimilation in some communities than others. It's hard to avoid the idea that the normative climate, or the set of relations between individuals within those communities, or the values that are affirmed by those families, or the cohesiveness of those families, or the degree of social capital that's enjoyed, or the aspirations of those children, are not varying in a systematic way across those different subgroups within American society. It gets hard in my --

MCWHORTER: And American society is one thing. And so that's a constant variable. And yet you see these different responses, right.

LOURY: Indeed. That's what I'm saying. So prima facie, I think there's a fair amount of evidence on the table that non-economic stuff does matter for the ability to climb the ladder.

MCWHORTER: Glenn, would you call that culture? Because part of the reason it's so hard to talk about this is because that word is so loaded.

LOURY: Well why get into euphemism? I'm going to call a rubber contraception, not family planning.

(laughter)

LOURY: And I'm going to call sitting up with your kids, burning the midnight oil, and telling them that they have to become doctors and engineers, even though you are a street sweeper, I'm going to call that culture.

MCWHORTER: Right, right. Because that's important. But many people, as soon as you say the word culture, they think you're saying pathological. Or that you're pointing a finger in a mean-spirited way.

LOURY: Well that's it, it's about the assignment of responsibility, I think, getting blended in with the assessment of causality, OK? The assessment of what's happening and what causes stuff to happen doesn't necessarily resolve the question of who's responsible and who deserves to be assisted. And I think that some people are resisting the idea that values, norms, and behavioral patterns amongst poor communities might help to lock in poverty, because they fear that that observation will be followed by a denial of responsibility of the society as a whole. Well, they need to pull up their socks, that's what they need to do, that hasn't got anything to do with me. And that's a non sequitur.

MCWHORTER: Exactly.

LOURY: It doesn't follow, it doesn't follow.

MCWHORTER: Exactly. And yeah, that is the fear, that there will be this kind of backlash. It seems to me that to the extent that we're talking about a conversation that's been going on for near 50 years at this point, I'm not sure what evidence there is of that kind of backlash that people are always fearing. There are changes in the political winds, but I haven't seen a capitulation, or a complete denial of the need of an address of the problems of the poor.

(inaudible) what's effective, that'll vary. Whether or not we need a martial plan, as opposed to what we have, and whether or not we need to bring back the great society, that's a question. But it seems to me that after 50 years, we can assume that society has grown enough, American society in general enlightenment, and I really think that American society has, that we can assume that things that certain nasty moralists will say, that imply that we should just stop trying. There's not going to be an American administration that supports a view like that. They couldn't be elected. That's not how things are going to go. And so I think the time has come for that reason, that we can start having more honest discussions about these things.

LOURY: Yeah, I just want to make a couple of points. That welfare reform debate from, I don't know, 1994, '95, '96

did, at times, veer over into this land that you say we don't dwell in. That is, in which it did at times seem that the argument was all right, she's had one kid, and we're going to give her the check. Although as you say, we're going to time limit it, and we're going to require that she be looking for work, and so on. But we're going to give her the check. But if she has another kid, damn it, we're not giving her nothing.

MCWHORTER: Just cut off, right.

LOURY: So yeah, they had a word, family cap I think is what they may have called that. So the family size cap and the welfare benefits (inaudible). And also, this business about time limits. OK? This idea that the incentives were encouraging her to have children because, you know, she could do better having children and being married to the welfare system than she could be doing -- being married to one of these guys who doesn't have very good wages or something like that. All that kind of talk was in the air, so it's not as if it's unknown to American society. The other thing I wanted to say was, although it is not what we're hearing going on --

MCWHORTER: Notice when it didn't win. So people talked about that, and I think you and I both actually had been in the position to be face to face with people who were having

that kind of conversation. But that's not what happened.
Go ahead.

LOURY: OK, OK. The other thing I wanted to observe is that we just had the 50th anniversary of the war on poverty. And I saw fewer pieces than I expected to see under the generic headline "War on Poverty: Poverty Won." OK, and that used to be a mantra. That used to be something you'd hear at the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation all the time.

MCWHORTER: Right.

LOURY: We declared war on poverty, and poverty won. In other words, I don't think anybody is in the -- any longer credibly in the position of saying, you know, it's ridiculous for us to try to do anything about poverty, or to do anything about helping the poor. So, you know --

MCWHORTER: Yeah, that's gone I would say. Yeah. Things -- a society does become more enlightened. And actually, I have to go do my small part in trying to make that happen. And do a class.

LOURY: All righty.

MCWHORTER: And so --

LOURY: You do that.

MCWHORTER: -- you know, I'm glad we talked about this, because it's been a bee in my bonnet, well for really, 15

years, but particularly over the past week, with war on poverty conversations, plus the blowback from the Brooks piece. So yeah, I just wanted to pick your brain on what you thought about these sorts of things.

LOURY: Thanks for the conversation John. A pleasure as always.

MCWHORTER: You too Glenn. Talk to you soon.

LOURY: Bye.

END OF AUDIO FILE