

bhtv-2015-09-24-loury-mcwhorter

LOURY: Hey, John. John McWhorter, how are you?

MCWHORTER: Hey, Glenn, how are you doing?

LOURY: Doing well. I'm Glenn Loury here at the Glenn Show at Bloggingheads.tv, talking with my conversation partner, colleague, and friend John McWhorter of Columbia University. John, we are here, as is our wont, to discuss issues having to do with race in American politics. Black Lives Matter has arisen as a forceful intervention in contemporary discourse about race, policing, the subjugation of black people. It's a movement that's spreading like wildfire around the country, drawing a lot of attention. People tell me George Soros has put some money in. It has been controversial, and we being the guys covering the race beat at Bloggingheads, it falls to us to comment about that. I know you've been writing about it. I've been trying to write about it, but to be honest with you, John, I haven't -- everything I put down on paper is so vitriolic that I've been afraid to show it to anybody. So I'm trying to get some perspective on the issue, and who better to talk to about it than a sage observer of matters race such as yourself?

MCWHORTER: Well, you know, I'll kick it off with this. I

think the iconic vision for me of Black Lives Matter is the piece that the New York Times Magazine did, where they portrayed the three main young black activists who are trying to make a difference with black men, usually, and the police. And I think it's a very important issue, but I think that civil rights has hit a wall, in a sense, with this, in that the going idea is that if you disapprove of Black Lives Matter in any real way, then it must be that on some level you just don't like black people. And the most articulate person of that opinion seems to be, as usual, Charles Blow. So it means you just don't like black bodies making noise. But that's oversimplified. There could be some of that, but I think the reason Black Lives Matter has a lot of people's eyes rolling is not because people don't care about black people and they don't understand the problem with the police. The problem is, as you have mentioned, and you get vitriolic about this, that the typical black man in a particular kind of community is at much, much more risk of being killed by another black man. And you can't argue it away. There are all these sophisticated feints, such as saying that there's a difference between the state murdering and citizens murdering, but none of it goes through this high indignation about one white cop doing a terrible thing.

Looks incongruous, given that in the same communities, hundreds of black men are killing each other every summer. And so I think, in short, Black Lives Matter is very important. I think it could make a really important difference in modern black history. But for that to be a movement that really resonates historically, it has to add a new wing where it firmly says and stands behind and works at the idea that black lives matter when black people take them too. There has to be a second wing that goes into black communities and works on, in a real way, the black-on-black murders. That would make Black Lives Matter complete. As it is now, it's incomplete and it looks shrill, and the idea that black lives matter when white people try to take them looks recreational, it looks childish, it looks peevish, and it's just wrong; it's incomplete. That's my take on Black Lives Matter. What's yours?

LOURY: Well, let me respond to what you've just said, and I will stick on an opinion in due course, which is not all that different. I mean, I don't personally disagree with the sentiment that you just expressed. But here's what the rebuttal would be, I think. First people would say, yes, there's violence in black communities, in low-income urban black enclaves, homicide rates are very high. But this is

a consequence of the structural racism that has played out over history and continues to play out today that confines people to segregated neighborhoods, racially segregated, that denies people an opportunity to develop their talents and to live decently with legitimate jobs and so forth. Drug trafficking is flourishing, people are concentrated in public housing, gangs are proliferating and whatnot, young men are idle, and so on. So there's a structure that accounts for the behavior, and it's unfair to ask a movement demanding justice from the police to be responsible for patterns of behavior that are deeply embedded in a system over which black people don't exercise any control. That would be one rebuttal. Another rebuttal would be, these are two different subjects altogether; why are you changing the subject? We came here to talk about police brutalization of young black people, and you tell me about something else, which is that young black people, on occasion, maybe even more often than on occasion, brutalize themselves. I can agree with you and stipulate that the latter is a problem, but that's not the problem I was discussing; why are you trying to change the subject? So those are two possible rebuttals to the position that you just stated.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, and they fail utterly. I am never more

struck than I am lately, because of some things I've been thinking about, about how certain sentences that you hear often enough are accepted as truth until they become almost a kind of music. So you take a group of people who are all the same color and you put them in neighborhoods where they're all with one another and job opportunities are not great, and the inevitable result is that the men are going to start killing each other over trivia. That is an equation that I don't think any historian, any anthropologist, would think of as applicable to homo sapiens that we know. A group of people who are poor all put together in one place, without a whole lot of opportunity, will start killing one another. No. If you actually think about it, it would be considered racist if a white person said that 75 years ago, but today we're encouraged to think of that as somehow an enlightened or humane take on what goes on in black America. And as far as changing the subject, all you have to do is think about the mother who just lost her second son. Now go up to her with your pad and tell her that, Well, this is really sad, but we're really more interested in things that [affects deep serious voice] the state does. We're really more interested in things that people who are responsible for the public order do. Now, the fact that this was done by

somebody who's from three blocks over, well, we're sorry, that's regrettable, but we're not concerned with that. We're doing this now. It seems almost inhumane, and yet we're supposed to accept that as wisdom.

LOURY: OK, you just responded to one part of the rebuttal, the part that says, you know, we're talking about the police here and why are you changing the subject. But I guess you responded to both parts, because you also said you don't believe that it's necessarily the case that because people are poor and concentrated that they necessarily have to be violent in this way, and in a way it diminishes the humanity of people to say that they're just going to necessarily be violent, you know, just because of some environmental circumstance. Don't they have the volition and the sort of moral will to eschew violence, notwithstanding their deprivation? OK, so you answered both. A person might say, Look, the state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Agents of the state who abuse that awesome responsibility constitute a real threat to democratic values. There's a great deal more at stake here than the personal safety of an individual. This is about an abuse of power, and the lack of accountability for agents of the state who abuse power in this way creates a circumstance in which people are basically terrorized. So

that while they may fear victimization by their neighbor, and that fear might be quite real, that's one thing. But to fear victimization by the people whose salaries you pay with your tax money and who are supposedly there to serve and protect you, agents of the state, to fear victimization by them is quite another thing altogether. It's a different order of violation, and it's entirely appropriate to prioritize one's response to these things in the way in which the Black Lives Matter have done.

MCWHORTER: I reject that. I think -- and especially because I know that you don't agree with it, I think that that argument is hopeless. That is a wordy, beautifully put argument designed simply to give people an excuse to focus on racism as the problem, as opposed to the more complex issue of looking at a Rube Goldberg sequence of socio-historical events that have led us to an unfortunate situation, where racism from whites may not always be the problem that we need to face. And it's not that the black men shooting each other are evil. I understand their humanity too. But the idea that democracy is threatened by the white cop, whereas if the kid from three blocks over does it, well, he's just an ordinary person. No. And I am quite confident that A. Philip Randolph, that Martin Luther King would not agree with that fancy way of putting it.

The situation that we're in now is as if -- think about Selma, and now we can imagine it in color, because we've seen the movie. Think about you're watching people coming over that bridge with the terrible things that happened. And meanwhile, over on the other side of the bridge, black teenagers were killing each other by the dozens every summer. And the idea was no, we're not really going to think about that because, well, they kind of can't help it, and that's not important because they're not keepers of public order. Imagine what Selma would've looked like if that was what the situation was. That's where we are now, and no amount of fancy latinated words can disguise that simple fact from me or most of America watching.

LOURY: Well, you know, I'm reminded as you talk -- you're right, I don't necessarily agree with what I was saying earlier, but I do think it's my responsibility to try to put up the best arguments I can on both sides. So Charles Blow was at Brown University, where I teach, recently, giving a lecture that was entitled "Black Lives Matter: A New Civil Rights Movement." And I've been thinking about that. Is that really what we're dealing with? Reminded also, and Blow has addressed himself to this in one of his columns, about the pressure that the Black Lives Matter activists have been putting on progressive political

figures like Martin O'Malley, Bernard Sanders, Hillary Clinton -- these are Democrats running for president -- who've been confronted by Black Lives Matter activists more or less aggressively and called to account. Hillary Clinton criticized for not renouncing her husband's racist mass incarceration promoting policies from the 1990s. Bernard Sanders encouraged, indeed compelled by activists to elaborate an explicit racial justice agenda as part of his broader political platform, and so forth. So Blow writes in his column, you know, when people complain and say that maybe the activists should direct their ire toward a Donald Trump and not toward a Hillary Clinton, he says, and this is a quote, "There can be no sacred cows so long as black people are still being treated as sacrificial lambs." And I thought about that, and I said, My god, this is hyperbolic in the extreme. I mean, sacrificial lambs? Really? Black people? Placed up on a specific altar, slaughtered in the interests of some kind of mythic Americana? You know, come on, this is hyperbolic in the extreme. So I'm not sure what all that adds up to, but I think that. Another thing I think is that the racialization of this discourse -- I can't give you the exact numbers off the top of my head, but they wouldn't be hard to find -- the police kill a certain number of people

in every year, roughly half of them are black, OK? So blacks are roughly one-tenth or so of the population and roughly half of the people who are shot dead by police in a given year. So the rate at which we are shot by police is disproportionately higher, higher than our representation in the population.

MCWHORTER: And it is, right.

LOURY: On the other hand, the rest of the people who are shot by police are not black. That turns out to be just as many or more people. And I'm not sure, to be honest with you, at the end of the day what race has to do with this. Or I'm not sure that it is wise and prudent and helpful and effective to make race the centerpiece of a complaint of this kind, of a movement to try to bring police to accountability of this kind. I mean, the salience of it is of course influenced by race. The newsworthiness, the kind of public attention that it might get when it is framed in a certain way, is influenced by race. But that's also true if you were to influence common-day criminal -- if you were to characterize common-day criminal offending in racial terms. If every time a black assailant burgled or robbed or raped or assaulted a white victim, it were to be portrayed in the press as yet again another black criminal, another black criminal assaults a white, another innocent

white lady is raped in her apartment, another poor white person coming home from their job is robbed around the corner, etc., etc., if every act of bullying in a high school, in a gymnasium, in a locker room, on a playground, in which a bunch of black kids push around a working-class white kid going to an integrated public school, takes his lunch money or whatever, were to be characterized in terms of black adolescents accost another white, etc., etc., that would also heighten the public awareness of these matters and would make it more salient and more newsworthy. But it would also be wrong. It would be profoundly wrong. I mean, we can all see that it would be fomenting racism, that it would be characterizing behaviors in racial terms that perhaps are not appropriately characterized in that way. Why is it that the race of a police officer and the race of a young man who engages in an exchange of gunfire with the police officer and ends up getting the short end of it is relevant here? This master narrative of white supremacy is intellectually shallow, and it's not true to the actual texture of what's happening in our society. So one of my objections here is just a first-order stop, hold on, let's take a deep breath before we run willy-nilly down this alleyway of racial characterization and racialization of what are really complex social problems. So anyway,

that's hyperbolic, exaggerated, cherry-picking a few cases and presenting them as if it were characteristic of what Charles Blow or Glenn Loury or John McWhorter confront day-to-day when we go outside of our apartments and walk onto the streets of New York or Boston or Los Angeles.

Hyperbolic. And also a kind of un-thought-through racialization of these matters of public safety where black people could well come out at the end of the day on the short end of the stick for having the public's attention fixated upon the color of people who happen to be committing socially disruptive acts.

MCWHORTER: Well, you know, Glenn, when there's a part of you that feels like, because you're black, you're not quite good enough, if you have internalized at all the sense that to be black is to be less, and as we're always told, it's very hard not to, then all of this, this imbalance, this framing of the narrative, as you put it, is predictable because it can make you feel worthy to be the noble victim. And I always find myself thinking of how all of us felt if we ever had a tattletale phase, and even if we tattletaled in class a little bit. You almost choke up in your throat. You feel like you're doing the right thing. That person is doing the wrong thing and I am on the side of the angels. And especially if the person was doing it to you or maybe

to your friend. And that's a very human feeling, and in macrocosm, that's what a lot of this is. And so as a black person, you can feel that if you're fighting racism, then you're doing the right thing, you're continuing the struggle, you're highlighting victimhood, maybe not your own but possibly your own by extension, and in that you feel like you matter, it's something to build an identity around if circumstances have deprived you from being quite sure that you can do it in any other way. And I think that's why people feel it as so natural. All the business about the state, etc., is something constructed later. Why people are thinking of Walter Slager and what he did to -- Michael Slager, the white cop, and what he did to Walter Scott, why Michael Slager is somehow more important than some guy who could have killed Walter Scott over nothing 20 years ago, is because [audio glitch]

LOURY: -- South Carolina, where the black victim was fleeing on foot and was [audio glitch] didn't need to do that.

MCWHORTER: And who then tried to lie about it, and technology kept him from being able to do it. That was a horrific event --

LOURY: Well, he's been charged criminally, has he not? The police [audio glitch]

MCWHORTER: That's important, and he may not have been even,

say, three years before. And it wasn't isolated. These events do need to be chronicled. There is, I really do believe (inaudible), but -- I'm almost finished.

LOURY: Yeah, go ahead.

MCWHORTER: The point is, Michael Slager becomes more important than the black thug, if we will, because you get a sense of self-justification from battling racism. And I think that the only way we're going to get past that need that so many people have is for people to really feel good about being black, and I hate -- I'm almost done -- I hate to say this, but the business with the cops is an enabler of that. I think black America could get beyond that more easily if there wasn't something so obviously unjust that you can always point to. We can't start dealing with what are now the real problems until we have that distraction out of the way. That's my feeling about it.

LOURY: [audio glitch] -- saying right now, because it might be completely outrageous, John. You're saying -- let me see if this is what you're saying. Here's what I'm getting ready to say. That there are failures besetting African American society at every turn. The family is [audio glitch] deep security problem afflicting our people, which is managed, in part, by pointing a finger at racism. Any excuse that comes along that allows us to change the

subject from what we haven't done to what they are doing or haven't done right is seized upon. And for that reason [audio glitch] movement to which we've been calling attention is to be expected. Did you just say that?

MCWHORTER: I said precisely that, but not as well as you did.

LOURY: [Laughs] OK, I'll take that compliment, thank you very much. I'm glad to have some clarification on it. Because that's extremely provocative. I mean, I think I agree with it, maybe which is why I could put it, as you say, so well, in that here we are in the second decade of the 21st century, a half century after the height of the civil rights movement, the enactment of the civil rights laws, and so forth, and we're still looking at astronomical poverty rates [audio glitch] rates of incarceration, and so forth and so on. We're still grappling with problems of disproportionate rates [audio glitch] many, many examples could be given. And people don't quite know what to do or what to say about it. The intellectual capacity to fathom, account for, and remedy this ongoing festering social disruption that has this racial aspect is de minimus. I mean, all the arguments [audio glitch] Republicans, we can say it's because we don't have enough health care, or whatever, but something tells people [audio glitch] that it's got to be deeper than that, and that you know what,

we've got, we African Americans, some responsibility for the condition in which we find ourselves, and that's a terrible reality to confront. [audio glitch] a third or so of the African American society, all of these problems being manifest, and people's toolkit of remedies is exhausted, so they're flailing, they're flailing around. And they're being abetted in that flailing by a patronizing liberal establishment that, rather than subjecting what people are having to say to rigorous criticism and rebuttal where necessary, are basically capitulating, they're basically more interested in signaling that they're on the right side of history than they are in grappling with difficult and ambiguous matters. [audio glitch] thinks about these arguments.

MCWHORTER: I want to add that this is the hard part because it just doesn't lend itself to bumper stickers. I don't know if my take on this could ever have any influence, because it's not the way people are inclined to think about history, but you almost think, well, if black people have all these problems, is it because of some deficiency? And I say absolutely not. But for most people, the alternative has to be, say, Ta-Nehisi Coates, who thinks that black people's problems are essentially all due to what happened in the past: the redlining, the incarceration --

LOURY: Because of what? I'm sorry, I didn't understand what you said.

MCWHORTER: -- slavery, Jim Crow, all of that is why. Now, there's an in-between version, and I really think, and this what I wrote in *Winning the Race*, a book that was too long, but I really still do believe what I wrote 10 years later, black America was done in by two things that happened in the 1960s. One of them was the whole black power ideology, where we switched from what can we do for ourselves in an imperfect world to calling for the world to be significantly more perfect. That was a real problem, because it changed what was thought of as activism from roughly Roger Wilkins to Stokely Carmichael, and we live with the intellectual and cultural legacy of that today. And second, people think of this as just some obscure policy position or that I must be in love with Charles Murray or something, but it was welfare. It was the way welfare was changed in that era into a program that basically taught poor black people not to work. And this was something that was foisted on black America by white leftists. It wasn't somebody's fault. I said this at Brown during the whole discussion of reparations, as a matter of fact; you talk about Brown. And I believe that that's true, I believe that all the evidence supports that

that changed black America. None of that is black people's fault; we live with the legacy of it now. But the thing is, what undoes that is not white people becoming less racist. The situation now, decades later, is one that we have to play the major part in getting ourselves out of, and it's very hard to make people understand that. That's another problem here, that history is complicated; it's not Ta-Nehisi Coates's vision, nor is it that black people are just kind of dumb. But you have to be able to see that it's a Rube Goldberg flowchart series of events that doesn't lend itself to easy slogans and intonational tricks and things like that. That's what frustrates me.

LOURY: Let's try to go over this one step at a time. So Coates, Ta-Nehisi Coates [audio glitch] that are so miserable [audio glitch] history, and you say that's overly simplistic and it doesn't identify what were the actual historical culprits implicated here, one of which you say was welfare.

MCWHORTER: Welfare revision, yes.

LOURY: Which sapped the community, at least some elements of it, of the habits and will, you know, a kind of aggressive expansion of welfare and encouragement of people to avail themselves of it, a resistance to efforts to trim it back, to make it conditional -- which resistance was, of course

[audio glitch] but the damage had already been done, you said. And I think if Coates were here -- by the way, audience, I've invited him many times; I'm still waiting. Ta-Nehisi, can you [audio glitch]

MCWHORTER: Well, remember, he was so busy packing to go to France that he couldn't do a Bloggingheads.

LOURY: [audio glitch] [Laughs] Which is an interesting piece that deserves to be discussed. It's not our topic of discussion here today --

MCWHORTER: Seventeen thousand, uh-huh.

LOURY: -- maybe we'll circle back to it at some point. But I'm just saying, if he were here, I think what he might say is [audio glitch] you know, one decade or one [audio glitch] or political exclusion or the beating down of people who try to own some land [audio glitch] subordination for a century after the emancipation in a place where two-thirds of black people were living. [audio glitch] depriving families of property that would've been passed on one generation to the next. I'm talking about the fact that the culture that you might decry when it [audio glitch] was wrought out of decades and generations of racism, discrimination, and exclusion. The families that moved out of the South and came up to the industrial jobs in places like [audio glitch] didn't find a place to

live, and they wouldn't get the good job at the factories. And two or three generations later, you're seeing street gangs and [audio glitch] so don't [audio glitch] it's 20 or 50 different things at all levels of government, perpetrated by private as well as public actors. Generation after generation after generation, a kind of plundering and exploitation and suppression of the African American population, which has now finally borne the fruit that we see.

MCWHORTER: No. I don't think --

LOURY: [Laughs] No?

MCWHORTER: No.

LOURY: Why not?

MCWHORTER: Not that I reject it; I think that none of that follows through. Those are not a logical set of conclusions. The problem with that way of looking at things, and once again, I know I'm not really talking to you, is that it sounds like black people are this one person who lived for 400 years and got fed up, when really we're talking about people living limited human lifespans dealing with certain kinds of conditions. And this idea that what happened starting in the late '60s and early '70s is a matter of this one protean human being who's just gotten fed up after going through the great migration and

then being put in a housing project, etc., has nothing to do with the way real human beings -- we black people have to see ourselves as real human beings -- live lives on this planet. And the kind of rhetoric that you're talking about simply ignores there's a lack of interest in black American history from roughly 1880 until about 1960, maybe because it isn't as graphically exciting as slavery, I'm not sure. But a person living under conditions that we would consider absolutely grievous in 1935 did not live in the kind of community that that person's grandson lived in in 1975 or 1985, and these were people where, if they did the wrong sort of thing, they could find themselves hanging from trees, you often couldn't get into a union, and everybody likes to talk about how things really weren't that much better in the North than they were in the South. And yet, you had shabby communities. There was always such thing as a criminal, there was always such thing as illegitimacy. But it was nothing like it became later, which means not there's something wrong with black people in 1985; that would be just as silly as thinking there's something wrong with black people in general. But something happened in the 1960s, and attention must be paid if we're really going to understand ourselves and where we are. That is my answer to that line of reasoning. I think it doesn't

follow through.

LOURY: You know, I'm basically in agreement with you, John. I may think that you, John McWhorter, to some degree, overemphasize the influence of welfare as such on all these matters. Actually, I do think that, and I've said that to you in the past. But certainly the direction of the effect you've got is right. It was not helpful in the ways in which you describe, whether or not it is as important a factor as you say a person could argue about. But I get that. I think there's a couple of other things here that I would like to emphasize. One of them is class differences within the African American community. The serious problems that we're talking about are largely to be found in the lower, working-class, and impoverished and disconnected elements of the community. Certainly the variation in, for example, the intensity of incarceration across different educational classes for young African American men is quite great. Blacks are more likely to be incarcerated at any education level, but blacks who finish high school and get some college are much, much, much less likely to be incarcerated than blacks who drop out of high school. And these communities that we're talking about, in a St. Louis or a Chicago or a Detroit, or certain parts of New York City and other places which are largely or

exclusively black and which are poor and which have high crime rates and so on, they are, to some degree, a consequence of what had been in the past more diverse, socioeconomically diverse communities becoming less so because the people who had options moved out. The people who were working, attached to the labor force, the people who had values that were what Elijah Anderson, the sociologist, calls decent in the sense of affirming work and family and law-abidingness and so on, they had options and they moved out. So the enclaves remained that were created by those who remained behind were more homogenous and more disadvantaged. But I also want to call attention to class differences in the discourse, in the way in which movements get going. Because to a great extent, the energy here in the Black Lives Matter sphere is coming from relatively advantaged African Americans who -- for example, take a college campus, take Brown University, which I know a little something about. I love my students, they're magnificent, they're brilliant and they're going to change the world, there's not any doubt about it. I feel proud to be teaching them. But sometimes when I observe my African American students, I see struggles that they're going through to work out their identity. You know, they went to a suburban high school that was 92 percent white, their

parents are making \$300,000 a year, which is not a lot of money for a Brown parent [Laughs] -- their parents are making big money, and they find themselves thrown into this competitive milieu and they're sort of trying to sort themselves out and trying to find themselves, OK. And they know they're black, but they may not know exactly how and to what extent and for what purpose and what they're going to make of it and so forth. And I don't mean to make light of it, and I'm certainly not setting them up as some kind of straw people here to be knocked down. I'm just saying they're going through some stuff. And so when a movement comes along, and when this kind of mobilization, and when our bodies and, you know, we're fighting for whatever, there's something in that young adult, adolescent young adult psyche searching for -- that's going on. Now, that's a class-specific phenomenon, OK? Because a kid who's not at a Brown University campus, a kid who dropped out of high school, a kid who's got a job at the hardware store somewhere sweeping up in the back or whatever, a kid who's running with these gang-bangers, or trying to not run with them, one thing's for sure: he's not worried about whether or not he's black. You're not worried about how to behave in such a way as to express the authenticity of his blackness.

MCWHORTER: No, he knows he's authentic.

LOURY: So the character of the movement is going to reflect, to some degree, the psychological and existential needs of the people who are going to be populating that movement, and those are largely going to be people drawn selectively from the better-educated and more economically secure elements of the African American community. I don't say that to discredit them in any way. I simply say that I think class issues are implicated here, in addition to race issues, and that's really where I want to go with this. It's not just about blackness and whiteness, it's really a complicated phenomenon that's unfolding around us.

MCWHORTER: You know, Glenn, I would say, if we're talking about how we might think one another exaggerate a little bit, I've never been in favor of that argument about the middle-class exodus.

LOURY: Oh, you don't like that argument?

MCWHORTER: And I think -- no, and I think part of it is visceral, in that when Elijah Anderson, for example, writes about the middle-class black exodus, or another person who does it is the, I think, Georgetown law professor Sheryll Cashin, who writes quite articulately in itself about that. Frankly, they are assailing my parents. I mean, I was born in what was becoming a shabby, not terrible, but a shabby

black neighborhood, quite explicitly because it was, as my mother, who was a social worker, put it, it was becoming a ghetto. They moved us to Mount Airy, which is famous in Philadelphia as a very leafy integrated neighborhood, and we had a nice little duplex house. I don't like being told or reading somewhere that my parents were escaping their fellow poor black people, because that's a complete distortion of what made them do what they did. But more to the point, where is it written -- and this is the kind of thinking I've learned from you -- where is it written that when poor people live together, all of a sudden the sorts of things are going to happen that started happening in black communities? So you don't live next door to a black lawyer, so the schoolteacher doesn't live in the same neighborhood as you do, and suddenly people start getting pregnant earlier, they start killing each other, they have different attitudes towards work. Whereas actually there are studies that show that that doesn't happen, say, in a Latino community. I think that that's an oversimplified view where people -- talk about the authenticity. There's this sense, and you can see this happen in a room where that middle-class exodus argument is brought up, there's a sense that the people like my parents weren't authentically black, that the real black people would've stayed in that

neighborhood with their poor brethren and sistren instead of holding their noses and going off and living in the suburbs. And that's just not fair. And you know why it's not fair? Because both of my parents, talk about who knew they were black, neither of my parents had any problems with black people; frankly, my mother didn't like white people very much, she just didn't want to live in the fucking ghetto. And yet there is this argument that because the judge moved out, that everybody just went to shit, and I've never really seen a compelling argument. Just because William Julius Wilson writes well and has a kind of a magisterial presence doesn't mean he's right.

LOURY: No, but John -- OK, I take your point about the motives, attributing motives to the movers -- they don't like to be with their own people, whatever -- dead wrong and morally problematic. I mean, why would I go ad hominem on people that are just trying to get to a better life? I don't know, their motives are probably complicated. They may have been tortured and pained in doing so. They may go back every Sunday, or more than every Sunday. So I get that, and I would never want to say of people who moved out that they should somehow have sacrificed their kids' opportunities by staying in a, quote, bad community because they're black. On the other hand, I think the statistics

undeniably -- this is where William Julius Wilson is coming from -- indicate that they moved, that, you know, y'all moved. OK, so opportunities became available and people moved, and that had consequences, and without attributing motives to the movers, I could simply observe that it had consequences. Now, as to the consequences, you say, and I agree with you -- you say you learned it from me, well, good, I'm glad somebody was listening -- just because you're poor doesn't mean that the trash has to pile up in front of your door. It does not.

MCWHORTER: Exactly.

LOURY: You can pick up the trash and put it in the can, OK? That's on you. When I say of people that their poverty exempts them from living decently, then I basically communicate a lack of respect for their humanity. You know, I turned them into machines, into dumb animals who have no choice of free will about how they live.

MCWHORTER: I agree. Exactly, it's an insult.

LOURY: It's even more insidious than that, because not only might the editorial writer who says, Well, the poor will always be with us and they'll always be poor it's our job to do something about it or whatever, and exempts poor people from the standards that we would apply to everybody else, not only is he patronizing, but this cast of mind

inhibits the formation within our communities of leadership and the development of a kind of culture of responsibility where you have informal social pressures on people to behave in a way that's consistent with the ideals and values that we affirm. In other words, it gives the community an excuse not to tend to its own knitting. It disarms the storefront pastor who's got a congregation of a couple of hundred people and trying to teach the little girls not to get pregnant too soon, they're trying to teach the little boys not to become susceptible to the lure of the gang and of the drug sales and the street corner and whatnot. It disarms that cultural critic from within the African American community who's not interested in making excuses but wants to improve the lives of her or his people. It takes away the credibility of such an argument by saying, well, of course there are always going to be prostitutes on the corner and there are always going to be drug-selling gangs, because after all, what can we do? So I think it's a profoundly morally and intellectually bankrupt point of view. I'm not blaming the victim when I treat the victim like I would treat anybody else whom I respected and cared about by asking of the victim, Where is your child? It's 11:00 at night and that child is 13 years old. You don't know where that child is? What kind of

parent are you? That's not blaming the victim.

MCWHORTER: No, it's not.

LOURY: I'm not blaming the victim if I say of the young man who is perfectly capable of having sex but doesn't know diddly about what it means to be a father, anybody can make a baby, it takes a man to actually be responsible for one. That's not blaming the victim, that's holding up a bar to which people ought to be encouraged to aspire. So this contempt for respectability, that's where all this -- and I'll stop -- is coming with me in the Black Lives movement. I sense it. I don't want to paint with too broad a brush; I'm sure it's complicated and people have varied perceptions about this. But what I sense is a kind of contempt for respectability, both that I shouldn't try to comport myself in a way that would encourage white people to look more kindly upon me, and that those among us who behave in ways that are absolutely contemptible shouldn't be called on it, by us, not by the editorial writer at the *Wall Street Journal*, by us.

MCWHORTER: And this is the problem. What you just said, I think would make fundamental sense to just about any human being listening of no matter what political stripe. Nevertheless, at this point, and I don't think it's painting with a broad brush at all to say that what you

might call the mainstream black punditocracy considers what you just said with a sneer to be black-bashing, talking down to black people, when the president himself, who was black last time I checked, says it takes a man to make a child, to a black audience, and with a smile on his face, he gets roasted by a certain cast of usual suspects as talking down to black people. And it's not just the more fiery-voiced among those suspects. Even moderate-toned people like Jamelle Bouie at Slate are revolted by that kind of talk. And quite simply, that position is treated as mainstream by that long slate of writers, but actually it's radical. It is radical to propose that there is a group of human beings in human history who are exempt from any kind of serious responsibility for themselves beyond lip service because historical conditions have become unkind to them. That is a radical proposition. Now, it might be correct. However, when you're talking about a position that's that counterintuitive, that condescending, potentially, and that radical, it's got to defend itself. You've got to have a real case. And yet the people I'm talking about aren't even aware that a case needs to be made. And that's a major sickness in how we're taught to pretend to talk about race. Would you agree?

LOURY: Yeah, I would agree, John. And I think it's really a

complex and in some ways tragic psychological trap that we've gotten ourselves into. That trap being an incapacity to engage in self-criticism for fear of how it diminishes our standing in the eyes of our fellows, whom we are unwilling to even acknowledge we care about, but in fact that's largely what it's about. I mean, largely what the condemnation of Obama for giving a pull-up-your-bootstraps speech to black people is about is, it would have been OK if he had just said that to black people, but the white folks are listening. I mean, when he said it during the campaign of 2008, he gave a Father's Day speech at a black church where, you know, he basically told black men to pull up their socks. I could understand why a Jesse Jackson -- Jesse Jackson famously was caught off-mike saying something like, I'll cut his nuts off, you know, saying this of Obama, and therefore ending any possibility that Jesse Jackson would have any influence in what was going to be the Obama administration. [Laughs]

MCWHORTER: That was the end of his reign, right there.

LOURY: But I can understand Jackson's reaction, because the sense was that Obama was saying over the heads of black people who happened to be in that congregation, but that as running for president he was doing a kind of Sister Souljah thing of a Bill Clinton style in trying to communicate with

the rest of the electorate that he was, you know, not like your typical black politician. And black people resented that, and I could understand that. But here we are now in 2015, Obama will have been a two-term ex-president in another year and such, and for him to make that speech now, there's no way that you could attribute to him the motive of trying to talk to white people in the interests of his political career. And to the extent that it's true, what he's saying, which it is, self-evidently so, he ought to be listened to in that respect.

MCWHORTER: Yeah, and I think we need to clarify before we end, if we're thinking about comments. I'm not saying if you say to any of the usual suspects I'm talking about, Do you think black people are blameless, none of them would agree. However, human psychology is delicate, and the point is that even though they wouldn't agree with that statement, and even though people of that sort will joshingly talk about what black folks need to do, or they'll talk about it parenthetically, as far as they're concerned, what we really need to be talking about is the racist part. And if somebody makes a speech where they only talk about the racist part, none of those people write a column saying that something ought to have been said about black responsibility. So it really is what they

consider to be the only thing seriously worth talking about, even if they would not say, We consider black people not responsible for their actions. I just want to make that clear, because one does sometimes speak with a broad brush, especially when we're just talking rather than writing. But I think that's the case. Glenn, I have to run and teach people about phonemes, and so can we continue this next week?

LOURY: We can continue it next week, John. Always happy to talk with you. Next week, fine, we got a date, we'll set up the details later. Thanks for your time, great conversation, and we'll be in touch.

MCWHORTER: Wonderful. We will. Thank you. Talk to you soon, Glenn.

END OF AUDIO