

Almost Impossible To Discuss Poverty and Race In America

WASHINGTON – Old and encrusted socio-economic problems related to race issues have become intractable in America. In large part this is because they cannot be discussed in an objective way.

No honest conversation about race and poverty

This is what columnist Juan Williams (he is black) stated in a WSJ op-ed piece, (*Getting Past Name-Calling to Talk About Poverty*, April 30, 2014). He is right. Essentially, America is still prisoner of ideological oversimplifications –on the left and on the right– that make a productive conversation on the roots of black poverty and how to overcome it essentially impossible.

Everybody has a chance

Conservatives are inclined to think that in (color blind, totally fair) America the only obstacle between any individual, no matter their race, gender or background, and material success is lack of a “hard work ethic” and perseverance. Here is the simple recipe: if you study hard, then work hard and do your best, you are bound to get results.

After all, this is America, universally known as “*The Land of Opportunity*”. Here everybody gets a fair chance, not matter what. From this vantage point, the inability to “make it” in America is a sign of a weak character, a personal failure that has nothing to do with the broader social context.

The game is fixed

Liberals would tell you instead that there is no real opportunity for black people who have been discriminated

against for centuries. While open discrimination is illegal, the game is still fixed against them. Most blacks do not have a fair shot at the "American Dream", because they have no real access.

The system does not give them a chance.

Therefore, the only way out of this is to create, via enlightened social policies, new paths for the perennially underprivileged. And, if some programs do not work as they should, it is simply because they are underfunded. Add money, and you'll get better results.

Truth in the middle

Of course, the truth is in the middle. While racial discrimination is illegal, racism does exist. There is still a negative bias against black people. And this is obviously unfair.

However, it is also true that many black communities have yet to embrace a culture of commitment and hard work. There is a lot of dysfunction, ranging from teen pregnancy to absent fathers and no interest in education that conspire to create new generations of black young people adrift and poor. They drop out of school, or do poorly in school. Many get involved in gangs or petty crime. And it is obvious that there are not many doors open for young people who have a criminal record but no education. The notion that the only way to help them is through more social programs is wishful thinking.

Change the culture

Realistically, not much will change unless the culture and psychology are changed. People need to feel motivated in order to engage. If the prevailing culture is that it is no use to get an education and find a job, while there are more easy money prospects through crime, then the vicious cycle of *poverty-ignorance-crime-jail-poverty* will continue.

Finding new common ground?

Given all this, it should be noted, as Williams writes in his piece, that some, like Representative Paul Ryan, Chairman of the House Budget Committee, are trying to break these stereotypes by engaging black leaders in an attempt to find a new common ground that hopefully will lead to more productive policies.

The facts are clear. However noble the intentions, a variety of federal and state anti-poverty social programs have not worked well, or have not worked at all. Notwithstanding billions and billions of dollars spent over decades, the black-white divide is still there and all sorts of statistics confirm this grim reality.

Clearly all this is very complicated. How do you fix education, families and bad neighborhoods? How much is society supposed to do? And how much is really the responsibility of the people living in these communities? Who knows really.

But, at the very least, we should welcome any honest attempt to have an honest conversation about all this. However, it appears that this may not happen.

The liberal establishment does not want a new conversation

The liberal establishment does not like any dialogue outside the orthodox official doctrine whereby black poverty is the direct result of discrimination and racism. From this perspective, any talk about "personal responsibility", "work ethic" and "effort" as integral components of the problem is immediately labeled as disguised or open racism, yet another example of "blaming the victim".

Well, if this is the attitude, then Paul Ryan will not accomplish much. No black leader will engage in any dialogue with a white racist, let alone take any advice from him.

On Signal Hill, In Newfoundland, Marconi's Legacy

St. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND, (a few years ago) – The young professor took me for a visit in the afternoon. It was a windy November day. Quite cold for me, even though not very cold for that part of Eastern Canada at that time of the year.

I remember a rather arid, windswept landscape, in the proximity of the Atlantic Ocean, with big waves. The professor took me to Signal Hill, the highest point on the island, where there is a construction named Cabot Tower, a large building that looked a bit like a lighthouse.

As we went inside, he explained to me that that was the place where the very first transatlantic radio transmission had taken place many years ago, in 1901. And it was Guglielmo Marconi who did it. A little permanent exhibition explains the event.

Of course, as I was born in Italy, I knew that Marconi had invented radio transmission. But I did not know about that particular experiment –a success. The letter “S” in the Morse alphabet was transmitted from a site in Cornwall, Marconi's headquarters in the UK, to Newfoundland.

And there I was, right in the place where it all had happened. I was moved. I felt that I was somehow privileged to be right there. Marconi, a familiar name. Newfoundland, an unfamiliar place, where I had been sent by the government of the USA, my adoptive country. As an American, I was in Canada, on a lecture tour of a few universities and international affairs

research centers. And, right there, I was reconnected to something I had learnt as a child, in school, in Italy.

China's Government Manipulating Official Statistics?

WASHINGTON – A few days ago a major US newspaper had yet another story on China's economic slowdown. Yes, China is still growing at a 7.4% pace. This is much less than before; but still very impressive if compared with more mature economies that cannot even get to 2%. However, many economists are worried because longer term projections would indicate even slower growth in China for the rest of 2014 and 2015.

The slow down

So far, nothing remarkable. The Chinese government talks openly about a moderate slow down. The International Monetary Fund is also projecting somewhat slower growth. We know all this, even though experts may differ on the long-term implications of this slow down.

But what if the slow down were in fact much more significant than we are told? Well, this would open up a different debate on China's future as a world economic giant. Hence the relevance of an additional part of the same news item. Indeed, the article mentioned above also added that, according to different projections made by serious private sectors economic forecasters, China real economic growth is in fact much smaller.

No, it is not around 7.5% . It is in fact only 6%, or may be even less.

Cooking the books?

Got that? The Chinese government says 7.5%. But the real figures say 6%. This is no rounding error. And the implications are clear. If GDP growth is only 6%, this would indicate a far more significant, almost dramatic, slow down. The article did not comment on this discrepancy.

So, which is which? We do not know. But, assuming for a moment that the private sector company is correct, there is only one conclusion that can be drawn here: ***“the Chinese government routinely cooks the books, because it is scared of the negative political repercussions on the leadership of disappointing economic data “***. In other words, official economic statistics are (routinely?) embellished in order to make the country –and therefore its leadership– look far better than what it actually is.

Everybody does it?

Many can react to this with a yawn:

“So what? What else is new here? Every government puts a spin on numbers in order to make itself look good. China is no different”.

I am afraid it is not so. It is certainly true that all governments are guilty of spin. Everybody tries to put whatever numbers there are in the best light. And certainly we know that most official projections on future growth, future employment, future disposable income, and what not tend to be inflated, as they are invariably based on best case scenarios that very often do not materialize.

Spin and false numbers are two different things

But there is a huge difference between interpreting official

numbers in a politically convenient way, while making overly optimistic predictions, and cooking the numbers on past performance.

We can expect the US government to come up with unrealistic predictions on future economic growth because this puts the incumbent administration in a better light. This happens all the time.

We trust official numbers

But we do not expect the US government to intentionally produce false official data on growth that has actually occurred. And here we are not talking about rounding errors or small discrepancies due to the use of different methodologies. Here we are talking about adding 1.5% to GDP growth figures.

Is China a “normal” country?

Well, I have no way of evaluating whether the economic growth numbers for China produced by private forecasters are the real ones, or not.

However, if they are right and therefore we have to conclude that the Beijing government willfully manipulates the GDP growth numbers it releases to the public, then we are still a long way away from the day in which China, notwithstanding all its progress, can be considered a normal country.

Beyond Symbolic Gestures, The West Will Not Act To Help

Ukraine Regain Control Over Its Eastern Provinces

WASHINGTON – By now the provisional government in Kiev should have understood that, beyond symbolic gestures, the West will do nothing to stop Russia's mischief in Eastern Ukraine. It is obvious that the West has no stomach to engage in a serious, protracted confrontation with Putin over his meddling in Eastern Ukraine. Yes, there will be a few more "targeted sanctions", mostly against individuals close to Putin, may be something else; but that's about that.

No "Western Front"

Indeed, contrary to what has been advertised, there is no "United Western Front" on this crisis. President Obama may be a bit more forceful, but Europe is a sorry-looking mix of timidity and cynical self-interest. Forget about "forcing" Russia to do anything.

Sure enough, in the long, assuming Western resolve to tighten the screws, Russia would pay a huge economic price. Its economy is weak and it depends almost entirely on the revenue provided by the oil and gas it exports.

But there is no way that European countries worried about serious economic and social problems at home, (think France, Italy and Spain) , are willing to engage in a protracted, ugly confrontation with Moscow.

Russia has the upper hand

Given all this, it is clear that the Russian-inspired troubles in Eastern Ukraine will not go away. Russia has decided that, if it cannot "retake" Ukraine, it will make sure that the former Soviet Republic will not prosper as a western-leaning nation.

And, given the ethnic complexity in the region, fanning the flames of unrest is extremely easy for Russia. Pay people to demonstrate. Send in agents and disguised special operations forces. They easily blend in with the local ethnic Russians. Nobody can tell the difference.

In a different world, a diplomatic solution

Of course, in a better, more civilized world, there could be a way out of this mess. Ukraine would implement in good faith promised constitutional changes aimed at granting greater autonomy to the East, all under international supervision.

In return for these real guarantees to ethnic Russians, Moscow would stop fueling unrest. With ethnic tensions out of the way, a future, federal Ukraine would develop new economic ties with the West, while continuing its historic connections with Russia.

Russia is not acting in good faith

This would be nice. But this would be premised on the assumption that Russia acted in good faith, out of a genuine concern for the fate of its brethren in Eastern Ukraine. But this is not the case. The Russians simply want to destabilize Ukraine. They do not like the idea of a future, prosperous and pro-Western Ukraine right at their door step.

Kiev is alone in this

By now the provisional government in Kiev should have digested the meaning of developments so far.

In a nutshell: they are on their own. The West will not force Russia to stop its mischief in Eastern Ukraine, let alone force Moscow to give back Crimea. Yes, the people in charge in Kiev are really on their own.

For this reason, the smart –if painful– thing to do is to let Eastern Ukraine go. By now it should be clear to the people

in Kiev that they will never win this ugly fight. With 50,000 Russian troops across the border, ready to pounce, and a large number of infiltrated Russians and Russian agents calling the shots, there is no way that a weak and poor Ukraine will ever be able to regain full control over the East. Impossible. Putin will see to that.

“Self-amputation”

Therefore, the only solution is this: get out of this mess by performing a drastic, but probably life-saving, “self-amputation”.

Grant immediate independence to the Eastern Ukrainian Provinces where there are large numbers of Russians. Let them go. This way Putin will get half a loaf, (a piece of the Ukraine he could not gobble in its entirety), but Western Ukraine will have a chance to pursue its own economic development without having to worry about constant Russian interferences. Given American and Western timidity, this is the best course of action for Kiev.

And to those who cling to the belief in a rules-based, UN centered, international political order in which disputes are solved diplomatically by well-meaning statesmen inspired by principles of fairness and justice: “Stop dreaming”.

Walking By Ford’s Theatre, Where Lincoln Was Shot

WASHINGTON – After my meeting I decided to walk to Chinatown, to an old emporium where I bought a flower pot. From there I walked up to the corner of 10th Street. And there I saw the

Ford's Theatre sign. This is a historic landmark. This is the place where President Abraham Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth, as he was watching a play, on April 14, 1865. I do not know why I felt compelled to turn left and walk towards the theatre's entrance.

As I got there, there was a guide talking to a group of teenagers: *"...The president's body guard left Lincoln alone in the theatre. He believed he was safe there, and he went drinking in a nearby tavern... Booth knew the play. So he waited until the plot would cause a lot of laughter and noise. At that point he walked into the president's theatre box and he shot Lincoln with a derringer pistol..."*

Yes, we know the rest of the story. As the guide kept talking about what happened after Booth shot Lincoln, I looked across the street at the Petersen House. This is where the dying President was taken. And this is where Lincoln died, only 5 days after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. As I watched the house, I remembered when I last visited it, a few years ago. And there all visitors can see the bed on which Lincoln died.

As the guide kept describing to his young audience Booth's escape from the theatre, I thought more about President Lincoln's tragic death, and I was overtaken by a wave of sadness.

**The Ukrainian Government
Cannot Win, All By Itself,**

Against Russia

WASHINGTON – Vladimir Putin is winning in his ruthless and perhaps crazy effort to regain control over at least a few pieces of the Old Soviet Empire. His excuse for land grabs (Crimea) and for his efforts to absorb in another fashion pieces of the old Soviet sphere of influence rests on (not totally preposterous) claims of historic ties between these lands and Russia, and on the fact that there are many ethnic Russians living there.

Ethnic Russians outside of Russia

Theoretically Moscow has legitimate concerns for the welfare of ethnic Russians who found themselves outside of the borders of the new Russian Federation, after the sudden and messy collapse of the Soviet Union, (December 26, 1991). Still, these concerns could have been addressed in a much more civilized manner by a different Russian leadership.

For instance, in the case of Crimea, the Kiev provisional government, (prior to the annexation), publicly stated that it was ready to grant Crimea even more autonomy, so that the ethnic Russians who constitute the majority of Crimea's population could have determined their own destiny without much interference from the Ukrainian central government.

No interest in solving the issue

But it is clear that Russia does not want to “resolve” the “ethnic Russians” issue. After the successful annexation of Crimea, Putin wants to exploit it as an almost perfect excuse for stirring more trouble in Eastern Ukraine.

And, I am afraid, unless Washington is willing to take chances by threatening really serious consequences unless Putin stops bullying the neighborhood (and I do not see that happening), there is no way to stop Russia.

Weak Russia wins

Compared to the combined strength of Europe and America, Russia looks like a midget. Russia has a GDP of about \$ 2 trillion. Europe and the US together get to about \$ 34 trillion. America still has the most formidable armed forces.

However, notwithstanding its small economy, Russia has the enormous advantage of an insurmountable tactical superiority "in theatre", (50,000 Russian troops now stationed close to the Ukrainian border), while Europe and the US have zero assets close to the theatre.

Worse yet, while Putin is determined, neither Europe nor America have any appetite for escalating this confrontation with Russia up to a level that might force Moscow to reconsider.

Russian endless appetite for conquest?

That said, the scary talk offered on US cable TV by conservative military experts is rather silly. The notion that Russia is following a strategy that bit by bit will lead to Russia's complete domination of Eurasia is preposterous. Ukraine is a unique case. There may be other targets of opportunity in Moldova. But this is it.

Stirring trouble in the Baltic Countries (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) is theoretically possible; but it carries more risks, because these otherwise weak and exposed countries are now members of NATO. While I am not so sure as to how NATO would react if some of its more vulnerable members came under threat, such a move on Russia's part would carry a much higher level of risk.

However, even if we assume that Putin wants to do his best to recreate a larger Russian sphere of influence that will extend beyond the borders of Russian federation, I doubt that his plans include the subjugation of Germany, or even the attempt

to force Poland back into its sphere.

Why should Washington care?

Given all this, why should Washington worry so much about Russia's "revisionist" attempts, as they are unlikely to upset the global balance of forces?

Here are two different reasons. The first one is that Washington cannot just ignore a land grab in Europe and Russia's open attempts at destabilizing Ukraine, a sovereign country. International law should be upheld. Russia's behavior is illegal.

The second one is about Ukraine itself. It is in the interest of the West and of the US that Ukraine will have a chance to align itself with free market oriented Western democracies. Therefore Washington should support the provisional government in Kiev.

However, since the Obama administration has ruled out the use of force in Ukraine, the Kiev government has to realize that it cannot pursue the really complicated task of economic reforms, while there is an ongoing insurrection in the East.

Independence for Eastern Ukraine

As it is clear that Washington will provide only economic support, the only way for Kiev to resolve this crisis is to grant independence to Eastern Ukraine. The sooner the better. Once the parts of the country with most ethnic Russians are gone, Putin has no issue. To the extent that the Kiev government resists the separatists, the pro-Russian insurgents, (funded and organized by Moscow), have an excuse to continue their violent demonstration. And at any point this may give Putin a pretext for intervening, in order to "protect" them.

As I stated above, a different West could send Putin an

ultimatum: *“Either you stop this nonsense, right now, or we shall make you pay a very high price”.*

Weak West

But I do not see this Western united front. In fact I see the opposite. America has no appetite for engaging in a new confrontation that might escalate. Europe still depends on Russian energy, while many European companies want to keep their business ties to Russia.

Case in point. Just as America dispatched a few hundred (yes not even a thousand), US paratroopers to Poland for exercises, as a public relations effort aimed at reassuring key NATO allies, Ben van Beurden, the CEO of Shell, went to Moscow for a chat with Putin. The implicit message is clear: *“We find this crisis regrettable; but we want to continue business as usual”.*

For all of the above, the Kiev provisional government should reassess its options and conclude that the West does not have the will to stop Russia’s mischief in Eastern Ukraine. Therefore, if Western Ukraine wants to have a real shot at joining Europe, it should allow Eastern Ukraine to secede. This is painful, of course. But the alternative is a permanent crisis that the Russians have no interest in resolving.

In Newfoundland, Where Churchill And FDR Met During

WWII

NEWFOUNDLAND, Canada, (a few years ago)- Looking outside, at the Ocean on that windy day, I thought again about my “mission” in Eastern Canada. I had been sent as a “US Speaker”, by USIA, the agency that was in charge of “public diplomacy” in those days. I was there to explain to my Canadian audiences, (mostly university students and faculty), the future of European American relations, the continuing relevance of the Atlantic Alliance and the future of its military arm.

It was the Fall of 1989 –the year of miracles– just a few days after the Berlin Wall had fallen. How would America and Europe adjust to the remarkable changes in East-West relations?

As I was reflecting on all this, suddenly, a realization. *“It all started here, right here –I thought– in Placentia Bay, just off the coast of Newfoundland!”* Indeed, it was right there, in the waters of Newfoundland, that Winston Churchill, who had sailed from Britain on the HMS Prince of Wales, met with Franklin Delano Roosevelt in August 1941, in the most difficult days of WWII.

It was right there that the two leaders issued the “Atlantic Charter”, a document that outlined the principles of freedom that would guide the two western democracies in the conduct of their international relations during the war and after.

And it was that spirit that was followed, years later, in 1949, when some countries in Europe along with the US and Canada, decided to create the Atlantic Alliance, or NATO, as most call it.

And I had a sense of the noble ideals that inspired the founders when I saw, at NATO’s Headquarters in Brussels, the large Latin inscription on the wall of the North Atlantic Council Main Council Room: **“ANIMUS IN CONSULENDO LIBER”**, *“With*

a Free Spirit, We Deliberate”; or, “In Discussion a Free Mind”. It really conveys the idea that in that place free people freely discuss their future.

And there I was, in Newfoundland, in those momentous days at the end of November 1989, looking at the waters in which the first meeting of Western solidarity had taken place.

Sunset In Uhland Heights, Namibia

WINDHOEK, Namibia, (a few years ago) – It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. It was June, (therefore Winter, in that part of Africa). Over there, from the hilltop in Uhland Heights, I had a perfect view of the northern parts of the city.

The sun was still above the mountains; but it was barely warm in that African Winter afternoon. There was a slight but persistent breeze coming from the West, and I was happy to be wearing a coat.

Once more, as I contemplated the view from up there, I was struck by the pristine, stark colors of Namibia. The red of the barren landscape, the immense, light blue sky, always without any clouds, and the big, red sun slowly lowering itself towards the moon like mountains surrounding the city.

All around me only quiet and silence. The nice houses in that affluent neighborhood appeared to be completely deserted. Nobody walking around in the streets. No cars. Not a sound.

As the sun kept going down, the red of the mountains turned

maroon and then gray. Finally, after the sun had disappeared, I could only see their black outline.

However, even after sunset, there was still some brightness close to the horizon that created a beautiful, if faint, purple frame all around.

Meanwhile, the sky had turned dark blue, and then it became violet, while a thin sliver of dark pink continued to brighten the tips of the mountains encircling the city.

And then the stars began to appear, becoming brighter and brighter, illuminating the immense, terse African sky.

Splendide Royale

LUGANO, Switzerland, (a few years ago) – The large hotel dining room was in the old-fashioned Swiss style. Discreet lighting, simple and elegant decor. Looking out of the windows, to my right, a beautiful view of the Lake of Lugano at dusk.

As I took my seat, I noticed that the place was not crowded. Only a few people here and there, talking quietly, in low voices at their tables. The tablecloths were white and perfectly starched. The silverware, 1920s design, was shining and neatly arranged. With pleasure I observed the whole scene.

A middle-aged waiter came to my table and expertly lit my candle. With the understated, reserved smile of the consummate professional of a really old school he greeted me and politely inquired about anything I might wish to drink. In response to my uncertainty he proposed a local Ticino red wine. I gladly accepted his advice.

Upon ordering my meal, I looked outside at the dark mass of the lake and at the lights on the other shore, and then again at the dining room where I was.

Silence, just slightly interrupted by the discreet movements of the staff moving about and by the barely audible conversations from the other tables.

All was quiet, and beautiful, and simply elegant.

Okavango Silence, Midday in Botswana

OKAVANGO Delta, Botswana, (a few years ago) – That was the end of the week-end in the Okavango Delta, in Northern Botswana. It was a beautiful and mild African Winter day. Past midday the sun was high in the sky and quite warm.

From the camp we drove in the open Land Rover to the landing strip where the small single engine plane was supposed to land and then fly us to Maun where we could catch our commercial flight back to Gaborone.

It was a glorious, cloudless day. Upon arriving at the clearing, right at the edge of the landing strip, I got out of the vehicle. I observed the vast African landscape: bushes here and there, grass and a few tall trees. I began walking toward the middle of the clearing, away from the vehicle and away from the chatter of the driver, the guides and the other two guests.

As I walked away from them, the noise of their voices abated and then finally vanished, completely. And there I was, in the

middle of the landing strip, in this vast space. No people, no trees, no human or animal noise. The air was still. Just the midday sun, and a wonderful, total, complete, soothing silence.