

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

VALUING BLACK ASSETS IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

My guest on the show today is Andre Perry, a senior fellow in Brookings Metro and author of "Know Your Price: Valuing Black Lives and Property in America's Black Cities," published in 2020 by Brookings Institution Press. His research focuses on race and structural inequality, education, and economic inclusion, and he joins me in the virtual studio today to talk about an exciting new partnership that focuses on the strengths and assets of Black majority cities that are worthy of increased investment.

The Brookings Cafeteria is produced by the Brookings Podcast Network. Learn more at [Brookings.edu/podcasts](https://brookings.edu/podcasts) and follow us on Twitter at Policy Podcasts to get information about and links to all our shows, including Dollar and Sense: The Brookings Trade Podcast, the Current, 17 Rooms, and now Foresight Africa, a new podcast about Africa's dynamism and strategies for broadening the benefits of growth to all people of Africa. Here's the host of Foresight Africa, Aloysius Ordu, with more.

ORDU: Welcome to Foresight Africa, a podcast that celebrates Africa's dynamism and explores strategies for broadening the benefits of growth to all people of Africa. I'm your host, Aloysius Uche Ordu, senior fellow and director of the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution.

I'm excited to be with you on this journey—a journey that will take us from Cape Town to Cairo; from Dakar to Lagos to Mombasa; as well as to the heart of Africa—DRC Congo.

In this podcast we will interview experts, and policymakers from the public sector, the private sector, civil society, and Africa's youths. We will talk about the key trends affecting people and the nations of the African continent.

I will encourage you to follow the Brookings Podcast Network @policypodcasts and visit us online at brookings.edu/ForesightAfricaPodcast.

DEWS: And now on with the interview. Andre, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria.

PERRY: Hey, Fred, how's it going?

DEWS: It's good and it's great to see you and listeners can't see your background, but it would be definitely a 10 out of 10 on Room Rater. Maybe they'll catch you on a media show one of these days. It's terrific.

PERRY: And actually did receive a 10 out of 10 from Room Rater. I'd received a nine out of 10 and a 10 out of 10, so that actually did happen. For those who don't know, I have a wonderful collection of hip hop inspired pillows behind me.

DEWS: Well, among your many accomplishments, that's certainly a feather in the cap. Andre, you recently participated in the launch of a new Brookings Institution-NAACP partnership. Can you tell our listeners more about that?

PERRY: Too often when we are examining the state of Black America, we issue reports that essentially provides the problems or the deficits. Most of them show how bad Black people are doing compared to white supposed norms. So when we get together in those conversations, they never lead to investment because no one invests in problems. We invest in people to fix the problems, and we have lots of white saviors for that very reason. And so a lot of my research examines the Black tax, if you will, the penalty for living in a Black neighborhood. Many people know my work on housing devaluation found that homes in Black neighborhoods are priced much lower than they are really valued, to the extent of 48,000 per home, about one hundred and fifty six billion is lost.

But that devaluation is somewhat of a metaphor for so much of our lives in Black America. There is a penalty on many other assets. And based upon a conversation I had with

the president of the NAACP, Derrick Johnson, he wanted to see if we could explore more of the assets that are devalued that will show the strength of Black assets in Black communities.

And so the NAACP and the Brookings Institution formed a historic partnership really under the name Black Assets Index. And it seeks to examine those assets or opportunities Black people have in critical quality of life areas. And again, rather than assess the state of Black community through a deficit lens, the reports and engagement will highlight assets and strengths in Black community that racism has devalued. So it's a great opportunity to do some outstanding work and move away from this deficit frame that we typically see.

DEWS: I've interviewed you before on the show. You've been interviewed by our colleague Bill Finan about your book, "Know Your Price," so I'm somewhat familiar with this concept that you've talked about where you look at the deficit side. Can you give an example of what it means to look at the asset side, the focus on the strengths in Black communities?

PERRY: Well, it can be on anything. On the housing side we have a number of communities that have higher homeownership rates. When we look at things in the aggregate, we can miss where some communities are doing well. We're going to issue a report in the next month or so that looks at where Black people's life expectancy is higher. But again, we're going to calculate the loss of life due to racism. Some of it is again in the form of higher home values in certain areas. People generally know that homes in Black neighborhoods are devalued or priced lower. But if you look at Nashville, Boston, and other areas, home prices are actually higher in Black neighborhoods compared to their peers.

So the goal here is to really just say, Hey, when you look at the aggregate, when you're constantly comparing Black outcomes to white outcomes, which oftentimes is apples to oranges comparison, particularly when you look at income-related variables, a lot of people will talk about the middle class, but you can argue that there really different types of

classes based upon race because Black people were prohibited from developing assets because of federal policies, state policies, as well the local municipal ordinances. And so comparing Black people to white people in many cases is just a poor comparison.

So instead of doing that, we're going to compare Black people and Black communities to other Black majority areas and neighborhoods to see where we're doing well. And then once we get a sense of where we're doing well, then we're going to ask why here in this place are home prices, life expectancy, job rates, and other critical quality of life measures higher. It could be if racism is a given, it could be because some of the actions of local leaders on the ground. And we need to uplift those ideas so that other areas can learn and implement them.

It's going to be an interesting journey. We're in this for the long haul. This is not going to be a one off sort of series of reports. This is going to be an ongoing relationship where we provide the NAACP with additional research that will inform their various campaigns. And, you know, in the announcement last week prior to this recording, I talked about you really can't have justice without truth and to a certain extent, you can't have truth without justice. And we're seeing that being played out today, where government officials are really trying to wrongly, in my opinion, cover history, whitewash history, distort facts. Misinformation campaigns have run wild. So it is important that these two historic organizations that were founded within seven years of each other in the early 1900s come together to provide a credible source of information in a sea of disinformation and misinformation.

DEWS: It's a very exciting partnership, and there's more information about it on our website. And I know people can come to our website in the coming weeks, months, years to find out more about the Black Assets Index and related topics. Andre, you also said in that event, and this is kind of a loose quote, there is an architecture of inequality that mechanically

reduces the quality of life for Black Americans. So kind of a bigger picture perspective there.

What do you mean by that?

PERRY: Janet Yellen put it succinctly during an MLK event this year. She said the economy has never really worked for Black people. That translation is that America has created policies that prohibited Black people from participating in the same way in the economy as other groups, and particularly white people. And so there are policies in place that still are vestiges of our segregated past, discriminatory past, that still extract wealth and opportunities from Black people. But the bottom line is that the country was built not to be fair in terms of the distribution of quality of critical goods that predict for life expectancy, homeownership, health and wellness. All of these things are lower in the Black community because it was supposed to be that way from a policy perspective.

And so our challenge really in this country, and I hope that this NAACP-Brookings partnership addresses this, is to dismantle that architecture of inequality, brick by brick, policy by policy, to scrub the remnants of our segregated past from our current day policy. And so if we can provide research data, deep analysis, we can have a better chance at dismantling that architecture.

DEWS: That idea of the architecture of inequality also strikes me as a key concept in critical race theory, that racism is not just the actions of individual, racist acting people, but really a system erected by white people to perpetuate their economic and social power. And yet over the last year or so, this outsized reaction against critical race theory being taught in America's schools is kind of obscuring what seems to be pretty basic facts about America's history and present.

PERRY: The fight against critical race theory or what people are projecting on critical race theory is really an extension of the ongoing effort to whitewash history so that that power can be maintained among the few. That it no longer makes any sense at all to not talk

about slavery, Jim Crow racism, redlining, a broken criminal justice system in an era of information, it's out there. Most people know it, and it's never been in fashion, I should say it's never been in fashion to distort history, but that's what has been done. And it wasn't just done by politicians and wayward folks. It was done by research institutions as well.

When the NAACP and Brookings was founded, eugenics was in full swing. You had universities and other what we think of research institutions of the past, they promoted segregation, they promoted discrimination. And so for me, I really don't want Brookings to be on the wrong side of history again. We may be nonpartisan, but we're not a valueless institution. We do believe, in truth, justice, democracy. And we must uphold facts. And we must dismantle the myths that are around everything from vaccines to slavery to conceits of family construction in the Black community.

It's really time that organizations, white-centric organizations historically speaking, take a stand against this form of bigotry, because you cannot have justice without truth. And Brookings, with its more than 100 years history of producing facts for the public, we have to be very clear and have a full-throated response to the white supremacy, bigotry, misinformation, disinformation that is on the rise today. I mean, those issues are threatening the very existence of Brookings, so it's not simply something to do out of our moral take on this. I mean, we won't exist if facts can't hold weight. And so that's why I think this pairing of the NAACP and Brookings is so vitally important. NAACP has worked on justice issues for over a century, just like Brookings. Brookings have been working on policy, but we've been operating on separate tracks. We can no longer do that in this day and age where coordination, partnership, and togetherness has to be exhibited, has to be modeled for the rest of the country. So for me, this is such an important initiative not only for our institutions but for the country as a whole.

DEWS: I've worked at Brookings for over 25 years now, and I have never thought about the possibility of the institution no longer existing because of the collapse of facts. So what you just said, it's really giving me a lot to think about that is really important.

PERRY: Let me just add to that because it is part of the strategy that Black people have felt for quite a long time. The first misinformation campaign at a mass level was really around racism. We don't have to look far, but look at Reconstruction. And at the time, the racist film "Birth of a Nation" was premiered in Los Angeles in the early 1900s, which was essentially a propaganda campaign that valorized the Ku Klux Klan and demonized Black folks as a menace to society. We know that these narratives are often a prelude to bigoted policy, that whenever you see these misinformation campaigns, disinformation campaigns, eventually you'll see negative or bigoted policy coming from it. We saw it from the Trump administration and his flagrant racist attacks on immigrants and his flagrantly racist attempts to create a horrible immigration policy as a result.

But this was par for the course. Politicians have been doing this for our existence in America, particularly against Black people. And so now we're in a place where even white organizations are faced with this existential threat. We cannot take this lightly, that organizations who say that we believe in justice and democracy must show it and prove it by working together.

DEWS: I want to move on to another issue, but it's also one that I think ties back in to the focus on value that ties back into the focus on valuing Black assets, and that's been in the news a lot lately, and that's student loan forgiveness. Recently, you and another Brookings scholar had what seemed like a public disagreement about how to approach student loan debt forgiveness. Can you walk us through that?

PERRY: There is a big argument centering around student debt forgiveness that around this idea of regressivity that cancelling student debt will primarily help the rich. And

again, this is where income-based analyses missed the point. That on its face, when you look at income, those in the highest income bracket brackets take out the largest amount or the greatest share of loan dollars. Because many wealthy people go on to be lawyers, doctors and take out loans for those quote unquote noble professions. But the overwhelming majority of people who take out loans are also low-wealth individuals. If you look at this issue as a matter of wealth and who takes out loans, the number of loans themselves, more of them are taken out by low-wealth or moderate-wealth individuals.

And my issue with these analyses that say it's regressive is that when it comes to the middle class, i.e. white people, the white middle class, we find many different policy solutions. And in this case in higher ed, we have tax advantaged programs, 529 plans and the like that many wealthy individuals can join, including myself. My child is in one of these plans. But because of past discrimination, far more Black people cannot enjoy those policy luxuries.

Remember, slavery, Jim Crow racism, housing discrimination, biased criminal justice system extracted wealth and opportunity from Black people by law. This was commonplace. It was legal to discriminate in housing against Black people for most of our history in the United States. And we know that the equity in homes are then used to start businesses, send your kids to college, move to a better neighborhood. So if we could not get those rewards, we have to take out loans. For me it's not a coincidence that we became much more of a loan dependent higher educational system when more and more Black and brown people started going to college. But that's another story.

But the point is that there's a lot of scholars, including my colleagues, who will fight tooth and nail against providing policy solutions for low-income or low-wealth people, but hold middle class people harmless in our discussions around inequality. And for me, even if you take the approach that it is regressive, at what point do you say, you know what, I'm

going to stop making or basing policy off of wealthy white people? At what point do you center Black people in your discussions, in your analyses? That's part of our problem, that we don't center Black people by and large. And then when we do, it's in the deficit mode.

So again, what I want this partnership to do is not just for the benefit of the greater good, it's to the benefit of Brookings, it's to the benefit of the NAACP. Both organizations, while we're historic and while we are certainly the top of class, so to speak, there's room for improvement. And I want to be able to say that we have a range of scholars at Brookings, some of whom will, in the post-secondary issues around the loan cancellation, look at it as a regressive issue, some will center Black people and look at this matter of this issue from a matter of wealth.

And so for me it was it was a public disagreement. And I will say this, a lot of people don't know that Brookings is not like a monolith. We have different scholars with different ideas. We do value rigor and that's about it. And so based upon your framing of an issue, based upon your models, you can come up with different types of outputs. But for me, this is more a matter of can we center Black people in our analysis, ever? So it played out in a weird way. People don't realize that we have disagreements, but oftentimes we do.

DEWS: Listeners should know that they can find all of your research and writing and commentary on our website, Brookings dot edu, but also they should follow you on Twitter at Andre Perry Edu to see a lot of your other commentary, a lot of your media appearances. Again at Andre Perry Edu on Twitter.

Andre, I'd like to close with the way that you quoted the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh in a Cafeteria podcast episode that you appeared in last December, it celebrated Brookings Metro at twenty-five. And you quoted an idea that seems very central to your work, and it really struck me then, and since he just sadly passed away, could you just share again what you said then and what it means?

PERRY: Thích Nhất Hạnh once said that if you're growing ahead of lettuce and it doesn't grow, you don't blame the lettuce. You look to see if it's getting rain water. You look to see if the soil is rich, if it's getting sunlight, but you never blame the lettuce. But when it comes to Black neighborhoods, when things go wrong, we blame the lettuce, we blame Black people. We say everything from they need to pull their pants up, they need to get haircuts. We criticize the school district. We remove political rights. We do everything to blame the lettuce instead of looking at whether or not that's getting sunlight, the soil's rich, getting rainwater, getting the resources, getting the policy to grow. And again, nothing grows without investment. I don't care what it is, education or businesses. And the lack of growth in the Black community is not because people aren't pulling up their pants. It's because of the historic underinvestment and devaluation of Black communities. And we need frameworks and policies that understand that point.

DEWS: Well, Andre, I always learn something when I talk with Brookings scholars on this program, but perhaps you more than others, I always gain a powerful new perspective on the way to look at issues in society. So thank you for that, thank you as always for sharing with us your time and expertise.

PERRY: Hey, thanks for having me.

DEWS : You can learn more about Andre Perry and his research and the new partnership with the NAACP on our website, Brookings Dot Edu.

A team of amazing colleagues makes the Brookings Cafeteria possible. Gastón Reboredo is the audio engineer; our audio intern this semester is Skye Sutton; Bill Finan, director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews; my Communications colleagues Adrianna Pita, Chris McKenna, Chris Peters, and Colin Cruickshank are key collaborators. And finally, Ian McAllister, Soren Messner-Zidell and Andrea Risotto provide guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.