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Host 00:00:08

Thank you all for being here today. And moreover, I want to thank you for giving me some authority relative to you for the next 18 minutes or so. And by that, I mean, just the way we are positioned here, gives me control relative to you. I stand, you're sitting, I can move around, I could even dance. You are constrained. I can see only some of you, not all of you. And yet, your position in a way to have a great view of the stage. In a sense, the way we are configured gives me deference from you. They might be saying that's a bit of extreme interpretation of how we all came to be. You didn't get to choose those seats, right? That may be true. But did you right? So much what we think of as natural.

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The way we're all configured here today is what we call socially constructed. That's important to recognize because in any social construction, they're going to be winners and they're going to be losers. Right now, arguably, I am winning. I get to share my views with you, very top down one way platform. Right? And I come across at least in my own mind as infallible. You also could be losing. Are you getting as much out of this event than if we were configured differently? Right? You could imagine other kinds of ways of setting this up. I could be on a stage in the middle and all of you in a circle around. I would have to engage you better. The lights could be more on -- if nothing else, right? You could be engaging one another through facial expression or something else. Right now, it's more passive, not active or interactive for you.

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Would you learn as much as you possibly could if we had a different kind of arrangement? I don't know. Right? But the point is much of what we take to be as common sense could be wrong. Instead, we should approach our day to day lives and how we've organized them with a sociological imagination. That means that we should see our behaviors and our beliefs less as our volition and our agency, and instead, shaped by cultural, economic, political and other forces that have historical grounding, right? And great magnitude. Our job is to uncover what are those forces? How do they work? How do we resist? How did that historical grounding come to be.

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If I pick out my keys and I let go, what do you think will happen? Will drop on the floor? All right, you're an educated audience. You knew that. Just as there are physical laws that govern our physical world, there are social laws that govern our social world. Our job is to uncover what those laws are and we need to do so, so we can make our institutions whether that's the media, family, politics, education, religion, more equitable and more democratic. I want to elaborate on the power of institutions and shaping behavior by referring to three different cases. And I chose these cases because each one of them is arguing behavior that role find odd, and probably more so, problematic, worrisome.

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And I want to explain using these stereotypes, right? That there may be no more odd then coming together in a crowded auditorium, sitting next to strangers and listening to someone speak whatever they want from a stage. As stereotypes, it's important to keep in mind that these do not really demonstrate much. They're not going to be significant of many people. But they live large in our cultural

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imagination, so we should unpack what's behind them. The first one is called the Code of the Streets and refers to a sociologist who studied African Americans in inner city, Philadelphia many years ago. And he found among a small section of these youth that they would engage in violence as a way of earning respect. They almost invited violence.

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We also would wear nice clothing, expensive jewelry, other demonstrations of their wealth through their cars or other kinds of symbols, right? And again, these are areas where most families are working families, where kids, contrary to popular belief, care a lot about school, work very hard in school. But we still found some kind of behaviors of this sort, so why? And as you studied them, you began to realize that they behave this way because they were responding to the lack of institutional support that many of us take for granted. If you're in an environment where the police or criminal justice systems do not seem to protect you, then you have to come up with your own ways of protecting yourself. Your own way is adjudicating what's right, what's wrong. If you have an education system as underfunded and even if it was really well funded, there's a very limited job market in these neighborhoods, then you get a lot of status by being able to demonstrate that in these kind of conditions, I can accumulate resources, I can accumulate some money. So the lack of institutional support leads to certain kinds of behaviors. It's the same reasons why the Black Panthers, many years ago, in certain cities would construct health clinics. The idea being the healthcare system is not taking care of our residents, we have to find ways of taking care of ourselves. From that point of view, what these youth could be seen as an act of resistance, nothing else makes a lot more sense when we think of it outside of a purely cultural, or family narrative. And a more sociological one.

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The second case refers to this pursuit of what I call hyper education among certain Asian American families. That is the pursuit of school outside of school. Right? So you may have heard that, for instance, Indian American youth keep winning spelling bee after spelling bee, right? I'm here as an Indian American to tell you that that's not the case for all of us. Or you may have heard of other Asian Americans doing well in certain kinds of fields, math, and science. And they pursue education outside of school some of them quite a bit so much so that schools and their neighbors are getting really worried rather than applaud these activities. They're seen as the behaviors of tiger parents, right, who are pushing too much pressure on their kids and that's hurting education for all of everybody in the space, in the neighborhoods, right? Schools are clamping down on this. There's even a "New White Flight" as white families try to leave areas, they're seen as too intense in this way. So why are these families performed as a kind of foreign kind of parenthood? And if you think about it, it's not that foreign at all. Lots of parents, especially middle class, upper class parents engage in over scheduling their kids, right? Club sports is a multi million dollar industry for young kids where it wasn't 15 years ago. So whether I'm educating my kids after school or putting them in lots of soccer. Either way, I'm still making them over scheduled and over organized. These parents like more assessment and more testing. How strange is that? We have a school system where assessment and testing is baked into it through no child left behind or other kinds of legislation.

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So what these families are doing may seem actually fitting in, not sticking out. But of course, we do see a difference in what these families are doing and others. And if you talk to them like I have, you realize that as immigrants, they're just trying to make their kids as best equipped for the future as they can. You've all heard of the old adage, it's not what you know, it's who you know, but if you don't know that many people because you didn't go to college here and have those networks, there's no sorority or fraternity, you can call up, your parents aren't from here and therefore they can't use their connections, then you better know a lot to compensate for that. And that's what these parents are doing. Let's give our kids lots of knowledge to compensate for a labor market, but often uses social connections, social capital, right, as a gauge. They look around at the sports arenas and see these are racially white and black spaces, we might not fit in. So I'm not gonna invest our time and energy is after school and those activities. Using the sociological imagination, we realize that what these families are doing makes a lot of sense. It's hard to argue.

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The third case has to do with Debutante balls. These are lavish parties that certain upper class white families put on for their youth as they are kind of growing into adulthood. These are families who belong to country clubs on the board of charities and other non profits, right? They may have second or third homes. And what's interesting is that as those scholars who have talked to them, they realize that these parents actually may not be that excited by these parties. They're not that committed to them personally. So why do they spend tens of thousands of dollars? There's a religious conviction, there's a personal conviction. And if you talk to them, you realize what they're trying to do is make sure that their kids have what it takes for them to maintain or advance in their social standing as they go forward. It's not enough to have an income and a profession and a zip code. You have to make sure that you are known within a tight network of people, right, and appreciated as one of them. That way, you have more access to jobs, marriages, whatever else it might be that governs our life chances. So the question really isn't, how do they for such parties? Why do they do so?

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But instead, how can you afford not to do this? If so much of your children's future generational opportunities are at stake. Right? Again, these are all three cultural stereotypes. White families are no more likely to do Debutante balls than Indian Americans are to win spelling bees. But because they live in our cultural imagination and because these are often behaviors we might critique, it's important to understand how they came to be? How they make sense. All right? We need to move past, the moral and essentialist judgments we make about group behaviors. We need to realize that so much of what we see as a product or at least facilitated by our social institutions, whether we like those behaviors or we don't, right?

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If we want kids after school to do less testing and assessment, maybe we should ask why we have a school system that applauds and requires those exact things if we want kids not to engage in violence as a means for self-protection, right? That is to say, if I engage in violence and protect myself and that encourages me to want to do more violence in order to demonstrate more protection. If we don't like that. And we have to ask, why do we have a police or criminal justice system that might not be treating

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everybody equitably to the best of their abilities, right? We're not trying to excuse any behaviors, trying to explain them. And what's more, as I said before, in any social institution, there are winners and there are losers. Same thing applies to what we've just been discussing, institutions that might not be serving others well, probably are serving certain people very well. Right? Some of us get our power and authority from being in exclusive spaces, right? Private exclusive spaces that keep others out. Those could be country clubs, those could be elite educational institutions.

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Our gain requires someone else to lose. Our school funding is a zero-sum game for some public schools to be funded adequately or even well, others are going to be underfunded. If we appreciate certain kinds of behaviors in some groups and criticize those of others, we have to understand they're all connected. We give ourselves the benefit of the doubt all the time. We rationalize, we justify our behaviors even sitting here today, it makes sense why we do what we do, given our constraints, given where we came from. We need to move past individual assessments and recognize the social conditions that have created opportunities and created constraints. Still more natural for us to be sitting here, closed up next to these total strangers, in a dark room, thinking we're the enlightened ones. Right? It is for other things that we've discussed.

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Hopefully, you understand that moralistic and essentialist judgments need to be tempered, sociological imagination, right? You're not programmed to sit in the dark, hopefully, to applaud when the speaker is done. You recognize your social constraints and we should offer the same analysis to others. Thank you very much.