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Volume XVI

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Number 4

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Challenges and Prospects of William J. Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*

ROBERT G. NEWBY

Central Michigan University

I feel that it is a real *coup* that I had the opportunity to assemble the right scholars and, in turn, edit this special issue of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*. These were "the right" scholars in that they offered varying progressive perspectives of high quality on William J. Wilson's award-winning book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Since so much of the debate on the so-called "underclass" is carried out in the parlance of conservative scholars, the articles which appear here are not encumbered in any way by such a retrogression. By contrast, I had the pleasure of engaging a very dynamic set of sociologists who are not apologists for the *status quo*. Consequently, the readers of these articles will be offered a very different set of parameters on the "underclass" debate.

Before introducing the articles, there is a need to say how this issue came about. As chairperson of the Race and Ethnic Relations division of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, I had the responsibility for shaping the division's program for the 1988 annual meetings to be held in Atlanta, Georgia. In early October 1987, I saw a prepublication copy of Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*. The "stuff" of that book signaled some compelling issues which would certainly need to be debated, specifically by sociologists. I seized the opportunity to organize an "author meets critics" session, in which Professor Wilson graciously agreed to participate. Further demonstrating the importance of such a session, H. Paul Chalfont, Chairperson of the Poverty and Inequality division, and Sandra Walker, Chairperson of the Association of Black Sociologists, agreed to have their respective associations serve as cosponsors. The joint sponsorship, along with the cooperation of the

SSSP staff, elevated the session to being one of the Society's plenary sessions.

If the book's notoriety by that time had not been enough to attract an audience, Professor Wilson had just been recently elected President-elect of the American Sociological Association. Also, as fate would have it, one of the critics, Professor Edna Bonacich, in that same election was elected the Association's Vice President-elect. In more ways than one the session had its "star" quality.

Of course, the biggest "star" was the book itself. There is no scholarly work on the present scene which is more central to our debates about the poor, particularly the urban black poor, than Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*. By the time we reached Atlanta in August, the book had received a front page review in the *New York Times* Book Review section. Also, it had been selected by the *New York Times* as being among the 16 best books published in 1987. It was also the winner of the *Washington Monthly* 18th Annual Book Award. The book had served as the basis for a feature story in *Time Magazine* and a cover story review for the *New Republic*. The North Central Sociological Association honored Professor Wilson by making him the recipient of its Scholarly Achievement Award for *The Truly Disadvantaged*. The book has been reviewed by, seemingly, every periodical of note. In addition to the media and professional recognition, policy makers sought out Professor Wilson for hearings before legislative bodies throughout the nation, including the House and Senate.

Prior to the popular storm being created by the book, I began organizing the peer review session for the annual meetings. In so doing, I took into account the myriad of issues raised by *The Truly Disadvantaged* and sought out scholars representing a variety of research interests and whose specialties certainly intersected with the population being analyzed by Professor Wilson. In addition to research interests, I was also concerned about issues such as perspectives, age cohort, gender, etc. in shaping the panel.

Independent of my organizing the "author meets critics" session, James Geschwender, on behalf of the Marxist Section

of the American Sociological Association, organized a session which was to examine public policy strategies implied by *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Fortunately, we are able to include those presentations in this issue, as well.

Thanks to efforts of Professor Geschwender and the presenters of both sessions, the choices were all fine scholars who took seriously the importance of their tasks. Of course, much of the motivation for their efforts might lie with the fact that they were encountering a scholar whose work commanded their attention. Consequently, the articles in this issue are evaluations by colleagues who show no inclination to have their work serve the interests of any other sector than that of "The Truly Disadvantaged." The result is a fine set of "challenges and prospects" to William J. Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

The lead article is a real *tour de force* by Professor Andrew Billingsley, whose work *Black Families in White America* is a classic on the black family. Dr. Billingsley uses a too often neglected sociology of knowledge framework to place William Wilson within the context of his own socio-historical development.

That article is followed by Professor Edna Bonacich raising some very fundamental questions as to how "Racism in Advanced Capitalist Society" is being addressed by *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

Professor Carole Marks then raises some important issues about the internal dynamics of "the ghetto" over time in her "Occasional Laborers and Chronic Want."

In her "A Limited Proposal for Social Reform," Professor Bonnie Thornton Dill confronts for Wilson the dilemma of trying to present a set of proposals which can be enacted and still be meaningful.

The final word in this section on the "challenges" is a class analysis by Ralph Gomes and Walda Katz Fishman which presents Wilson with the major dilemma: is this problem not simply a more general crisis of capitalism that hits blacks first and worst?

One of the "prospects" for change is offered by Professors Richard A. Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, whose work on

behalf of the poor has been a major contribution. They argue that one of the ways the "underclass" can help itself is its potential at the ballot box.

Professor James A. Geschwender, providing what might be termed a "pragmatic class analysis," points out ways in which some important interim steps must be taken in order to relieve suffering prior to that "great reform."

My "Problems of Pragmatism in Public Policy" questions the extent to which there can be very bright prospects for "hidden agendas."

Even in the face of such challenges, William J. Wilson answered his critics well. It will have to be up to you and the test of time to determine: "who won?"

Endeavors of this sort are never the product of any single person. In that regard, there are a number of people I want to thank for their encouragement, assistance and patience. At the beginning of the list I must place Professor Norman Goroff and the editorial board of the *JSSW* for inviting me to guest this issue. The same appreciation extends to Robert Leighninger and other *Journal* staff.

A special thanks goes to Richard Ogles of the University of Colorado—Denver for his having the foresight to tape both sessions and sharing the tapes with me. Apart from the help that the tapes provided for this publication, it is possible to relive the excitement of those sessions, some of which gets lost in the coldness of the printed word.

The Sociology of Knowledge of William J. Wilson: Placing *The Truly Disadvantaged* in its Socio- historical Context*

ANDREW BILLINGSLEY

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In this paper I will do the following: first, set forth an introductory statement designed to place Wilson's work in some philosophical-theoretical perspective; then, I will identify and describe what I consider to be three distinct, yet overlapping, phases or central themes in Wilson's work; third, I will discuss how he treats Black families and discuss some features of his policy recommendations.

By 1988, it was clear to almost all social scientists and a large number of policy makers and ordinary citizens as well, that William J. Wilson was an eminent Black scholar. His four books, all published by established publishing houses, have been well received. His latest two have been awarded numerous prizes. He is greatly appreciated, admired, and in great demand as a speaker and consultant by scholarly, public policy, and public forums in general. He has served as departmental chair and continues to serve as distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago. In addition, he has been awarded one of the McArthur Foundation Fellowships. And to crown his professional achievements as a sociologist, he has been elected president of the American Sociological Association, becoming the first Black sociologist so honored since E. Franklin Frazier was so honored more than 30 years ago.

Such eminence, seems a long way, indeed, from Wilson's humble origins some 53 years ago in a low-income family in

*Prepared for the Association of Black Sociologists and the Society for the Study of Social Problems

the small, rural community of Derry Township some 40 miles east of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father, who was a laborer in the coal mines died when Wilson was 12. He was brought up by his mother, alone who supported him and his five other siblings by working as a maid, a trajectory so common in the Black experience of a generation ago. Despite her efforts at working, the family for a time needed the assistance of the public welfare system. Later, the Black church, a historically Black college, and his service in the U.S. Army would provide major opportunity screens and support structures for his upward mobility, as they have for thousands of young Black men.

Wilson's academic career began at the small historically Black Wilberforce University with the financial assistance of a Black church. At Wilberforce, Wilson was surrounded by the Black intellectual tradition. Wilberforce was the launching pad for another distinguished Black sociologist, W.E.B. DuBois. Indeed, Wilberforce gave DuBois his first teaching position, and it was the setting where DuBois first developed and practiced his revolutionary ideas about the new science of sociology. And, it was his burning desire to follow this new discipline that led him to the University of Pennsylvania and to his monumental work, *The Philadelphia Negro*, which still stands as a beacon of Black scholarship.

When Bill Wilson entered Wilberforce, he would not have been accepted at most of the nation's white colleges, including many of those who would bestow lavish honors on him today. By the time he earned his Masters degree at Bowling Green State University in 1961, and Ph.D. in Sociology from Washington State University in 1966, he was prepared for his rapid rise to the top of his profession. At that time, Washington State University was one of the few major universities to welcome Black graduate students, and until recently it had produced more Black doctorates in sociology than any other. Among these are Anna Grant and James Blackwell. He needed only the opportunity and the support structures provided by the University of Massachusetts and the University of Chicago. Wilson's performance as a sociologist during the past 20 years has been so phenomenal and his transition from the Black

world to the white world so complete that he has been quoted as saying that while he experienced racial discrimination during his early years, he cannot recall experiencing a single major incident of overt racial discrimination since he entered graduate school in the early 1960s. There are not many Black people of any social class or occupation who can make that statement. Wilson, therefore, is among the "truly advantaged" (Pear, 1987; Greenstein, October 25, 1988). Thus, for the past 20 years, Wilson has been wholeheartedly accepted in and surrounded by white upper-middle-class society, a situation far different from that of the vast majority of Blacks of any social class.

Wilson and the Sociology of Knowledge

The argument being advanced in this paper is that Wilson's scholarship, his ideas, his theories, the subject matter he studies, and his conclusions are all influenced to some extent, not only by his brilliant and well-trained mind, but by his experience as well, including his position and changing position in racially-stratified and race-conscious America. His scholarship is thus, in part, the product of his remarkable intellect, his African heritage, his Afro-American experience, and his American experience.

Now the question is what is the relative influence of his African heritage and his American experience on his scholarship. It might be said that as one observes the maturation of Wilson as a scholar over the years, one notes a certain 'declining significance of the African heritage'. Wilson writes more and more as an American sociologist, discarding much of the African-American experience, culture, and insight, so visible in his early works.

Even so, however, Wilson's America is not everybody's America. He is a Black American and, thus, has been socialized in both the Black world and the white world. His experience is colored by that fact; it affects him. And, it especially affects others who view him. For as a Black scholar in America, he is both the man in the academy and the man in the mirror. And both these identities fuse into a whole that is much more complex than either the one or the other.

There is still further cultural and intellectual complexity to

William J. Wilson that might be helpful in putting his works in context. He is not an ordinary American sociologist; he is a Black middle class American. You might not suspect it from his recent writings, particularly given the terrible things he says about the Black middle class. But, alas, he is one of us. His education, occupation, and income all place him distinctly ahead of most Americans in status, standing, and opportunities. Wilson is both Black and white in experience, and in both working class and middle class. He is, therefore, a much better sociologist than most of his colleagues, in part, because he writes out of a much richer experience than they can bring to their work, particularly their efforts to understand race relations in America.

Thus, while society has been changing for the better, he has broken through barriers of class and race and stands today at the pinnacle of the opportunity structure in society. Yet, he brings with him something of all his salient experience and, thus, the complexity. Not many people can write a book which is at once so powerful, so insightful, and so controversial, that it could be denounced by white conservatives, white liberals, and Black liberals, all the while vying with each other to claim him and give him awards and have him address their forums. All of which makes Wilson one of the more powerful voices and pens in American social-science and social-policy analysis writing today.

But most people, including most of his colleagues at the University of Chicago, probably do not see all this complexity. Some may tend to see Wilson simply as a Black man. Others may see him simply as not a Black man. But, few are likely to see him as both Black and white. And few will see him as working class and upper-middle class. For Americans in general have difficulty viewing such complexities. It is more common and, perhaps, more comfortable to view a person as either one thing or another. That is quintessentially an American-European intellectual tendency, owing perhaps to our Greek heritage. A glass is either half empty or half full. Wilson is either a Black scholar or not a Black scholar. A person is either influenced by his or her class or race. In African and Afro-American thought, we know that reality is often more complex

than that and that a glass may be half full and half empty both at the same time; and so with most things including class and race. It is a complexity which Wilson recognized in his earlier works more than his latter works; and that is, in part, a function of his complex experience and his changing position in the changing American social structure. It is this evolution of Wilson's central ideas as expressed in his scholarship to which I now turn.

The Three Phases of William J. Wilson

There are, then, three distinct phases reflected in Wilson's scholarship. Phase I, I call the race conscious phase. It is most graphically represented by two books published in 1973. One is a book Wilson coedited with two other scholars titled *Through Different Eyes: Black and White Perspectives on American Race Relations*, published by Oxford University Press. The second book published the same year is *Power, Racism, and Privilege: Race Relations in Theoretical and Sociohistorical Perspectives*, published by the Free Press.

The second phase of Wilson's work, which I call the class conscious phase is represented by his prize winning book, *The Declining Significance of Race*, first published in 1978 by the University of Chicago Press.

The third phase, which I call the synthesis, is represented most dramatically by his new book, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, published in 1987 by the University of Chicago Press.

Phase I: Race Consciousness

In Phase I of Wilson's scholarship, produced primarily between 1965 and 1969 when he was assistant professor and associate professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, race consciousness played an important part in his work. This was the height of the civil rights movement which would touch all institutions of higher education and most disciplines. Moreover, the inner-city uprisings of 1967 to 1969 and the student revolts of 1968 to 1970 all had their impact on Wilson, and this impact was reflected in his scholarship.

During this period, Wilson the rapidly rising young

scholar, made original contributions to social science and the effort of social science to understand and explain how a democratic society found itself in the midst of these explosive movements for social change. This was reflected in the two books referred to above and in a number of articles including the following: "Race Relations Models and Ghetto Behavior" (Rose, 1972) and "The Quest for a Meaningful Black Experience on White Campuses" (*Massachusetts Review*, 1969).

Wilson dealt with all these themes of racial conflict and Black activism in his book *Power, Racism and Privilege*. In the process he combined his penchant for original theoretical propositions with careful analysis of empirical observation to make a number of contributions to knowledge. He clarified our understanding of power relations between groups, of competition for scarce resources, of cultural pluralism and most especially of racism in its individual, collective and institutional forms.

A good example of this occurs toward the end of the volume when he summarizes his general perspective as follows:

Furthermore, as I have indicated, racial intolerance tends to be greater in periods of economic decline, particularly for whites unable to advance themselves and forced by economic strains to compete more heavily with minority groups. Accordingly, not only is it possible that the gains experienced by middle and upper-income blacks could decline, but it is also possible that the deteriorating circumstances of many lower class blacks could worsen, further widening the economic schism. (Wilson, 1973, pp. 150-151)

Published in 1973 and written at least a year earlier, such insight was to prove prophetic a decade later.

Wilson also contributed to our understanding of race conflict, power imbalance, racial solidarity, the legitimate aspirations of Black people and the meaning of the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1960s in the following theoretical speculation.

We have seen throughout this volume that race relations are extremely variable, shifting back and forth from periods of accommodation to periods of overt conflict. Until factors that produce

racial conflict are eliminated (such as differential power, racism, strong sense of group position, and intergroup competition for scarce resources), this pattern will continue to persist. (Wilson, 1973, p. 151)

Still another contribution of this volume and of Wilson's work in Phase I was his connection of institutional racism and political oppression in the United States and in South Africa. This theme would be missing from phases II and III of Wilson's work.

The second major work of Wilson during Phase I was a book he coedited with two other social scientists, Peter I. Rose and Stanley Rothman. The book *Through Different Eyes: Black and White Perspectives on American Race Relations* was published the same year as Wilson's own book, in 1973.

Wilson made at least three major contributions to this book and to our knowledge of race relations, institutional racism, and the struggle for social justice. First, he took the leadership in selecting the other eight Black social scientists who contributed articles to the book. At the same time, he approved the selection of the 12 white social scientists who participated. By these selections, particularly of the Black scholars, Wilson made a distinct contribution. By the selection of the subject matter and the authors, the editors explicitly recognized the primacy of racial conflict, racial dominance, and racial oppression as central features of American life. This theme would not be quite so prominent in the later phases of Wilson's work.

In selecting the Black authors, Wilson chose some of the brightest young talent then available. They included Joyce Ladner, writing on the urban poor; Johnetta B. Cole, writing on the Black middle class; Roy S. Bryce-Laporte, on Black immigrants; Edgar Epps on Black integrationists; J. Herman Blake, on Black nationalists; Chuck Stone on Black politicians; Sethard Fisher on Black professors; and Cleveland Donald, Jr. on Black students. As we shall see, none of these scholars would figure prominently and positively in the later stages of Wilson's work, in part, perhaps, because all of them continued to write about the institutional racism and the powerful entrenchment of political and economic power in the hands of whites with the

Black minority structurally subordinated to these forces. While these are themes they shared with Wilson in Phase I of his work, he would shift to a different focus, namely the ascendancy of social class over race and racism.

Still another and most important contribution Wilson makes to this volume is his own essay, which appears as an epilogue, "The Significance of Social and Racial Prisms" (Rose, Rothman & Wilson, 1973). This essay is, in part, a condensation of Wilson's ideas expressed more fully in his own book, *Power, Racism, and Privilege: Race Relations in Theoretical and Sociohistorical Perspectives*. This one essay is worth the price of the whole book. It is nothing short of brilliant, insightful, and incisive. It is also the essence of vintage Wilson of the first Phase.

Early on he reminds us, as did several of the other authors in this volume, that race and class are very much imbedded in the American social structure, impacting on the ideas and the wellbeing of Black and white Americans and their respective views of each other and relationships between them. Delving into the complexity of these interrelationships he observes as follows: "The crucial underlying assumption of these propositions is that racial groups, like other social groups, engage in a constant competitive struggle for control of scarce resources" (Rose, Rothman & Wilson, 1973), p. 396). Then he continues, "White gains from black subordination is the historic pattern of race relations" (Rose, Rothman & Wilson, 1973, p. 396). This insight too would be muted in the later phases of Wilson's work.

A theme that would run through each of the three phases is the dialectical relationship between race and class bias as they emanate from the social structure. While in later phases the relative emphasis and his conception of the relative dominance of these forces would shift, one can find the rudiments of this dialectic spelled out in this brief essay. He concludes as follows:

Thus we have seen throughout this volume that images of American race relations are influenced and shaped not only by race but also by social, economic, political, and historical situations. Although people tend to view racial problems through particular

sociocultural prisms, a common underlying variable ultimately determines whether their racial attitudes will be hostile, friendly or indifferent—namely, a belief that in-group claims to certain rights and privileges have been (or will be) jeopardized or threatened by the special actions of outgroup racial members. (Rose, Rothman & Wilson, 1973, p. 409)

It would be difficult to find a more insightful explanation of white resistance to housing for Black families in formerly white neighborhoods, as this came to public attention in 1988 in Yonkers, New York and other places. Thus, whoever it was that persuaded the Governor of New York to describe this situation as a conflict of class and not race had certainly not read or had forgotten Wilson's Phase I. Such resistance operates at the highest social-class level as well as in the middle class and among the poor. It is seen in white universities where Black faculty are frozen out of tenured positions and in Black universities where Black faculty are becoming an endangered species. It is seen in professional athletics where blacks are frozen out of the front office and in the inner city where Blacks are frozen out of good jobs, and in social welfare agencies where Black culture, ideas, and leadership are often subordinated to whites. Which is why even in 1988 while Wilson has deemphasized racism, in the experience of most Black Americans it is still a common reality. In a recent study, we found that more importantly successful efforts to change the status quo will always be resisted by a variety of means, legal and translegal, by intellectual and political persuasion, and especially by economic political power. Resistance to the status quo, thus must also turn to a variety of strategies, all designed to amass and use legitimate power to disturb the imbalance of power relations. From this perspective, it is clear that race relations will continue for some time to follow the ebbs and flows, seen so clearly and described so incisively in Phase I of Wilson's work. As we shall see presently, while not denying the existence of these factors, Wilson would emphasize nonracial factors, impersonal forces, and the ascendancy of class over race and racism as the central foci of Phase II of his work.

In Phase I, Wilson called on his experience as a Black American to help clarify the nature of American race relations. He

focused on the structure of power and privilege, which rested so heavily in the hands of white-dominated society, norms, and institutions. In the process he would clarify for us the true nature of racism in its individual, collective, and institutional forms. During this first phase of his career, he focused his considerable talent, intellect, and imagination on breaking down the walls of racial oppression. He approached this from his own experience as an African American. He, thus, stood boldly before the temple of racism and called for its dismantling. He was our Joshua at the Battle of Jericho. He was our Jack Johnson, striking a mortal blow to the idea of white supremacy. He did it with ideas, words, and remarkably persuasive analyses. In Phase I of his work, he was our modern W.E.B. DuBois, telling us and the world in prose almost as eloquent as the master, himself, that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line. In Phase II he would have other priorities. He would sing a different tune.

Phase II: Class Consciousness

Where Bill Wilson's scholarly focus in Phase I had been on institutional racism and its structural correlates, his focus in Phase II would shift to social class and its structural correlates. While both race and class were viewed as important societal factors, and while both race bias and class bias would be seen as induced by the malfunctioning of society, the class factors would be seen as paramount, in part, because of the progress which had been made in race relations.

In Phase I, Wilson had written of the 1960s Black struggle as follows: "The recent surge of Black protest has presented a series of challenges to white prerogatives. Blacks have not only revolted against labor exploitation but also have confronted whites in areas where the latter had almost exclusive control (e.g. places of residence, upper status jobs, higher education, politics). Racial tension and hostility has spread, therefore, into institutions occupied by whites who, in the past, could smugly sit back and blame racial problems on lower-class ignorance or on southern racism. Disillusionment and hostility have, in turn, increased among Blacks as they attempt to overcome new obstacles to racial equality erected by the very groups once

defining themselves as either liberal or tolerant toward racial differences." This emphasis would be absent from Phase II.

In Phase I, Wilson showed appreciation for the positive role of the Black middle class. "The rise of the black middle class in America is directly associated with the sustained, disciplined protests during the middle 1950s and early 1960s. In fact, with a few notable exceptions such as the Marcus Garvey movement of the 1920s and the ghetto revolts of the 1960s, it has been the black middle class and black intelligentsia who have most frequently been associated with black protest throughout the period of competitive race relations in America" (Wilson, 1973, p. 196). In Phase II he would have a different assessment of the role of the Black middle class, suggesting a certain responsibility for the rise of the Black underclass.

The centerpiece of Wilson's Phase II scholarship is his prize winning book: *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1978. By now Wilson was Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago.

The Chicago experience. The University of Chicago had begun in keeping with the spirit of the times to recruit Black faculty members and administrators. Among these were John Hope Franklin in history, Edgar Epps in education, Walter Walker in social welfare, and Eddie Williams in public affairs. It takes nothing away from the outstanding qualifications of these Black scholars to say that their race was viewed positively during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in part, because of the changes brought by the civil rights movement, and that they, despite their qualifications, would probably not have been appointed ten years earlier or ten years later. It speaks instead of institutional racism in which the University of Chicago, like most other universities, was involved. It is a situation which would have been seen quite clearly by Wilson in Phase I of his scholarship.

The movement to Chicago, even though at the same rank he held at Massachusetts, was clearly an elevation for Wilson. It provided him social, economic, intellectual, and even political resources to support his work, which surpassed even the generous supportive climate at Massachusetts. As a conse-

quence, his scholarship flourished. Because of his talents, leadership skills, and willingness to work hard, he was soon elevated further by his colleagues at the University of Chicago. In rapid fire order he was elevated to full Professor in 1975, Chairman of the Sociology Department in 1981, and Lucy Flower Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology in 1984. Thus, in the short span of some 25 years since his graduation from college, he had moved through the Army experience (1958–1960) through graduate school and into the top echelon of his profession.

The central thesis of this book and this phase of Wilson's scholarship is that so much progress has occurred in race relations and in the elevation of Blacks that race and racism are no longer the primary obstacles to their well-being. We now enter the era of class consciousness in Wilson's scholarship. For him, class has overtaken race as a barrier to further Black progress.

This sharp departure in his thinking is reflected in the opening paragraph of the preface to his new book. "This book," he says, ". . . is a rather significant departure from that of my previous book, *Power, Racism and Privilege*, in which I paid little attention to the role of class in understanding issues of race" (Wilson, 1978, p. ix) (which is not quite accurate, he did indeed pay considerable attention to class as we have shown above, but he thought race was more significant of the two). Wilson continues, "I now feel that many important features of black and white relations in America are not captured when the issue is defined as majority versus minority and that preoccupation with race and racial conflict obscures fundamental problems that derive from the intersection of class and race" (Wilson, 1978, p. ix). In my view Wilson had seen clearly and written perceptively about the intersection of class and race in Phase I, even as he noted that race was paramount.

It is the ascendancy of class over race that is the true reflection of Wilson's new views: "Race relations in America have undergone fundamental changes in recent years, so much so that now the life chances of individual blacks have more to do with their economic class position than with their day to day encounters with whites" (Wilson, 1978, p. 1).

In other words, for Wilson in Phase II, class and classism

have overtaken race and racism in holding Black people unequal with whites. Specifically, he argued that "In the economic sphere, class has become more important than race in determining black access to privileges and power" (Wilson, 1978, p. 2).

Thus, ten full years before Jesse Jackson would campaign for president in 1988 by urging Blacks and whites to move beyond the racial battleground of the past to the economic common ground of the future, Wilson would declare that the battle had already been won. To many critical observers, this position seemed more theoretical and possibly ideological than factual. Neither Wilson's data base in his book nor the prevailing findings of other studies would support such an abrupt shift in the factors influencing the well-being of Black Americans over so short a time. Particularly is this so during the period between 1973 when he published his first book and 1978 when his second book was published. This was a relatively quiet period in racial progress. By 1978 two years into the Carter presidency, two years after the Watergate political upheaval, and three or so years after the end of the Vietnam war, a period of quietude had already settled over the land. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s had come to an end. The Black power movement which succeeded it had given way to a period of sustained and quiet cultural nationalism. The Black student movement of the late 1960s after making enormous progress in opening up institutions of higher learning had begun to lose its potency. The Great Society programs representing the most massive social reforms affecting Blacks since the New Deal, had begun to lose its steam. As a consequence of all this, by 1978, the progress that had been made during the 1960s was in jeopardy.

This is the political, economic, and social climate within which Wilson issued his Phase II argument, that the progress made by Blacks over the past few years was so substantial and seemingly secure, that he discerned it a certain "declining significance of race," such that social class had become more important in determining the well-being of Black Americans. Many Black scholars and other observers, considered this observation more doctrine than science; more theory than real-

ity; more political than scholarly. And in any event, it seemed to play into the hands of the neo-conservative forces. Thus the Kerner Commission report, which Wilson had mentioned with such favor in his 1973 book, and which he gave scant attention in his 1978 book (and would not mention at all in his Phase III) seemed to many Black scholars to be as accurate in 1978 as it had been a decade earlier in ascribing much of the misery of Black Americans to the deeply-ingrained, often unconscious practices of institutional racism. Wilson would see it differently by 1978. Many observers felt that he had it right the first time.

Benign neglect. It may be of little consequence to poor Black inner-city dwellers to tell them that they are stuck at the bottom of life's resources not because of their race but their class position. Apart from the tautology involved, this insight could hardly make them feel better. But it is of greater consequence for the society-at-large and for social change and social policy to adopt such a view. For if the poor Blacks are being oppressed because of their class, then the solution is clear. Let them improve their class position by going to school, learning skills, improving their personal habits, and getting good jobs. Then, they will be accepted into the mainstream which is waiting for them with open, unbiased arms. The focus becomes "victim help thyself." And the failure to do so is the fault of the victim. Society can afford to engage in "benign neglect," as Moynihan recommended when he served in the Nixon administration.

If, on the other hand, contrary to Wilson's thesis in Phase II, the problems experienced by poor Blacks and other Blacks as well, stem in large measure from their subordinate position as Blacks in a white-dominated society, and is owing in some substantial measure to the structure of privilege and power in the hands of whites, as Wilson argued so persuasively in Phase I, then the alternate solution is also clear. Change the society because people cannot be expected to change their race. But changing the society requires disturbing the status quo. It means disturbing the balance of power. It might even mean sharing some of the privileges of the more privileged with the less privileged. Little wonder, then, that Wilson's thesis in Phase II of his work, the theory that race and racism have been supplanted by class and classism, struck

such a responsive cord among defenders of the status quo. This result is certainly not what Wilson intended. He has expressed his agony that conservatives would have embraced him and his theories in Phase II and that liberals and Black leaders and scholars would be so critical. He was no doubt following the leading of his own mind as influenced, in part, by his own experience. But we know now, that even the best theories, like other human inventions, may have unintended consequences, some of which may be manifest and some latent; some positive and some negative for the understanding and advancing the well-being of disadvantaged minorities.

Phase III: Synthesis

If in Phase I Wilson went overboard in crediting racial subordination for the plight of Black Americans; and if in Phase II he went overboard in claiming that class had overtaken race in the struggle for racial equality, then in Phase III, he attempts to arrive at a synthesis, stating quite clearly that both race and class are continuing phenomena, which serve as barriers to racial equality in America.

Phase III of Wilson's work is represented most clearly by his book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1987. It came out at a time when neo-conservatism was at its height and when Wilson was a national celebrity made famous by his book *The Declining Significance of Race* and his controversial thesis that class had overtaken racial discrimination in the well-being of Black Americans. It was a thesis eagerly embraced by neo-conservatives and criticized by Black scholars. Wilson says that he wrote this book in reaction to the criticism he received over his 1978 book, *The Declining Significance of Race*. He was distressed that critics of that book overlooked his assertion that both race and class were continuing phenomena and focused instead on his discussions of class. He wanted to correct that perceived imbalance in emphasis in the new book. He was also unhappy that critics focused on his discussion of the Black middle class, which he described as having made such substantial progress that race and racism were no longer the principle barriers to their further development, and ignored his discussions of the problems faced by

the growing numbers of poor Blacks. Wilson also reacted to the criticism that he set-forth no solutions to the problems faced by Blacks in his 1978 book, giving the impression that there was no need for solutions, since the problems had subsided to such great extent. Still it must be said that the 1978 book was well received by audiences of all political spectrums, and among its many awards, was the most prestigious award given by the American Sociological Association. Even so, Wilson felt the need to develop a synthesis of his views on race and class in his new book, thus we have titled Part III of Wilson's work Synthesis.

In his own words Wilson set forth the aims of this new work:

During the controversy over *The Declining Significance of Race*, I committed myself to doing two things: (1) I would address the problems of the Ghetto underclass in a comprehensive analysis; and (2) I would spell out, in considerable detail, the policy implications of my work. . . . The first commitment grew out of my personal and academic reaction to the early critics' almost total preoccupation with my arguments concerning the black middle class . . . (instead of) . . . my analysis of the underclass in *The Declining Significance of Race*.

The manner in which he approached both these objectives, including especially the language he uses and his criticisms of others who take a different approach, and what Troy Duster has called the "non-secutuers" spread generously throughout the book have also invited considerable criticism as did his 1978 book.

The focus of Wilson's book and his major work during Phase III is on what he terms "the black ghetto underclass." His aim in the book, he said was (1) to challenge liberal orthodoxy in analyzing inner-city problems; discuss in candid terms the social pathologies of the inner city; establish a case for moving beyond race-specific policies to ameliorate inner-city social conditions to policies that address the broader problems of societal organization . . . and (establish) a public-policy agenda designed to improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass by emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races can positively relate" (Wilson, 1987, p. viii).

Wilson's underclass. He defines the underclass as persons who live in neighborhoods "populated almost exclusively by the most disadvantaged segments of the black urban community, that heterogeneous grouping of families and individuals who are outside the mainstream of the American occupational system. Included in this group are individuals who lack training and skills, and either experience long-term unemployment, or are not members of the labor force; individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families that experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency. These are the populations to which I refer when I speak of the underclass" (Wilson, 1987, p. 8).

The wide range of types of people and behavior included in this definition suggests that Wilson has not been any more successful than other advocates of the underclass concept in isolating a specific social phenomenon to which it refers. Operational definitions are also fraught with difficulty. If one asks how is underclass different from poverty, the answer is that it includes poverty. If it is asked how does it differ from unemployment, the answer is that it includes unemployment. If the question is how does underclass differ from long-term welfare recipients, single-parent families, teen pregnancy, and so forth, the answer is that it includes all those. And now street crime has been added to the definition. This label, thus, hardly advances our knowledge or understanding about the lives of poor residents of the inner cities. In his actual research, much more than his central thesis or rhetoric, Wilson does indeed advance our understanding of inner-city problems.

Using census data for Chicago for both 1970 and 1980 Wilson establishes that there has been a phenomenal growth and spread of "poverty areas" during that decade. He also shows a heavy and increasing concentration of poor people in these poverty areas, with fewer and fewer poor people living in non-poverty areas. Indeed, Wilson's data show a substantial increase in the concentration of poor whites in poverty areas, but he does not deal much with explanations of white poverty. For despite his philosophical and theoretical admonitions against "race specific" approaches, he concentrates almost wholly on the Black poor in these inner-city areas and sets forth his explanation of how they got that way.

In order to qualify as ghetto underclass in Wilson's Phase III period, persons need to be Black and live in neighborhoods where at least 20% of the people are below the poverty level. Even when Wilson divides ghetto underclass areas into three categories to reflect the varying degrees of concentration of poor people, neither of his three degrees of poverty areas requires a majority of poor people. Thus, for him, poverty areas include any and all neighborhoods with 20% or more of poor inhabitants. Mild poverty areas are those with between 20 and 29% poor people; moderate poverty areas are those with between 30 and 39% poor people; and extreme poverty areas are those with 40% or more poor people. Thus, even his most extreme poverty areas do not require a majority of the people to be poor. In other words, the very definition of a ghetto underclass neighborhood requires that only 20% of the people in the neighborhood be poor. Then, Wilson proceeds to treat the whole neighborhood and all the people in it as though they are poor, or unemployed, or on welfare, or engage in street crime. While there is undoubtedly plenty of these behaviors in neighborhoods where 20% or more of the people are poor, it hardly advances the cause of scientific specificity, to set-forth so loose a definition of this very popular concept. Moreover, if only 20% of the people are poor, then it is possible that up to 80% of the people in some ghetto underclass neighborhood are not even poor. The recognition of this reality casts considerable doubt on Wilson's repeated treatment of these areas as if all or almost all the middle class and "stable working class Blacks" have left these areas. While he provides no data to support this assertion, he repeats it throughout the book, and the vanishing of the Black middle- and working-class families from the inner cities becomes a major explanatory factor in his theory as to why the conditions have worsened in the inner city.

What this demonstrates, strikingly, is that the so-called ghetto underclass neighborhoods are not peopled by all or even a majority of poor people. Some people live there not because they are poor but because they are Black. What his data also show is that not all or even a majority of middle-class and working-class Black families have left the inner city, while

it is true that a majority of white middle-class families have deserted the inner cities. Both these facts call into question the central explanatory thesis of Wilson's Phase III scholarship, namely that it is not so much racism that causes the problems of the inner city, but cleavages among Black people themselves, especially between the Black middle class and the Black underclass.

Another tenet of Wilson's thesis holds up more strongly and makes an important contribution to knowledge. That is his thesis that "impersonal forces" of the economy technology and the larger shift from industrial to service economy are major causes of the worsening conditions of Black inner city dwellers. Even on this tenet, however, it is difficult to see that these are "race neutral" forces, since their consequences fall most adversely on Black people.

Wilson shows data from the U.S. Census for 1980 which shows that fully 68% of white poor lived outside poverty areas, in the nation's five largest cities while only 15% of Black poor and 20% of Hispanic poor lived outside poverty areas. This would appear to be a striking example of the triumph of race over class. For while all these persons are poor, the white poor get preferential treatment by being more readily accepted outside poverty areas than the Black poor or the Hispanic poor.

The heart of Wilson's contribution to knowledge in Phase III, is his discussion of the rapid increase in poverty in the nation's five largest cities between 1970 and 1980 by some 22% and the even more rapid increase in the population living in poverty areas. "Furthermore the population living in poverty areas grew by 40% overall, by 69% in high-poverty areas, (i.e., areas with a poverty rate of at least 30%) and by a staggering 161% in extreme-poverty areas (i.e., areas with a poverty rate of at least 40%)" (Wilson, 1987, p. 46).

Blacks as main cause of the underclass. Then we come to Wilson's amazing explanation of this concentration of poor and nonpoor Black people in these poverty areas:

"The extraordinary increase in both the poor and nonpoor populations in the extreme-poverty areas between 1970 and 1980 was due mainly to changes in the demographic characteristics of the black population" (Wilson, 1987, p. 46).

Again while noting that the white population in extreme poverty areas in these five largest cities also increased substantially, by 24%, because these increases were so much smaller than the Black population increases, he felt no need to explain this white increase in poverty. It is the same mistake Moynihan made in 1965 when he found that the single parent rate among white families was so much lower than among Black families that there was no need to explain the white rate. The white rate, whatever it was, was considered normal as long as it was substantially lower than the Black rate. The Black rate was, thus, deviant and needed an explanation unique to Black people. Two decades later the phenomenal increase in single-parent families among whites caused Moynihan to change his explanation that single-parent families constituted a Black family characteristic. One hopes that Wilson will learn this too, particularly since he considers Moynihan one of his intellectual mentors.

Our own view, as we have noted elsewhere, is that it is not likely that the problem of concentration of low-income Blacks in inner cities and the problems they experience can be explained by "the demographic characteristics of the black population," as Wilson argues. The explanation lies elsewhere, and lies outside the inner city and outside the Black population altogether. In our view, there are much more powerful social, economic, and technological forces at work which offer a better explanation. Indeed, the major factors pushing Blacks into poverty, into inner cities, and into what Wilson calls the "tangle of pathology", again borrowing very controversial terminology employed by Moynihan in 1965, are the same forces causing these problems among low- and moderate-income whites. They impact on Blacks more adversely because Blacks are more vulnerable, being less powerful, and being subjected to the added burden of racial subordination in addition to their class subordination, which in theory poor blacks share with poor whites. In our view, this helps to explain the growing poverty among whites and the increase in the white population in poverty areas in recent years by a phenomenal 24%.

Wilson's argument that Black flight from the inner city is the primary cause of the concentration of low-income blacks there and the attendant social problems is repeated throughout

this book (Wilson, 1987) and is a hallmark of vintage Wilson phase III.

There are a number of problems with Wilson's formulation. As we have pointed out elsewhere, the thesis that the exodus of the Black middle class from the inner city is a proximate cause of the worsening of conditions there, overlooks at least two other social forces much more powerful than the small trickle of Black middle class, which left the inner city long before the Black middle class did. These are the white middle class which began to leave the inner city in massive numbers in the 1950s after World War II and continued into the 1960s, the very period Wilson notes in his analysis. They left because of massive government support to build the suburbs. The suburbs were the haven of white flight. They were not open to Blacks—middle class or otherwise. If this was not an example of the working of institutional racism, even if unintended, it would be difficult to find such. The second force which left the inner city beginning in the 1960s and the 1970s and has continued into the 1980s is industry. As industry has moved out of the inner city into the suburbs, into other parts of the country (i.e., the sunbelt) and to overseas locations of cheap labor, the inner cities have become impoverished. Again the Black middle class was not responsible for this industrial relocation. And again while such relocation may not carry a racial label or even racial intent, they carry a distinct racial effect. Nor were they carried out without substantial government subsidy. Blacks suffer more, in part because they are confined to the inner cities because of discriminatory housing patterns and, in part, because of discriminatory low wages.

Wilson's penchant for blaming Black people, particularly Black middle and working class people for the problems of the Black poor, seems hardly distinct from the eagerness of conservatives to blame those who are most victimized by societal forces for the conditions they and their fellows suffer. Thus in Phase III, Wilson has not developed a synthesis of his first two phases. He has continued to move in the direction a conservative ideological interpretation, seeking to fortify his criticism of liberals and blacks who propose race specific solutions to the problems Black people face.

Perhaps Wilson's greatest contribution to knowledge in

Phase III is his elaboration of a thesis advanced by others that the increase in single-parent families among the Black population is influenced directly by the increase in the economic deprivation of Black men. As early as 1940 the Black sociologist Oliver Cox pointed up the impact of the relative shortage of black men on the marriage rate and single-parent rate in the Black community. Another Black sociologist Jacqueline J. Jackson, expanded on this observation in 1967 in a celebrated article in *Black Scholar* magazine titled "But Where Are The Men." Even Moynihan noted in his 1965 study that the rise in Black single-parent families between 1940 and 1960 followed almost exactly the rise in unemployment among Black men. The taking up where Moynihan left off, Tom Joe has shown that the combination of official unemployment and Black men out of work for other reasons help to explain almost directly the incidence of single-parent families in the Black community from 1960 to the present time. An even more innovative approach to this problem has been developed by two other Black social scientists, Joseph Scott and James Stewart with their concept, "The institutional decimation of the American Black male."

Wilson is, thus, continuing a stream of analysis offered by a number of scholars prior to him. He makes an important contribution, however, by creating what he terms a "Male Marriageability Index," which measures the proportion of Black men between the ages 25 and 45 who are in the community and steadily employed and single, as compared with the number of Black females who are single. He finds a wide disparity suggesting that there are not nearly enough eligible Black males available for the numbers of eligible black females of marriageable age.

There are a number of problems with Wilson's index as Bonnie Dill and others have pointed out. Even so, however, it is an important contribution by crystallizing some important data.

Wilson notes that "in the 1960s scholars readily attributed black family deterioration to the problems of male joblessness." This has not been the case during the past ten to fifteen years. During this period, welfare has come to be seen as the major

source of family instability. During the same period some attention has been paid to changing social and cultural norms regarding early sexuality as a factor in marital instability. After examining all these factors, Wilson concludes that the focus should again shift to joblessness especially among Blacks. While I do not agree with some of his observations, such as that among whites, it is working wives that explains family instability more than joblessness of men, his analysis, reading of other studies, and conclusions about the impact of Black male joblessness on family structure are impressive. It is unfortunate, however, that he sees this matter in such "race specific" terms (Wilson, 1987, p. 99). A number of studies have shown that joblessness and economic deprivation among whites also have devastating effects on family stability.

He is also perceptive in showing that the decrease in job opportunities for Black men is greatest in those regions adversely affected by the shift from manufacturing jobs to low-wage service jobs. Wilson, thus, makes an important contribution not only to our understanding of changes in Black family structure, but to the necessary public policy to correct this situation (Wilson, 1987, p. 106).

Toward the end of this book, Wilson has come finally to agree that jobs for Black women, especially good jobs with good pay, along with good jobs for Black men will also enhance family stability, though he gives short shift to jobs for women throughout most of his book, and his work in Phase III. He has thus, belatedly realized the correctness of the finding by Robert Hill more than five years before, that "Black women are poor not so much because they do not have husbands as because they do not have good jobs." As some of Wilson's critics about his marriageability index have observed, it is incorrect to suggest that Black women are just a husband away from poverty. Poverty is an economic condition produced by the absence of wealth, not the absence of husbands. If husbands are unemployed, and cannot work, for whatever reason, their capacity to produce wealth is much more sharply curtailed than their capacity to produce children. Single-parent families in the Black community, as elsewhere, grow as much out of the social

structure as out of the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. One would expect this basic sociological insight to receive more respect in a treatise by so prominent a sociologist.

Policy Recommendations

Wilson's recommendation for public policies to stem the erosion of the quality of life in the inner cities, contained in the 30 pages of his chapters 5 and 6 and recapitulated in his summary chapter 7, fall far short of his aims in writing this book.

In his two policy chapters he seems more interested in taking pot shots at those who differ with his thesis and those whom he faults for pursuing "race-specific policies" and "race relations strategies," that he misses an opportunity to set-forth the coherent program for reforming the conditions of inner-city Black families that he promised. His obsession with avoiding the stark reality of race mars considerably his ability to set-forth coherent policies.

This policy section is the most disappointing and most sketchily put together section of this short book. Even those who agree with Wilson philosophically and those who applaud his analysis of the problem have faulted him for the inadequacy of his policy formulations.

Perhaps in Phase IV of Wilson's work, which hopefully will emerge from the massive research program he is now undertaking to examine the problems of low-income Black, white, and Hispanic families in Chicago will enable him to arrive at the true synthesis which eludes him in this Phase III of his work.

What then, does Wilson have to say about public policies to rescue low-income Black families and individuals from their confinement and growth in the inner cities.

First, in keeping with his emphasis on jobs, he recommends a macroeconomic restructuring of the national economy to create a tight labor market and full employment so that there would be jobs available for men and women of all races and of all social classes. Second, such reform should be accompanied by manpower training programs to prepare the unskilled members with low education and loss of motivation

for the new jobs that would be created, presumably the private industry. Just how this is to be done, Wilson does not say. He does say that he doubts that either the Republican or Democratic parties are likely to undertake such a policy. “. . . it will require a radicalism that neither Democratic nor Republican parties have as yet been realistic enough to propose” (Wilson, 1987, p. 139). Since Wilson has described himself as a social democrat, perhaps he means to urge a third party as the solution to Black problems in the inner city.

Third, he proposes a national subsidized program of child care so that working parents will have this available at a cost they can afford without remaining or falling into poverty. Fourth, recognizing that some adults will not be able to work for various reasons he proposes that the current welfare program be strengthened, with AFDC benefits adjusted for inflation. Fifth, he proposes a program of child support, whereby the state would collect from absent fathers and in the absence of their ability to pay would provide a children's allowance for all needy children. Sixth, he advocates a European-style child-support program providing an allowance for all children of all socioeconomic levels. He suggests that high-income families would pay for this service through higher taxes.

He reasons that all these programs should be available to all families without regard to race, socioeconomic status, or need so that the more privileged members of society would also benefit and, therefore, provide their support to get such programs enacted.

Still, he says that after all the above actions there would need to be some targeted programs and even some race specific programs and means tested programs especially for low-income families (Wilson, 1987, p. 154). He does not say why this should be necessary after arguing the opposite throughout Phase III of his scholarship. These would be considered in his scheme “offshoots of and indeed secondary to the universal programs” (Wilson, 1987, p. 154). Perhaps this suggests some version of trickle-down welfare reform, where the dominant group benefits more and offshoot benefits are provided as a secondary service to the poor and racial minorities. His essential purpose he argues, which he calls his hidden agenda,

“... is to improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass by emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races and class backgrounds can positively relate” (Wilson, 1987, p. 155).

There are a number of problems with this program of reform recommended by Wilson. First, it is difficult to see how it is related to his analysis of the ghetto underclass and the explanation for how it came to be as it is today. Nothing in his proposal would return the Black middle class and working class that have left the inner city. He does not even propose Enterprise Zones, which a number of conservative republicans have endorsed. And, he is opposed to set-asides for minority businesses or other government help for minority businesses on the grounds that they are “race specific.” Indeed, he is generally opposed to affirmative action and to race specific legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Open Housing Act of 1968, to the War on Poverty, and other Great Society Programs of the 1960s, which is no doubt why he has been embraced so warmly by conservatives and supporters of the racial status quo. Wilson’s rationale, however, is different from those of George Murray and George Gilder and the Black Conservatives. He does not believe that these programs cause poverty or welfare dependency, or family disintegration. He is opposed to them, in part, because they become easy targets for the opposition of others, and because they benefit the Black middle classes at the expense of the poor. “The problems of the truly disadvantaged,” he argues, “may require nonracial solutions such as full employment, balanced economic growth, and manpower training and education.”

The problem with this way of thinking is that here Wilson falls into the familiar American way of either/or thinking which he avoided so studiously in Phase I. There he saw more of the complexity of things, that both full employment and affirmative action may be necessary to correct the historic and contemporary subordination of the Black poor. It may not be necessary to choose either one or the other.

Moreover, Wilson is just plain wrong when he asserts that only middle-class Blacks benefit from race specific programs,

affirmative action, and the war on poverty. The fact is that low-income Blacks also benefitted. As Troy Duster has pointed out many of the jobs opened up in police departments, fire departments, and other public services have been filled by low-income Black persons. Moreover, low-income whites and especially middle-income whites also benefit from affirmative action and race-specific policies.

Thus, when the Black Mayor of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson, supported the building of the Atlanta Airport only if it included set-asides for Black businesses and affirmative action goals for minority workers, his actions benefitted both Black and white. The fact that now 25 percent of the small businesses run out of the Atlanta Airport are Black owned and that a third of the employees are Black still leaves plenty of opportunity for expanded business ownership and employments for whites. Similar programs have been launched in a number of cities with Black mayors.

And in the field of higher education, when the Black student movement of which Wilson is aware, demanded open admissions in the 1960s and other minority students did the same, the results have been expanded places in college for white students as well, and expanded job opportunities for middle class white professionals as well as for Blacks. It is, thus, a mistake to think or assert that race-specific programs benefit only middle-income Blacks.

Certainly the Great Society programs, including the war on poverty, brought benefits to whites as well as to Blacks and not all the blacks who benefitted were middle class. It is true that these government programs did provide for the phenomenal expansion of the Black middle class. It is difficult to see that this was done at the expense of the poor. The hundreds of thousands of Blacks moved out of poverty between 1960 and 1975 and the even larger numbers of whites who were moved out of poverty cannot be fairly said to have been middle class. It is faulty reasoning to suggest that if programs move people out of the lower class into the working class, or into the middle class in one or two generations, that this is an expansion of and benefit to the middle class at the expense of the poor. In such assertions ideology seems to triumph over experience.

Another major failure of Wilson's program of reform is that it has no place for black economic advancement beyond employment. He even scoffs at the "Black solidarity movement" and the idea of "Black control of institutions serving the black community," and sees no need for Black entrepreneurship. In Wilson's America of Phase III, these matters would be left to white people. This is a curious kind of "nonracial solution."

As a sometimes member of the Black solidarity movement, I don't recall that anyone has ever advocated that Black ownership of a piece of the American economic and social structure was the sole answer to Black problems. But it is difficult to see how one can make a case against Black ownership and control in a multiracial society. Again it is not a matter of Black ownership and control or white ownership and control, or Asian ownership and control but shared and equitable distribution of these resources which a truly democratic society demands. Enlightened public policy of whatever political persuasion should not confine Black people to the role of employees of others. Moreover, the history and contemporary status of the Black community suggest that there is room for ownership and control, without discriminating against others. My own experience, observations, and current research suggest that the Black Church, for example, which is owned and controlled by Black people generally, makes a positive contribution not only to the spiritual well-being of large numbers of Blacks but to their social, political, economic, and psychological well-being as well (Billingsley, 1988-A). Wilson makes no room in his program of reform for Black pride, but the Black church, and other Black-owned institutions make a major contribution to Black uplift by the instillation of racial pride, surely an important commodity for any people and especially for one which has undergone such historic subordination.

Bart Landry has made a careful data based dispassionate assessment that it was both economic growth and affirmative action programs that account for the upward mobility of Blacks during the 1960s. He points out that economic growth in the 1950s without affirmative action did not sustain such Black progress as did the 1960s; and that affirmative action without

economic growth in the 1970s also did not sustain Black progress (Landry, 1988). Wilson surely must have read Landry's work but apparently does not find it persuasive or compatible with his thesis.

Institutional Racism

One searches Wilson's Phase III in vain for the kind of trenchant analysis of institutional racism found in vintage Wilson Phase I. Wilson's analysis and policy formulations in Phase III take no account of institutional racism. Wilson seems so intent on denying the relevance of race that he takes sharp issue with his democratic socialist colleague Michael Harrington, whom he says he admires, in Harrington's correct and perceptive argument that institutional racism still exists. Harrington has observed, moreover, as Robert Hill has that such racism need not be intentional and need not be tied to the beliefs of particular individuals. Thus, according to Harrington there is an "economic structure of racism that will persist even if every white who hates blacks goes through a total conversion because there is an "occupational hierarchy rooted in history and institutionalized in the labor market" (Wilson, 1987).

Taking sharp issue with this view, Wilson states that the problem with this argument is that "complex problems in the American and worldwide economies that ostensibly *have little or nothing to do with race*, problems that fall heavily on much of the black population but require solutions that confront the broader issues of economic organization, are not made more understandable by associating them directly or indirectly with racism. Indeed, because this term is used so indiscriminately, it weakens the argument against racial problems and strengthens conservative arguments making them seem fresher" (Wilson, 1987, p. 12).

Wilson continues to tongue-lash Harrington, who was professor of Economics at the City University of New York and the father of the War on Poverty for "talking vaguely about an economic structure of racism" (Wilson, 1987, p. 12). In dismissing the economic analysis of the economist Michael Harrington, who has devoted considerable time studying poverty, and adopting instead the economic analysis of Glen Loury, the

Black conservative Harvard economist, Wilson betrays a curious allegiance to his color-blind perspective at the expense of analytic clarity.

Again, Wilson is wrong in his assumption that it is necessary to deny the existence of institutional racism to advance social reform that commands the support of a majority of the public. It has been done at several points in history including the period of the 1960s. It requires forthright leadership on the part of intellectuals and policy makers no less than civil rights leaders. Troy Duster who finds many commendable features of Wilson's work, including especially his call for macroeconomic changes in the structure of society, also holds that Wilson overdoes his denial of the relevance of race in America. "Since Wilson did not intend to write a book about institutional racism", Duster argues, "he can hardly be faulted for not doing so. But there is a danger that his stance, being so committed to non-race specific policies, will deflect, not complement, the growing sophistication of those who have argued that institutional racism is such a deeply embedded feature of American society that 'macro solutions' cannot address it" (*Contemporary Sociology*, May 1988, p. 289).

Nowhere, however, in his analysis or policy recommendations does Wilson set-forth a coherent political philosophy. Many of Wilson's ideas, criticisms, and recommendations are so comfortable for conservatives, that they have applauded him. And while Wilson goes to great pains to disassociate himself from Black conservatives, including Tom Sowell and Walter Williams—while embracing Glen Loury, another Black conservative—many of his ideas have been embraced by white conservatives.

Moreover, though Wilson describes himself as a social democrat, his policy recommendations do not seem particularly radical. Indeed, his insistence on providing equal benefits for the haves and the have nots, borders on pandering to the middle class which is rather trendy just now among both conservatives and liberals whom Wilson denounces throughout his book.

My own view is that justice would be better served if we could pursue the hard job of helping to empower the poor, so

that they could demand or negotiate with the American established society more effectively on their own behalf; and at the same time teach the middle class some values—basic democratic values, such as equality, fraternity, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all.

Other Scholars on Poverty

A number of other scholars have recently put forth more compelling policy recommendations to deal with the problem of poverty. Among these are David T. Ellwood and Lisbeth Schorr.

In his book *Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family*, David T. Ellwood pulls together some analyses and observations he has made over the past few years, including some very fine work he has done in collaboration with Mary Jo Bane, who served for a time as Deputy Commissioner of the New York State Department of Welfare. Both are now on the faculty of the Harvard University Kennedy School.

With essentially the same concern as Wilson, namely, how to understand and cure poverty, Ellwood casts a somewhat broader net than Wilson's more narrow focus on the Black inner-city poor in northern cities. Reminding us that the celebrated inner-city poor comprises less than 10% of all poor people in the nation, he seeks also to examine and prepare policies for two other categories of the poor, namely the working poor, two-parent families, and families headed by single females. Most of the poor are white and most of them are not on welfare. Indeed, one-half of all poor children in the nation are in two-parent families. What they share in common is that they have been abandoned by the larger society and by the fathers of their children. In every category of poverty, however, Blacks suffer more than their white counterparts.

By showing us the facts and the faces of poverty among Black and white, married and unmarried parents, working and nonworking poor, new and old poor, Ellwood enables us to see the problem much more clearly than Wilson's color-blind analysis, which, nevertheless, focuses exclusively on the inner-city Black poor with no meaningful attachment to the work force. Thus, while Wilson spends inordinate effort on trying

to get inner-city Blacks into the work force, he does not give proper attention to the facts that most poor Blacks are already in the work force, and that has not cured their poverty. Moreover, if all the Black middle-class and working-class families who have left the inner city were to move back, it would not appreciably affect the poverty rate of other inner-city dwellers.

Ellwood helps us to see that the poverty problem is so pervasive that it must be viewed and corrected at the societal level. It is a view also taken by Wilson, but his concentration in his analysis on the inner-city Black poor mitigates against his theoretical perspective.

Another approach to the amelioration of poverty is advanced by Lisbeth B. Schorr (Schorr, 1988). Schorr also addresses a wide range of the poor, broader than Wilson but not as comprehensive as Ellwood. The strength of her book is its focus on policy and program options which have already been demonstrated as effective in breaking the cycle of poverty. While Wilson's policy recommendations are general and theoretical, Schorr bases her recommendations on practical interventions which have already worked, for Black, Hispanic and other minority poor. Among these are head-start-type programs, with three year olds which involve their parents in a comprehensive health, education and cultural enrichment experience; prenatal care for pregnant mothers; school-based comprehensive adolescent health-care programs; home-visiting programs with at-risk parents and children; elementary school reforms which involve all elements of the child's learning environment in a positive reinforcement of learning styles and abilities; and many others.

What Schorr succeeds in pointing out without being racially exclusive is that the cultural element in policy rather than Wilson's color-blind approach, offers a more powerful basis for success. Clearly, then, on the basis of this analysis of successful programs, what we need in part is more cultural sensitivity, not less.

Wade Nobles has found in studying the drug problem in inner-city Oakland California that cultural sensitivity is strikingly absent from drug programs and other programs designed to help poor Black families, and from the helping agencies

alike. He argues for a more effective race- and cultural-specific approach rather than less (Nobles).

It may be, then, that Wilson will yet train his brilliant mind and agile pen on the complex of problems which face the inner-city Black poor in a manner that will recognize all of the complex factors which hold them down, including large scale impersonal forces and small scale personal forces in which both race and class interact with other forces including gender, age, and sexual orientation to serve as barriers to social justice. His new and massive research program in Chicago seems to provide that opportunity. Perhaps this will usher in Phase IV of his work which will more nearly approach the synthesis which he and we seek.

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Racism in Advanced Capitalist Society:
Comments on William J. Wilson's
The Truly Disadvantaged

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Let me begin with words of praise. Bill Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* is a serious and important work. In it he alerts the nation to the alarming rise of social dislocation in Black inner city communities. But rather than joining with the conservative chorus which dominates political debate about this issue, Wilson focuses on the social structure, especially joblessness, as the key to the whole network of pathologies. Black inner city joblessness is, in turn, explained by large-scale economic shifts, interacting with a legacy of past racial discrimination, as well as various demographic factors. The result is the construction of a liberal analysis that challenges the dominant conservative position, which places the blame on the welfare system and ghetto subculture. Instead, Wilson claims, the blame lies with larger, social structural forces.

Wilson is not only bold in his analysis but makes strong recommendations to this nation's leaders as to what to do about the growing problem. His policy recommendations grow directly out of his analysis. If joblessness, growing out of economic restructuring, is the problem, then more jobs need to be created. Business, labor and government need to get together and engage in balanced economic planning, to encourage stable economic growth and a tight labor market. Although these policies will not necessarily bring an immediate end to the pathologies of the ghetto, Wilson believes that, when coupled with immediate interventions, they should eventually remedy the problems. Joblessness is the central causal factor; its elimination should mitigate most of the social problems found among the Black poor.

Wilson also daringly takes on the issue of racism. He questions whether racism can be blamed for the current problems of the inner city poor. Pointing out that the last several decades have marked the most progress in civil rights legislation, and even in group-oriented programs like affirmative action, Wilson argues that the patently worsening situation of the ghetto poor cannot possibly be explained by increased racial discrimination. Indeed, this is a central paradox that he poses: Why, given increasingly anti-discriminatory government policies, is the situation of the Black poor actually deteriorating? His answer, apart from economic restructuring, lies in the idea that these programs have mainly benefited the more advantaged members of the Black community, who were in a position to go through the doors that were opening. Not only were poor Blacks neglected by anti-racist policies, but they were also abandoned by the Black middle and stable working classes, who now had the chance for upward and residential mobility. Ghetto communities lost role models for mainstream behavior in this exodus, but more importantly, they lost support for institutions, like the schools.

Because Wilson does not see current racial discrimination as a major reason for the problems faced by the Black poor today, he proposes that the solution lies elsewhere than in race-specific programs. It lies in overarching economic policies that will open up opportunities for the very poor, regardless of race. This program is bolstered for Wilson by the political reality that race-specific programs are not popular among most whites. He is eager to present proposals that have a realistic chance of being implemented. Similarly, Wilson is cautious about means-tested programs, believing they stigmatize the poor and suffer from unstable political support. Better to follow the model of Western European social democracies which provide public goods for all. Again, he believes such programs have more chance of political survival in the United States than programs geared to special groups.

I hope I have done justice to Wilson's argument. It is complex and well-documented. I believe it will pose a serious challenge to the conservative ideologues who dominate our nation today. Wilson has engaged them directly, spoken in a language

that they can understand, and, I hope, has opened debate on these important questions.

Now I am not bound by the necessity of speaking to the nation's political leaders. I have no expectations that they will ever listen to me, so I am going to speak in a language that would immediately turn them off. I want to state my own position, which diverges from Wilson's on several key points, and appeal, not to the U.S. government, but to ourselves to do something about the enormous social problems that Wilson so ably describes. I would label my position as radical or Marxist, in contrast to Wilson's liberalism, and I hope, in the course of this discussion, to reveal some of the limits of a liberal model.

Capitalism and Exploitation

First of all, I concur with Wilson that the problems of inner city Blacks need to be seen in social structural terms. But I don't think that "economic restructuring" gets at the heart of the problem. In my view, the capitalist system itself is the fundamental issue, and economic restructuring is only one of its surface manifestations.

Capitalism is a system that depends on exploitation. The owners of private property enhance their wealth by exploiting the labor of the propertyless. For this reason, property-owners have an interest in propertylessness, since if there were no have-nots, there could be no one to work for them, no one to rent their buildings, no one from whom wealth could be derived.

This basic fact means that capitalist societies, or more accurately, world capitalism, can never rid itself of poverty. It requires poverty. Poverty is the basis of wealth. The dependency of the rich on the poor is the fundamental, hidden reality of this system.

Of course the dominant ideology totally covers up this reality. It tries to argue that the United States (to take one example) is like a race in which everyone has equal opportunity to get ahead. The rich are merely the swiftest runners, the most able and talented. And the poor are the stupid and lazy, the people who couldn't keep up because of lack of talent or character.

Therefore, the rich deserve what they have, and the poor deserve to go without. There is no relationship between wealth and poverty; certainly the rich bear no responsibility for the poor and will, at best, only take a charitable, humanitarian interest, out of the goodness of their hearts. Or they may, on occasion, notice that a highly polarized society may be dangerous to live in, so they had better ameliorate the extremes.

As I say, I see this version as a mystifying ideology that covers up the basic theft, repeated daily, that characterizes the relationship between rich and poor in this country. A tiny proportion of the U.S. population owns most of the wealth of this nation. The top one-half of one percent own over one-third of the wealth, and they own 45 percent if personal residences are excluded, according to a Congressional study. The 400 richest Americans, as reported by Forbes magazine, together owned \$220 billion in 1987, a figure that is close to the U.S. military budget, and higher than the U.S. budget deficit or total U.S. investment abroad. Did these super-rich owners *earn* their wealth through their own talent and hard work? The idea is preposterous. Huge fortunes are not made that way. They are made by grabbing and claiming and stealing. They are made through conquest and coercion. And the impoverishment of masses of human beings is the inevitable accompaniment.

To repeat, the wealthy depend on poverty for their riches. They are committed to it, wedded to it. They cannot do without it. Jesse Jackson captured this reality when he said to a group of poor people: "You are not the bottom. You are the foundation." For this reason, the capitalist class, and the governments they put in power, will never support a serious effort to rid our system of poverty. If they manage, during liberal regimes, to mitigate it a bit domestically, then capitalists turn abroad to exploit the poor in the Third World. Capital accumulation depends on exploitation, and exploitation both requires and reproduces poverty. The profitability of capital requires a dispossessed population. It is this concept that is missing from Wilson's analysis.

Capitalism and Racism

This brings me to the issue of racism. To Wilson, racism seems to mean acts of prejudice and discrimination. If an

employer promotes a white person over an equally qualified Black person, then we have evidence of racism. I am sure that Wilson would also include in his definition institutional racism, for instance, inferior schools in ghetto neighborhoods, even if not an actively promoted plan of some anti-Black individual or group, could still be seen as an instance of racism.

But I see racism in a different light. For me, racism is a system of exploitation. It is a mechanism for effectively controlling and oppressing peoples so that a maximum of profits can be extracted from them. In this view, the emergence of a fairly affluent Black middle class does not belie the persistence of racism. Indeed, if we examine the functions of the Black middle class in this system we will find that they, like the white middle class, are PART of the structure of oppression of the Black poor and working class.

I shall return to the role of the middle class, both white and of color, shortly. Right now I want to dwell briefly on the relationship between capitalism and racism. It seems to me that capitalism and racism are closely connected. The emergence of capitalism in Western Europe coincided with the "voyages of discovery," or colonial domination of most of the rest of the world. Capitalism evolved in Europe in part because of imperialism and the ability to extract wealth from the other nations and peoples of the globe. Ideas about racial inferiority and the superiority of Europe accompanied this conquest and expansion, providing a justification for an obviously unprovoked aggression. The Europeans managed to convince themselves that their reign of terror was really beneficent, bringing enlightenment, religion, and economic development to the savages. In fact, they often brought genocide and enslavement. The plunder they took helped build the economic and military might of Europe.

Now the history of Black America fits neatly into this larger picture. Africans were forcibly brought to the Americas for one reason: so that white property owners could exploit their labor for profit. Can anyone deny it?

But now we live in an era when slavery has long been abolished and when even its aftermath of sharecropping, segregation and disenfranchisement are gradually being disestablished. The government, the media, the official ideology, all

proclaim their abhorrence for using race as a criterion for the allocation of any of the society's resources. A color blind society is the professed ideal, with each individual judged and rewarded according to his or her own individual merits apart from group membership. What meaning does racism have against such a backdrop?

In my view, the United States continues to be a deeply racist society despite this rhetoric. Racism continues to inhere in at least two aspects of the system. First, it consists in the continued exploitation of people of color for profit. And second, it is demonstrated in the demand that people of color must accommodate to the white man's system, rather than vice versa. Let me elaborate on these two points.

A racial division of labor continues to be very evident in this society. Despite the movement of small numbers of people of color into middle class jobs, almost all of the "dirty work" in this society continues to be done by people of color. I am not going to present statistics to prove the point. Anyone who keeps their eyes open for one minute will see it. Who makes the beds in the hotels? Who cleans the floors in middle class houses? Who collects the garbage? Who empties the bedpans in hospitals? Who does most of the minimum wage jobs in this nation, and the below minimum wage jobs?

The exploited labor of these millions of workers fills the coffers of the wealthy, virtually all of whom are white. Wealth is continuously drained from Black and Latino and Native American communities, through the hard labor and lack of remuneration of their people. The huge wealth of America's white-owned corporations rests on the backs of the hard labor of workers, many of whom are people of color.

Wilson blames this phenomenon not on racism but on the inadequate training of minority youth for a changing job market. But here I think he is buying into the great fiction of this society that education, and not property, is the key to wealth, and that everyone, regardless of race, has an equal access to education. I shall return to the "great education myth" a little later. For now I just want to point out that there is a systemic racial oppression that keeps people of color doing the dirty work. It isn't necessary to break it down into its components

in order to “explain away” the racial aspects. It is a cohesive package, a unitary phenomenon.

The racial exploitation of people of color is quite parallel to the colonial exploitation of Third World peoples. When we learn that between 1982 and 1987, poor countries transferred a net total of \$140 billion in interest payments to the banks of rich countries, we don’t feel compelled to break that down into such factors as lower educational levels. The overwhelming reality is that these poor nations are being sucked dry by the gargantuan, white-controlled, multinationals. The lack of education, and a million other social ills, are the result of this drainage, not its cause.

Wilson and others might argue: But the problem in the ghetto is not exploitation, but joblessness. How can Black inner city residents be exploited when they aren’t working? I am not going to try to answer this question in full. I just want to suggest that unemployment is unabashedly useful to the capitalist class in keeping the cost of all labor down, so that the Black minimum wage worker can be kept at that unlivable level because her brothers and sisters are jobless. And secondly, that the drainage of the ghetto of whatever resources it can muster continues on a daily and hourly basis. If we could track the flow of dollars, I have no doubt that the dominant flow is outward: to landlords and shopkeepers and drug lords, and so forth. All those facts and figures that Wilson presents about Black poverty only prove the point that racism is alive and well in America.

Now let me turn to the question of assimilationism. Wilson often refers to the “mainstream” in his book. What is this mainstream? It is white, capitalist culture. It entails a value system based on the concept of utilitarian individualism, seeking to compete with one’s fellows in order to move up the social ladder. It is a dog-eat-dog world, where you try to outdo others and knock them out of the race so that you can win, come in first, and get the big prize while they are left emptyhanded.

Despite the fact that American capitalism declares itself to be color blind, it is, of course, imposing a particular culture on everyone. This is the white man’s culture. It was born and bred in Western Europe. European imperialists imposed it on the

world. They arrogantly asserted its superiority to all other systems of social organization. They coerced the peoples they conquered into accepting their system.

Of course, the white man spoke with forked tongue since, while he promised the benefits of joining his glorious civilization, at the same time he excluded the conquered from it. They "joined" only as his menials. The glories of his civilization were built on their labor, even as they were told that they, too, had "equal opportunity" to get ahead if they just used initiative and saved their pennies.

What I'm trying to say is that the "mainstream" is not neutral. It is capitalist. It is based on vicious inequality. Even if the ruling class of this country pays lip-service to racial equality, they certainly don't pretend that they value social equality. They absolutely do not, and openly oppose any dangerous leveling tendencies. The super-rich white billionaires will not be dispossessed under any circumstances. And the lowly minimum wage will only reluctantly be allowed to inch upward. Wealth and privilege will be protected, with armed might when necessary, in case the poor should rise up and demand a reconstruction of the society. and in between rich and poor, there will be steep ladders of inequality, so that everyone is always a little better or worse off than their fellows, and so solidarities and common social purpose will be built.

This is the "mainstream" that Wilson is hoping the Black poor will join. Not only can one question its fundamental values and premises and whether it has been a boon to its own members let alone humanity as a whole, but people of color are also being asked to join a system that has notoriously oppressed them. Suddenly, in the last couple of decades, the leadership of this nation is saying: "Hey, we made a mistake in oppressing you, so now the doors are open." The net result of this posture is that Black impoverishment can now be blamed solely on Black failure. The doors are now open, aren't they? So if Black people remain poor, whose fault is it?

In other words, the system demands that people of color adapt to *it*, to the white man's culture. They have to alter themselves to fit in. They have to play by the white man's rules. They have to accept the white mainstream. Any cultural alter-

natives they devise, such as cooperation and mutual aid, instead of competitive individualism, must be discarded as antithetical to the mainstream. They must assimilate, transform themselves, and try to fit in to the white man's system, because that system has no intention of changing to meet their needs, their reality, and most importantly, their vision.

I think that Wilson profoundly misses the point of the Black Power Movement. It was not simply a race-consciousness movement that ignored economic issues. Rather, it was a decolonizing movement, an effort to regain control of the Black community under Black leadership, so that the rip-off could be ended. Black power leaders wanted to put a stop to the exploitation of their community. They correctly saw that "joining the mainstream" was a dead-end quest. Instead, they needed to rebuild their own communities, with Black, not white, needs and interests, as the central, human concern.

The Middle Class

Let me turn to the role of the Black middle class in this system. Does the emergence of a Black middle class imply that racism is no longer an important reality in the United States? I don't think so. But before getting into the role of the Black middle class, let us consider the role of the middle class in general in American capitalism.

As I see it, and stated very briefly, the middle class serves a special function in capitalism. Its members are paid out of the profits squeezed from the poor in order to keep the poor under control. The middle class, including both management and professionals, helps "manage" the poor. They are the guardians of the system. They keep inequality intact. They make sure that the capitalist system is reproduced from day to day and generation to generation. That is why they are paid so handsomely.

The educational system is the great reproducer of the middle class and its values. If you look closely at the educational system you will find a miniature model of capitalism. Students compete against one another, each seeking their own individualistic advancement so that they can come out higher than their fellows. This is NOT the only way that schooling has to

be organized. It need not be based on a philosophy of survival of the fittest. But that is the way it is organized here, preparing tender young people for the steeply ranked, viciously competitive world they will confront once they leave. The schools are a great sorting machine for the unequal hierarchy of wealth and privilege that is American capitalism. And the teachers are the implementers, the validators of this process. They help to label the poor as incompetents, as failures, as unworthy, and therefore deserving of their dispossession.

The great myth of the educational system is that the pursuit of individualistic advancement will produce the social benefit, that the greatest good for the greatest number comes from selfishness, and that the social welfare can be ignored because the benefits of competition will trickle down to everyone. This is, of course, the self-deluding myth of capitalism in general, and imperialism in particular. Although the white man may have been able to fool himself that his colonial rule was really a benevolent gesture, and that his pursuit of profits was a mutual benefit to all, most peoples who suffered this rule had no such illusions.

Trickle-down theory is the same as utilitarianism. It is sheer ideology. But the middle class buys into it just as solidly as the capitalists. They think their own upward mobility is a beneficent gesture of dedication to humanity. They believe their own privilege is a sign of what a splendid public servant they are. They believe that, in lining their own pockets and protecting their comfort with high walls and the police, while people outside are starving, is a mark of their uprightness.

They claim they are "role models" to the poor. "Just be like me and you too can be well off." In other words, be selfish, be ruthlessly concerned with number one, forget everyone else, just make sure *you* win the race. That is what the middle class role model teaches the poor in capitalist society. And the poor learn the lesson well. The social decay in the ghetto, particularly in the form of drugs and gang warfare, is but a mirror of capitalist ethics. "You look after yourself in this world because nobody else is going to look after you. And you blast out of the water anyone who stands in your way." The ghetto isn't out of the mainstream of American life. Wilson has got it

all wrong. The ghetto IS the mainstream. It epitomizes the social decay of capitalism. This is what the "free market" produces.

The Black middle class is not that different from the white middle class. Although no doubt many African American individuals pursue an education and upward mobility with a view to helping their communities and in some cases strive hard to put these ideals into effect, the truth is, the system rarely will let them. They are forced to become police for the white man's system, whether they want to or not. That is what they are getting paid for. They have to participate in supporting capitalist rule. They have to help in the extraction of the surplus from the poor. They have to serve as role models of capitulation. For example, when Black mayors win elective office, are they really able to bring into effect programs that change the condition of the Black poor? Or are they not bound by capitalist social relations, by private property and the control of the economy for the benefit of the few who own, so that they cannot effect any substantial changes?

The growth of the Black middle class doesn't negate the reality of racial oppression in America. In a way, it intensifies it. How much more effective to have a Black police to control the Black masses! This is a trick that the South African racist regime learned a long time ago. If the immediate controllers of the oppressed are of the same background as the oppressed, it is harder for the oppressed to see the roots of their oppression so clearly. The existence of a Black middle class makes it harder for the Black poor to see themselves as victims of racial oppression. If some Blacks can "make it," why can't they? It must be their own deficiencies. They, as individuals, must lack what it takes to get ahead in this free and open society. The existence of a Black middle class helps to mystify racism in American capitalism. Who can doubt that this is a very convenient arrangement for the wealthy elite, who are far less likely to be faced with a national uprising if they manage to polarize the Black community along class lines.

In sum, the growth of a Black middle class does not mean the end of racism in America. It is only a new chapter in the evolution of American racism. The white elites of this society

are forever devising new strategies to consolidate their rule. We should not be fooled by the shifts in their surface policies.

What is to be Done?

There is much to commend in Wilson's approach to a solution to Black inner-city impoverishment. I agree with his emphasis on the need for overarching economic change, and I concur with the desirability of developing more public goods—goods and services funded by taxes and available to all rather than programs targeted to specific populations. I would definitely like to see the United States move in these directions.

But, while social democratic and corporatist reforms of this type have been adopted in some Western European countries, I can't see the U.S. government being easily persuaded that these reforms are in its best interests. Moreover, I believe there is an inherent limitation to these liberal policies. So long as the system is based on the private ownership of productive property, and that property is used to make profits for its owners, there will remain an impoverished class in this society, and it is very likely that that class will consist largely of people of color. The class relations of capitalism inevitably involve drainage of wealth from the poor to the rich, and no redistributive programs can ever remotely counter the basic direction of this flow.

Because the government and the capitalist class are closely intertwined, I see no point in making policy recommendations to them. Instead, I believe we need to engage in struggle against them, pushing for changes that they would never accept because those changes would deprive the ruling class of their power and privilege. We have to develop *power* to counter their rule. Ultimately, we need to overthrow them. Just as the private property in slaves was once confiscated, so the owners of the corporations that rule this nation will one day have to be dispossessed.

Of course, the United States is very far from a revolutionary situation right now. The ideological apparatus of the system—the schools, the media, etc., are firmly in capitalist hands, and any alternative visions for this society are quickly crushed. Still,

I'd like to talk briefly about what we *can* do during these unpropitious times.

First of all, it seems to me that some of the ideas of the Black Power Movement still have relevance today. I believe that the Black community, and other oppressed communities, need to try to regain control over their own resources. They need to engage in community rebuilding, in community regeneration, under their own leadership.

I reject the idea that individualistic upward mobility into the white middle class, or "mainstream," can help improve the lives of any but a small number of Black people. Thus, the Black community needs to develop an alternative vision for itself. How can it build viable economic institutions? How can it harness the now wasted talents of its young people to become the builders of a new society? This is the challenge. It is a challenge that is born in defiance against the old oppression, and not, as Wilson seems to be advocating, in accepting the dominant order and fitting into it.

In my view, Wilson's placing the blame on joblessness misses a more fundamental, underlying problem, and that is powerlessness—powerlessness to control the fate of one's own community. The creation of jobs only means the replication of capitalist social relations and the continuation of the exploitation of Black labor. Jobs in the white man's system is not the answer. Rather, the Black community needs to build alternative economic institutions that they control. Needless to say, I don't mean Black capitalism. I mean collective institutions that bring in everyone and give everyone a stake in the community's future.

Rather than make suggestions about what other people should do, however, I want to focus on what we, academics, middle class people, both white and of color, who believe in the need for social and radical justice, can do. I believe that we need to recognize our own complicity in the capitalist-racist order. We need to see how we are caught up in the values of careerism and survival in the system, and how, in protecting ourselves, we become a part of the system of oppression, and thus accomplices to the crime. We have to scrutinize and negate our own delusions that our upward mobility really ben-

efits the masses. In other words, we have to expunge from our consciousness the trickle-down illusion as it applies to us.

We are all actors in the social institutions of this oppressive system. We need to challenge the institutions in which we participate. This doesn't just mean calling for more effective affirmative action programs. On this point, I agree completely with Wilson. Affirmative action mainly helps the middle class. I support affirmative action programs, but think they are quite limited. They are framed within capitalism, and accept the basic structure of a system based on individual advancement up a steep ladder. Affirmative action doesn't challenge the system of inequality itself and that, I believe, is what needs to be challenged if we are ever to eliminate racism.

The need for struggles for greater equality abound all around us. For example, on my campus, the cafeteria is sub-contracted to Marriott Corporation which employs women of color at wages and working conditions well below the university standards. Both the University and Marriott are implicated in the exploitation of these women. People like us are in a position to expose these practices and demand that they be changed.

In general, I think we can push for more community involvement in the shaping of the institutions in which we work. Instead of the University simply plucking out the "best and brightest" from the Black community in order to assimilate them into the white middle class, we could work with Black community leaders to pressure the University to lend its hand to the project of community regeneration. The research and teaching skills of the University could be put to work on behalf of the community and all its members, not just the elite few.

In other words, we need to challenge the elitist, inequalitarian, and fundamentally anti-democratic practices of the institutions we work for. To do so requires a change of alignment on our parts. It requires a different kind of consciousness. We need to make a decision for the poor, with the poor, to struggle beside them for the fundamental social change they need. We have to forswear the protection of our own privileges and see that, in the long run, this oppressive system will come tumbling down. We need to choose which side we are on.

Conclusion

The biggest mistake that Wilson makes is to see class and race as somehow antagonistic or alternative modes of social organization. If there is a class division in the Black community, then race can no longer be an important factor in our society. This is precisely the position of the ruling elite, which wants to eliminate the powerful potential and threat in movements by oppressed groups for social change and redistribution.

For me, class and race are not opposing dimensions, which somehow need to be sorted out. Rather, capitalism is a system that breeds class oppression and national/racial conquest. The two forms of exploitation operate in tandem. They are part of the same system that creates inequality, impoverishment, and all the other host of social ills that result. I believe that you cannot attack racism without attacking capitalism, and you cannot attack capitalism without attacking racism. The two are Siamese twins, joined together from top to bottom.

Colorblind social programs are all very well. Certainly there are poor and moderate income whites who need major social change, too. But I believe that we cannot abandon a central focus on racism as one of the major mechanisms by which private capital retains its rule. Any progressive regime would have to give such issues, as the end of all forms of colonial rip-off, and the need for independent, self-determining, Black community regeneration, a central position on the national agenda. Nothing less will do.

“Occasional Labourers and Chronic Want”: A Review of *The Truly Disadvantaged*

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The Truly Disadvantaged is an important book which brings the subject of poverty back into the forefront of sociological discourse. William Wilson's intent is to redirect its study by simultaneously mounting challenges to the ideological orthodoxy of the left and of the complacency of the right. Throughout, he attempts to subtly reconstruct current debates and controversies and to mould them into a form more palatable to the skeptical, voting age masses. For those interested in public policy formation, there is value in both the underlying purpose of such an exercise and in much of its form. Though the work is not meant as definitive, it does manage in a few pages to address many topics which are important to our understanding of poverty in the midst of plenty. Discussions of the role of joblessness, the inadequacy of the welfare dependency thesis, and the problem of institutional failure in the schools are particularly insightful.

Yet the *Truly Disadvantaged* is not without warts and blemishes. It never fully breaks away from the shortcomings of previous articulations, generating in many instances more of a modest proposal than a truly new understanding. The intent of this critique, however, is not to detract from the acknowledged contribution of the original but to debate some of its more problematic parts in the hope that discussion will further the author's own call for new directions in the study of poverty.

The most problematic section involves his discussion of the “shrinking pool of marriageable and economically secure men.” On the surface, there is substance to what is essentially a descriptive observation which suggests that female-headed

families are a consequence of poverty and demographic change. Demographically, an existing sex imbalance at birth within the black community is compounded by high rates of incarceration and homicide to produce low rates of "eligible men." In cities like New York and Washington, black females outnumber males 25 to one. Economically, inner city industrial job loss has disproportionately affected minority working populations. And finally, intact black families with employed males have a much lower incidence of poverty than do female headed ones. The problem is not the emphasis on men but the decided neglect of women. Moreover, such a discussion is easily transformed into a cure which develops a kind of useful life of its own and begs the question. As Hilda Scott suggests in her work *Working Your Way to the Bottom*, simply finding an employed man does not alter the exploitative character of women's work itself. Indeed, given the number of working women within so-called stable black families, it may well be that it is their labor "that keeps families from falling into poverty" rather than the other way around. Indeed, Mary Jo Bane has developed a concept of "reshuffling" to describe already poor black families, who, by virtue of separation, become poor female headed households, a pattern more evident in black than in white families (Quoted in Baca-Zinn, 1988, p. 9). What is needed, then, is a discussion of the problem of increased wages for women as well as men, as well as more skills training and greater assistance with day care.

To ignore or gloss over gender when seeking a policy alternative for the entire black community seems not only short-sighted but harmful to our ultimate understanding of the relations between family and social structure. As Maxine Baca-Zinn has commented, "the economic demise of large numbers of black men affects the meanings and definitions of masculinity and reinforces the public patriarchy that controls minority women through their unequal dependence on welfare" (Baca-Zinn, 1988, p. 24). Centering the discussion on these issues rather than the ambiguous one of "non-mainstream values" would have made it more pathbreaking.

Further, the Male Marriageable Pool Index (MMPI) itself does not work in the way that one might expect in two of the

four regions of the country examined. In the West, where there is an admittedly small black population, it is shown that the "substantial" pool of eligible men does not reverse the trend of female-headed households, although we are told that they are not the same kind of households. In the South, where blacks are known to concentrate in low-waged, low-skilled labor, the finding that families are intact as a result of these "eligible" men is hardly worthy of celebration (Wilson, 1987, p. 99).

The discussion of the passing of black role models with the exodus of the black middle and working classes from central city neighborhoods also seems somewhat forced. So Wilson writes, "The very presence of these families during such periods provides mainstream role models that help keep alive the perception that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a viable alternative to welfare, and that family stability is the norm, not the exception" (Wilson, 1987, p. 56). Forced because of Wilson's own inclusion of Bowles and Gintis's description of the school environment, an environment that does not separate black middle and underclass areas. They write, "Blacks and minorities are concentrated in schools whose repressive, arbitrary, generally chaotic internal order, coercive authority structures and minimal possibilities for advancement mirror the characteristics of inferior job situations" (Wilson, 1987, p. 103). It is hard to imagine, in this setting, honestly conveying to poor black children an impression that there is "a connection between education and meaningful employment" (Wilson, 1987, p. 56).

Moreover, the black middle class of the 1940s and 1950s was, by all accounts, a tiny population. It was a population that tried to stay as far away from the poor as it could get, in a social sense, by establishing a protected enclave with exclusive clubs and churches (Landry, 1987, pp. 59–62), and by supporting mechanisms like tracking in the schools to keep the student apart. While it may be correct to suggest that this population has left the inner city, whether they ever represented significant role models for the "underclass" is problematic and more attributable to what one reviewer called notions of "a largely mythical past." Particularly so is the suggestion that

they might convey to the poor "the habit of waking up early in the morning to a ringing alarm clock" (Wilson, 1987, p. 60).

Further, it is a somewhat romantic idea to label them as "black middle class professionals." E. Franklin Frazier suggests, many of those who had money at that time did so by virtue of participation in quasi-legal and illegal activities, a situation, one might add, that they shared with many emerging immigrant groups. Black professionals of this time were often living at the edge of poverty, a point also discussed by Landry who indicates that "they occupied a very ambiguous position" and that "their activities were severely circumscribed by the racial norm of a still very segregated society" (Landry, 1987, p. 50). They gained position, if at all, not from their practices but from working second jobs (Landry, 1987, p. 51), from being slum landlords or middlemen for mainstream enterprises. In Philadelphia, for example, black undertakers, a distinguished group within the community, would often exchange votes and influence for the right to claim unidentified bodies at the city morgue. The notion that this Gogolesque population would have swayed the poor from a life of crime to good deeds by example seems a bit overstated.

But more curious is the notion, perhaps more implied than stated, that black middle and working class populations have abandoned the inner city for exclusive suburbs or more affluent peripheries, expressed at one point simply as "the large out-migration of nonpoor blacks" (Wilson, 1987, p. 50). We know from most demographic accounts that black suburbanization has, at best, been a minor movement even in these last decades of expansion and that the black working class exodus has trailed that of the middle class. Massey and Denton (1987), for instance, conclude, "Some blacks may be moving to suburban areas, but this movement does not seem to be related to their socioeconomic characteristics. . . . Either blacks are moving to suburbs in numbers too small to make a difference, or suburbs and central cities are qually segregated" (p. 823). These groups have to be sure, migrated to the peripheral communities at the edges of central cities but they have not gone alone. In Wilmington, Delaware, for example, a city that is over 60% black, the poor live in every census tract in which there is a sizeable

black population. In the most prestigious black area, 14% of the population is below the poverty line. Further, in only two of the 21 census tracts of the city are there exclusive concentrations of the poor, and in one of these there is a fairly high racial mixture. Moreover, there is no evidence to indicate that the poor who live in more affluent census tracts are any better off than those who live in less affluent ones. What this suggests, more disturbing than what Wilson argues, is that the decline has occurred in the midst rather than in the absence of "verticle integration."

In a related way, Professor Wilson gives very little weight to the political changes that have occurred in the decades of "unprecedented prosperity," changes that directly affected the working poor. He states, for example, given the most comprehensive civil rights legislation and the most comprehensive antipoverty program in the nation's history, it becomes difficult for liberals to explain the sharp increase in inner city poverty" (Wilson, 1987, p. 30). Yet, in 1975, nearly 80% of the jobless were eligible for unemployment compensation. After 1980, changes were made in federal requirements reducing that figure to only 29%. Similarly, the Department of Agriculture's food stamp program was cut by seven billion dollars and, once again, eligibility requirements were changed. It is estimated by Brown that in 1985 only 19 million of the more than 33 million living in poverty were receiving food stamps. In 1982, alone, one million children previously participating in school lunch programs, were made ineligible. In a study of the homeless in Delaware, it was found that "almost half—44%—of the total said they had no income at all, including public assistance." (Wilmington *News Journal*, April 19, 1988). Is it not possible that these policy changes may have swelled the ranks of the underclass, and also contributed to the rise in the crime rate, regardless of isolation or role model demise?

And third, Professor Wilson is much persuaded by the notion that the poor are "increasingly isolated socially from mainstream patterns and norms of behavior." Indeed, his apparent rejection of the "virulent liberal attack on Moynihan" and acceptance of his "historical analysis" (Wilson, 1987, p. 21) place him in the peculiar position of having to explain Moy-

nihan's contradictory argument that "because of housing segregation it is immensely difficult for the stable half (of the Negro community) to escape from the cultural influences of the unstable one" (Moynihan, 1965, p. 29).

Further, the "negative cultural influences" common to both Wilson and Moynihan are disquieting because so much ethnographic research reveals that the poor are a lot more connected than we admit to the hopes and dreams of the dominant society. Williams and Kornblum in the work, *Growing Up Poor* found that the teenage mothers of their sample spend hours and hours watching television, leading to the suspicion that they get many more of their ideas about life from the media than they do from each other. The authors found, for example, a strong awareness by young drug dealers of the latest weaponry not from their community connections but from Clint Eastwood movies.

This issue becomes particularly enjoined when one discusses the subject of having babies. The media is full of romantic notions of the joys of motherhood, values extolled hourly in television commercials and in such recent movies as "Baby Boom," "Three Men and a Baby," and "Having Babies." Is it surprising that young girls in the absence of other badges, translate these images into visions of their own self-worth? Or that they fail to understand that nobody wants them to have babies, not that having babies is bad per se?

Beyond the limits of these underlying themes, lies more central questions which remain unanswered or only partially answered. Are the truly disadvantaged a new population qualitatively different from the much larger group of working poor of the present? Are race and inner city residence the key ingredients of the underclass? Is there a white underclass? If not, how is it that a recent race-specific malady (i.e., occurring after the role model exodus of the 1950s) is not generated by current racism?

Initially, the message seems to be clear. There are differences in problems of welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy and violent crime which set the underclass apart from the more familiar, liberal versions of the deserving poor. The origins of

these differences are found in patterns of historic discrimination which were compounded by social isolation for those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy. And that the solutions to these problems must be achieved by expansive rather than restrictive policies.

But towards the end, joblessness is presented as the root cause of these "pathologies" suggesting either that the initial cultural discussions (telling liberals things they did not want to hear) were actually insignificant or that the poor with no jobs behave less well (i.e., are more criminal) than those with bad jobs. The former perspective would lead most liberals to say, "where's the change?" and the latter to thrill the hearts of conservatives who have always advocated forcing the poor into employment of any kind, at any wage.

A similar uncertainty surrounds the issue of race. At first, race seems somewhat incidental to the underlying structural origins of the class. We are warned to not "rely heavily on the easy explanation of racism" (Wilson, 1987, p. 19). In fact, evidence is presented which suggests that inequalities of similar magnitude though not of strength affect a white population. We are told, for example, that in 1978 74% of all poor black families were headed by women and 39% of all poor white families were as well. We could conclude from much of Wilson's own data, that whites are behind but catching up. As a matter of fact, a recent study of violent crime by researchers at Rutgers found that "the rural areas of the West, rather than the American urban ghetto, is where youth is far more likely to suffer violent death." The authors concluded, "Typically, those counties had higher death rates among their white population than high-crime cities showed for urban blacks" (*New York Times*, October 12, 1987, p. 13).

Of course, if whites are in the underclass then both the historic discrimination and urban isolation explanations must be recast to fit the contours of this mostly rural population which has not been victimized by the same racial disadvantage. This is a point Wilson, at times, seems unwilling to concede as he argues, "Any abserved relationship involving race would reflect, to some unknown degree, the relatively superior eco-

logical niche many poor whites occupy with respect to jobs, marriage opportunities, and exposure to conventional role models" (Wilson, 1987, p. 60).

The problem here may well be one of emphasis. But at the same time, we are told that liberals must be brought to task for being "unwilling to mention *race* when discussing issues such as the increase of violent crime, teenage pregnancy, and out-of-wedlock births." What it is that we should mention about race in this connection is unclear. We are given James Q. Wilson's "critical mass theory" which suggests that when the numbers of young persons in a community reach a certain point "a self-sustaining chain reaction is set off that creates an explosive increase in the amount of crime, addiction and welfare dependency" (Wilson, 1987, p. 38). But a theory which has as its basis the notion that too many young people (in all examples black) produce bad things, at its best does not seem very explanatory.

While *The Truly Disadvantaged* leaves some important concerns unanswered and unresolved, it does raise other issues which spark the imagination. First, the whole spectrum of the workings of the underground economy are suggested and need to be examined. In the past, many people on welfare supplemented benefit levels with employment; either of their own or of a spouse/boyfriend. This "cheating" of the system was viewed as necessary because formal employment was sporadic and uneven and because such things as health care benefits were not available for many of the working poor. In the face of the loss of formal employment in inner city communities, has this alternative also been diminished or abolished? If it still exists, must not the welfare system itself be seen as a mechanism for sustaining marginal employment at least as much as it is as a producer or conveyor of nonmainstream norms of behavior?

The last point brings up the more general one of what we truly know about the lives of these people. In our discipline, we are particularly drawn in Berger's terms to a certain voyeurism in choices of topics to study (Berger, 1963). Departments are filled with courses on nuts and sluts—which not only help dwindling enrollments but apparently encourage

some of the best work in the field. Lifestyles of the not rich and infamous seem to peak our imaginations and numerous examinations of out-of-wedlock, teenage pregnancies, street crimes and school drop outs grace our shelves. The link between lifestyles and poverty is always a tenuous one. Does poverty create conditions which bring on certain attitudes toward work and play? Are behaviors predominately found among the poor, routinely or in proportions little better than those which would be predicted by chance? We know very little about how people make it in society, a question which ultimately may be of greater significance than examinations of how they fail.

In addition, we carry around a lot of potentially biased information about how they live their lives. Professor Wilson, for example, cites Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space* in discussing the fact that in poor areas "residents have difficulty identifying their neighbors. They are, less likely to engage in reciprocal guardian behavior. Events in one part of the block or neighborhood tend to be of little concern to those residing in other parts" (Wilson, 1987, p. 38). Newman's work was published as part of a grant from the Law Enforcement Agency, investigating the need for the introduction of techniques of sophisticated surveillance. Does that affect the finding? It certainly contradicts the images of supportive networking found in Carol Stack's work, *All Our Kin* (1974).

What happens to the money that is illegally funneled into these communities? We are told that people are buying fancy cars and clothes and teenagers are buying boom boxes and gold chains as well as drugs. But are they also giving money to their grandmothers to pay electric and rent bills? What does this say about the ghetto economy and about the norms and values of its residents?

What is the role and structure of the systems of extended family and friends? Many biographies reveal successful branches of underclass families as well as the inevitable, individual rags to riches sagas. Is there no contact between those who make it within a family and those who do not? Wilson indicates, "They also seldom have sustained contact with friends or relatives in the more stable areas of the city or in the

suburbs" (Wilson, 1987, p. 60). Did they at some point have more contact with the black middle class than with friends or relatives?

What is the basis of the difference in these groups, class role models, a caring and hardworking parent, religion, luck? We know, although as sociologists we sometimes forget, that people do not actually live in census tracts. Do they leave their neighborhoods to shop, to work, to play?

But perhaps most importantly, we need to expand our study of the truly disadvantaged from a domestic to an international arena. Professor Wilson is writing about the wretched of the earth, "groups marginalized by the market mechanisms of capitalist society." According to Dahrendorf, industrialization brought on the abolition of the system of norms and values which guaranteed and legitimized the order of preindustrial society, an order "endowed by the patina of centuries." In its stead, classes arose defined by the crude indices of possession and nonpossession, with the emphasis placed on economic function rather than behavior. Classes, according to classical definitions, were formed in this stage only in so far as they were engaged in a common struggle with another class, and as the identity of their interests produced a community and a political organization. The "underclass" in most of our current formulations hardly constitutes a class in this sense but rather represents an "unstable entity" which may yet be formed but presently plays a more significant role in attempting to overcome the various crises of the economic system.

In this guise, there are striking parallels to our study of the underclass in the United States and the formation of certain ethnic minorities in Western Europe. As Stephen Castles points out, from 1945 until the midseventies, the import of labor power was a marked feature of all economically advanced countries (Castles, 1984). Estimates are that over 30 million people entered the Western European democracies as workers or workers' dependents after World War II. Not all remained, indeed net migration increased by about 10 million by 1975 and to 16 million by the mid 1980s.

It is not necessary to describe the social costs associated with such movements but only to point out that the costs were

often differentially distributed among certain sectors of the indigenous working class as well as the elderly and the unemployed. Migration was seen as a cause of their problems and campaigns to expel the newcomers were numerous. Obviously each country represented a specific case where social, democratic and economic conditions affected what went on, from Sweden's fairly liberal settlement policy to West Germany's fairly restrictive one. Race also played a complicated and varied role. But beyond the particulars, were significant common threads. First, the economic moment in which migrations occur represents a stage of development, with the transformation of mass production and the deskilling of labor. Second, new jobs are created which are often dirty, unhealthy, unpleasant and it is to these, in particular, that migrants are recruited. Similar to the period of the 1920s in the United States, a period of homogenization occurred in Western Europe after the war, characterized by worker substitutability and exploitation.

But as all good things come to an end, in the United States the development of automated systems in the 1950s and the movement of capital to labor, a pattern duplicated in Europe at a later period, made these populations obsolete. By the mid-seventies in Europe, restrictive policies were found in all countries again with only slight variation.

But the cessation of recruitment did not end the presence and in all countries new ethnic enclaves emerged, filled with groups characterized by nationality, often physical traits, culture, and lifestyles distinct from the indigenous populations. Their numbers, though not approaching the concentrations of minorities in the United States, were not inconsequential. In 1981, for example, foreign born populations comprised 9.4% of the population of West Germany, 5.1% of the population of France, 5.4% of the population of Yugoslavia and 11% of the population of Spain.

And in an all too familiar set of results, there are today large concentrations of impoverished populations living in inner-city areas and an upsurge of racism, fears of the destruction of national culture, the growth of neo-nazi movements and strong beliefs that immigrants are the cause of economic uncertainty and should be returned. There are frequent media dis-

cussions of foreigners who take away other workers' jobs, sponge off the welfare state, and exposes of minority youth and their threats to public order, their criminality and drug proliferation. In short, the makings of a dangerous underclass, yet one without slavery, the absence of mainstream role models or the vestiges of historic discrimination, to reveal its source.

Their inclusion in the model need not "leave unexplained the question of why black unemployment was lower not after but before 1950" (Wilson, 1987, p. 30) and expand the discussion of the disadvantaged to the true parameters of "chronic want" which have disturbed us at least since the days of Charles Booth.

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Comments on William Wilson's
The Truly Disadvantaged:
A Limited Proposal for Social Reform

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This is an important book which has already had a major impact on discussions of poverty, race and public policy in the United States. Wilson is to be commended for his willingness to step boldly into the arena of public discourse in an effort to blaze a new trail between the "rock" of conservative thinking on the underclass and the "hard place" of contemporary liberal perspectives. His project—the refocusing of the liberal perspective and the definition of a bold new public policy agenda is inherently controversial. Wilson is quite correct in his assertion that the conservative perspective captured public attention and policy initiatives in the Reagan era, and that that agenda has resulted in a real deterioration in the living conditions of the urban poor.

At the same time, what Wilson identifies as a liberal perspective has been pushed into a defensive posture. While I think there are some explanations for this that go beyond the limitations of the arguments themselves and demonstrate the influence of political climate on social thought, the challenge for all of us who seek a more progressive future is how to have liberal arguments take the offensive. This is what I see Wilson seeking to do in *The Truly Disadvantaged*—a daring and desperately needed project which raised a number of dilemmas for all of us who seek to use our skills as social scientists to influence social policy.

Wilson brings to public attention some important insights about the concentration of poverty in urban Black communities. His discussion of the increasing social isolation of poor

Black inner city neighborhoods and the many subtle ways that this isolation is exacerbated by macrostructural conditions of job loss and deindustrialization is a significant attempt to shift public discourse from an emphasis on "cultural" to "structural" phenomena.

An example is his discussion of the distinction between social isolation and the culture of poverty as it has been reviewed by conservative theorists. In his view, social isolation is a structural phenomenon which results in a ghetto specific subculture. Unlike cultural theorists, however, Wilson sees this subculture more as an adaptive response to economic conditions than an inherent or self-generating form. He argues that the loss of population in poor urban ghetto neighborhoods "makes it difficult to sustain basic institutions and sense of social organization."

In Memphis, Tennessee, where I live, the city and county under the leadership of the county mayor, have recently initiated a project designed to "break the cycle of poverty." The project, entitled: "Free the Children" has identified a four census-tract area in one of the most impoverished sections of the city to pilot its program. The initial (1988) census of that community provided an example of the relationship between the concentration of poverty, social isolation and severe neighborhood deterioration. At the same time, it demonstrates how these problems have deepened in the last decade. For example, this neighborhood, which contains approximately 2800 households, and is 98.7% Black, has shown a continuing decline in population beginning at 14,794 in 1970, decreasing to 11,647 in 1989 and further to 8,775 in 1988. The lives of the people who are left in that neighborhood are characterized by the following types of statistics: (a) an unemployment rate for males of 45% and for females, 58.3%; (b) an income profile in which 83.3% of households have incomes below \$10,000 (compared with a figure of 68.1% in 1980); (c) a loss of 1200 housing units since 1970, and a condition where 60% of existing units need repair; (d) a heavy reliance on government assistance to the point where 80% of households receive some form of support through government programs.

An easy first reaction upon reviewing these data is to see

this community as one in which almost everyone who had access to any resources that would have made it possible to leave, have already left. Or, to see it as a community populated by people who are so far out of the "mainstream" that they represent a distinctly identifiable group—a ghetto subculture which, as Wilson correctly points out, the conservative "right" have described as not just socially isolated but culturally distinct from American social values. The kicker in the report, on this community and in Wilson's discussion of the distinction between his notion of social isolation and the born-again version of the culture of poverty came for me in a second section of the report which stated:

There are some indications that it is a relatively stable community: 44% of the housing units are owner occupied; 62% of all units are single-family homes; 80% of those surveyed said they want to remain in the area, and 21% have lived there for more than 20 years.

What this particular case suggests is that social isolation is very different from a culture of poverty. Clearly the loss of population in neighborhoods such as this one makes it difficult to sustain the basic institutions and sense of social organization. Yet, at the same time, there remain elements of community organization and cohesion even in the face of severe deterioration.

These data on Memphis suggest that in the face of massive community deterioration and decay, this community and others like it, are not so much distinct from the mainstream as they have been pushed down and out of the channels of access to mainstream goals. Wilson's discussion tends to overemphasize differences and ignore the ways that people who live in these communities continue to strive for mainstream goals while they are denied the means to achieve them.

In my view, Wilson's analysis of poverty, race, and what he terms "American economic organization" fails to demonstrate that these communities are the logical outgrowth of the American capitalistic system and that the people in them are not polar opposites of the mainstream but direct products of mainstream goals, values and modes of achievement. In his

effort to refocus debate, using the very terms of discourse popularized by the conservatives, Wilson comes dangerously close to creating the same picture, though he clearly uses a different camera and a different set of lenses.

Second, I think Wilson has been somewhat overzealous in his effort to get us to see the limits of "racial" explanations of the conditions of poverty. There are many things I applaud in this vision. These include his emphasis on macro-economic changes and class formation as critical to understanding contemporary race relations. His point that many of what he terms "race-specific" and not the poor, is also worthy of serious consideration. However, he should have said more about the ways class position provides privileges and opportunities for some Blacks that are clearly denied to others.

And, as I would agree that in order to understand Black poverty today, one must analyze what Wilson terms "impersonal economic shifts in advanced industrial society," I would suggest that all of these shifts are not so impersonal. To ignore the ways in which racism operates in a period of economic restructuring is to be unable to fully answer such questions as, for example, why economic development and economic growth comes to predominantly White counties in states like Tennessee and Mississippi and by-passes predominantly Black ones (see Timberlake, Dill, Tukufu, & Williams, 1989).

As a social scientist, I will know that we can give less attention to race when we no longer have to respond to the same arguments every two decades or so. This will be apparent when, for example, explanations of IQ and family structure cease to use "racial characteristics"—be they genes or values—as their primary explanation; we will then no longer have to spend our time reacting to these postures. Wilson's discussion of poverty and family structure made a number of important points—one of which is a distinction between the reasons for the rise in female headed families among Blacks and Whites. In Wilson's view, the rise of Black male joblessness is a major cause of the rise in Black female-headed households. He speculates that for Whites, the increased economic independence of White women and changing social values have had more of an impact on their divorce rate.

His emphasis on male joblessness as an explanation for family structure rather than welfare is an important and much needed corrective to current policy discussions. Many of us for whom Black women is a primary research area, have argued for years about the importance of understanding ourselves within the context of our communities and families. We have suggested that the position of women who are members of oppressed groups and the relations between men and women within those groups can only be understood when we look at the position of the group within the political economy and then the roles, options and opportunities available to women. Wilson's joblessness thesis seems to support this basic position. It underscores an argument which has been made in discussions about the feminization of poverty. In these discussions, women of color have largely argued that the emphasis on a gendered explanation of poverty (i.e., one which makes sexism the fundamental problem) ignores the realities in minority communities. Black women are "not just a husband away from poverty." They are likely to be poor before divorce as well as afterwards. White women's poverty is more likely to be a result of an event such as divorce. This difference is of course due to the unemployment and underemployment of Black men as compared with White men as well as position of Black women in the workforce.

At the same time that Wilson provides an analysis of family structure and poverty that emphasizes the relationship of race, class and gender—and includes the impoverishment of Black men, he raises an unsettling question regarding solutions. Given the facts of inflation and other economic shifts which have generally eroded the earning power of White families, how much will jobs for Black males "improve" the situation of Black families when jobs for Black females, many of whom head families, and will continue to do so, remain at the bottom of the economic ladder? And, at what point then, do we aggressively address the race and gender segregation of the workplace which leaves Black women and other women of color in the lowest paid jobs of all?

I want to conclude by returning to the policy dilemma and/or challenge which I see inherent in William Wilson's work. In

my reading of it, his analysis calls for radical social change; changes that are, in fact, more radical than what he proposes. Upon reflection, I was struck by the limitation which Wilson's audience and his terms of discourse place upon his ultimate solutions. He has chosen, quite self-consciously, to present an argument that could contest an essentially conservative public debate on these matters. In so doing, he has sought to present the "wolf" of liberal social policy in the sheep's clothing of moderate social-political discourse.

His hidden agenda, as he states it "is to improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass by emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races and class backgrounds can positively relate" (p. 155). The result of this agenda, however, is not bad, it just doesn't go far enough. For the most part, he presents a familiar set of liberal social-democratic reforms. And, the fact is that economic growth and a tight labor market, a national AFDC benefit standard, a child support assurance program, and other programs which he proposes would improve the life chances of poor people though they would not eradicate poverty and social decay—be it urban or rural.

In the end, Wilson's book leaves unresolved for me a fundamental, yet disquieting question for those of us who seek to address social policy through social science research. Is this as far as we can go if we choose to approach the creation of social policy primarily by speaking directly to policymakers, government officials, and politicians? Must the result—in order for us to be heard and have any hope of having our ideas implemented—be a band-aid of some sort rather than fundamental economic reorganization?

Wilson's book exemplifies for me the limitations we face in trying to bring about truly progressive social change if we rely solely on debate in this arena. At the risk of ending with a facile statement on a very complex issue, I would argue that without a link to an active political constituency that can force an expansion of the terms of social debate, we as researchers can become locked into arguments that ultimately keep us from going as far as we really know we need to go.

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A Critique of *The Truly Disadvantaged*: A Historical Materialist (Marxist) Perspective

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"Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

—Karl Marx ([1887] 1967, p. 301)

Introduction: A Difference of Philosophy and Theory

Scholars such as William J. Wilson, public policy analysts, politicians, media personalities and journalists have, in recent years, turned their attention to the pervasive and growing poverty, permanent unemployment and inequality in American society. They have noted the disproportionate occurrence of these phenomena among African Americans—especially women and children—and in the "inner city ghettos" of the former centers of industrial production. At the same time, they have either ignored or severed any connection between the deepening poverty of one section of society—whom they have called the "underclass"—and the vast accumulation of wealth among the capitalist class.

This has allowed for the revival of an "explanation" of poverty in which the "victims"—in this case, the "Black underclass"—are guilty of "causing" their own poverty. The fundamental social arrangements of the capitalist political economic system—i.e., the sale of one's labor power to the capitalist in exchange for wages that are, in turn, used to purchase the necessities of life (food, housing, clothing, health care, education, etc.) in the marketplace—are found "innocent." The social relations that the legal system protects—that the capitalist owns all that the workers produce and pays the workers as little as possible (often below subsistence with a minimum wage of \$3.35 an hour)—are to be left intact.

Our problem is not so much with the "facts" that Wilson and others have marshalled in support of their "underclass theory," though we find they have looked at some facts and conveniently ignored others. Rather, our difference is more in the philosophical and theoretical understanding of society and history that provides the "scientific" explanation of these data—permanent unemployment and poverty, etc.

In contrast to Wilson's "underclass theory," historical materialism (Marxism) provides an understanding of poverty as a necessary result of the drive for maximum profits by capital, i.e., the driving down of labor costs by lowering wages and ultimately displacing labor by technology (computer automated production, robotics, etc.). Capitalism and poverty (of all races and nations) are dynamically interconnected. At a certain stage of the development of the technology of production, if the masses are to survive, it becomes necessary to reorganize society around human needs rather than exchanging non-existent wages for the necessities of life such as housing, food, clothing, health care, education, etc.

The historical materialist view (Marx [1887] 1967) that wealth and poverty are dynamically interconnected and increasingly polarized in society (i.e., wealth is the "unpaid" wages of workers) is borne out by recent U.S. data. These data indicate that as the lowest section of society has become poorer in recent years, the rich have gotten richer. For example, the top fifth of the U.S. population had 45.7% of all income in 1986, while the bottom fifth had 4.7% and the next poorest had 10.6% (THE WASHINGTON POST 1988, p. A18). This income inequality is part of a historical process of the polarization of wealth and poverty. Thus, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means (1989, pp. 984–986) reports that between 1973 and 1987 the richest fifth of the population GAINED 24% in average family income while the poorest fifth LOST 11% in income. The top fifth's average family income of \$60,299 in 1973 jumped to \$68,775 in 1987 (in constant 1987 dollars), while the lowest fifth's average family income dropped from \$5,507 in 1973 to \$5,107 in 1987. This income for the poor represented 93% of the poverty level in 1973 and only

83% of poverty in 1987. At the same time, the income of the top fifth was 6.86 times the poverty level in 1973 and increased to 8.51 times poverty by 1987 (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means 1989, p. 984–986).

In Wilson's work not only is poverty disconnected from the accumulation of wealth, but Black inner city poverty and permanent unemployment—the basis of the "underclass" formulation—is isolated intellectually and, thus, politically from the poverty and unemployment in rural America, in Appalachia, and among White, Hispanic, Native American and other workers in the United States and in the neocolonies of the Third World. Surely the fifth of the population living on an average family income of \$5,107 is not all African Americans and not all African Americans are in this lower section of the working class. Yet the connections between different expressions of poverty, which would be essential to a full scientific understanding, are left unexplored. The poverty of African Americans in the "ghettos" is thus presented as different from other forms of poverty and, (unlike other forms of poverty?) is caused by the moral failings of the victims themselves. The intellectual basis of the political isolation of this most vulnerable section of the U.S. population—poor African Americans many of whom are women and children—is thus accomplished.

Further, Black inner city poverty is ripped out of its historic context of the economic contraction that is currently gripping the United States and the global economy (e.g., the farm crisis and bankruptcies, the 1987 Stock Market crash, the S&L and bank crisis, the soaring budget deficit and trade deficit, the threat of Third World default on billions of dollars of loans, the housing crisis, ballooning consumer debt, and the glut of commodities that cannot be sold, etc.). As a result, the solution offered by Wilson depends almost exclusively upon influencing the ruling class and its political representatives to reform the system through congressional legislation and policies—a "solution" that has already shown itself to be ineffective (see below). It leaves the whole question of the systemic and historic crisis of capitalism and the necessity of the political mobi-

lization and empowerment of the masses across color, nationality and gender lines if they are to get out of their poverty and survive unexplored.

Wilson and others are led to ask "WHO is poor?" and "why are THEY poor?" The question "WHY DOES/MUST POVERTY EXIST?" is never asked. The "labor theory of value" (Marx [1887] 1967), which explains that the accumulation of wealth by capital necessitates the exploitation and impoverishment of larger and larger sections of labor by a constant revolution in the technology of production, is not considered for its policy implications. If it were, it would be clear that piecemeal legislative tinkering with the system is not the SOLUTION to the poverty of African Americans in the inner cities—nor is it the solution to any other form of poverty in the U.S. or the world today. Legislative reform can be a useful TACTIC in political struggle, but to offer it, as does Wilson, as the final resolution to Black inner city poverty is a cruel hoax at this moment in history.

We offer as evidence of this assertion the fact that today, in 1989, the hourly minimum wage of \$3.35 (in effect since 1981) has remained unchanged for longer than any other period in its 51 year history and has fallen to a mere 35% of average wages, its lowest ever (Kirkland 1989, p. A19). Both houses of Congress have voted to raise the minimum wage to \$4.55 by 1992. Three years from now the minimum wage would STILL be less than the \$4.58 per hour in 1989 that would be comparable to \$3.35 in 1981. Moreover, President Bush has threatened to veto anything more than \$4.25 (by 1992) and the political word is that there is no will in the Democratically controlled Congress to override this veto. The point is that if this straightforward piece of legislation directly related to poverty cannot make it through Congress in the current climate of economic contraction and political reaction, nothing of any substance will. Other legislation—the Equal Rights Amendment for women and "comparable worth" pay legislation—that would address the disproportionate number of African American women, especially those heading households, in poverty has not made it through the legislative channels despite a social movement and over a decade of struggle. (Iron-

ically, Wilson seems to suggest that women are poor because they are unmarried, with the solution being marriage. We suggest that women are poor because they are unemployed or paid poverty level wages.) In short, Wilson, we argue, does not deal objectively with the economic and political realities of this period in U.S. history in which even earlier reforms are being rolled back.

In the preface to his book, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy*, Wilson states his philosophical and theoretical position. He is, he says, a "social democrat," and offers his book as a "refocused liberal perspective" (p. 18). Wilson draws on the works of "liberals" such as Kenneth Clark (1965), Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965), Herbert Gans (1968) and Lee Rainwater (1970) and "social democrats" such as Michael Harrington (1962, 1984). He claims he is not of the "culture of poverty" school, and yet suggests that what is noteworthy in today's Black inner city poverty population is its "social pathology." He presents Scandinavian social democracy as a model for reform, and calls for a rekindling of the liberal reform agenda in the public policy arena.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, when the economy was expanding and reform was fiscally possible, the views of liberals and social democrats were "progressive." What we see in Wilson's work, however, is that what was once "progressive" is now unsatisfactory, at best, and reactionary, at worst, as economic conditions deteriorate (Fishman and Newby 1986). What one critic of the "New Left" and "neo-Marxism" has said of these scholars we find applicable, as well, to Wilson's presentation of the "underclass."

While New Left theorists have insisted on the importance of class analysis to an understanding of contemporary society, the actual result of their labor has not been fundamentally different or markedly superior to mainstream sociological analyses of inequality. More importantly, they have not been able to undermine the central arguments of their adversaries: They have replicated their static analyses of class structure, and they have accepted, without adequate theoretical or empirical justification, several significant points in their critique of classical Marxist class analysis (Meiksins 1987, p. 49).

Even further, the works of many of these well-intentioned liberal "idealist" theorists—including Wilson—have been appropriated by conservatives and play into the hands of the reactionary classes. "Culture of poverty" arguments were ultimately appropriated by conservatives such as Edward Banfield (1970) to argue against the role of government in solving poverty and other problems. And, to be sure, some conservatives are already using Wilson's arguments to undercut support for affirmative action and a host of social welfare measures.

The prominence given to "social pathology" and "moral breakdown" rather than systemic economic factors in getting at the root of African American poverty in the inner cities and the disconnectedness between this "underclass" poverty and other forms of poverty is, we suggest, a critical aspect of the intellectual climate of several recent set-backs in the political arena. These include, but are certainly not limited to, the Supreme Court decision in *Richmond V. J.A. Croson* declaring unconstitutional minority set-aside programs, the "welfare reform" bill mandating work for "welfare" benefits without guaranteeing affordable day care and adequate wages, the 1989 election of an open fascist "former" Ku Klux Klansman, David Duke, to the Louisiana state legislature, the rise of the skin-heads and other fascist gangs as well as the increase in racist attacks on campuses, etc.

The notion that the "ghettos" are havens of "underclass social pathology"—drugs, crime, etc.—has certainly been part of the rationale for the actions by Congress and "drug czar" William Bennett to militarize the inner cities. With Washington, D.C. as the "test case," we are witnessing the government's and the capitalists' "solution" to poverty—more monies for police and arming them with 9 mm semi-automatic weapons, more monies for prisons, and bringing in the National Guard to "aid" in law enforcement and the provision of special anti-terrorist surveillance equipment not otherwise available domestically.

In our critique we argue that any scientific analysis of the question of the "underclass," i.e., poverty, permanent unemployment and inequality, must be grounded philosophically

and methodologically in a theory of society which is historical, wholistic and materialist—in short, in historical materialism or Marxism (Levine and Lemboke 1987). The very concept of class must be seen as a dynamic and antagonistic relation of production between capital and labor, not a static category of income, education, occupation and life-style (Meikins 1987). Furthermore, solutions to the problems of poverty and unemployment must be presented within the context of what is objectively possible at this stage of the crisis of monopoly capitalism and not simply as the subjective wishes of liberal scholars and policy makers (Fishman, Scott, Gomes and Newby 1989).

Wilson's Thesis

Wilson's book makes a provocative contribution to current debates about the conditions and problems of the lower section of the working class, where African Americans are disproportionately concentrated. He takes great pains to separate himself from "culture of poverty," "blame the victim" and other currently conservative (but once "liberal") positions. For Wilson, the "underclass" is produced not by culture or welfare, but by structural forces in the economy.

Wilson tries to link race and economic indicators (not class, as noted earlier) to explain the "social pathology" (female-headed households, drugs, crime, etc.) of the urban "underclass." His basic argument (highly simplified here) is that joblessness among young African Americans in the inner city is the pivotal factor in the whole nexus of pathologies of the urban "underclass." Joblessness stems from structural changes in the economy (from goods producing to service producing activity) along with demographic forces and past discrimination. With the shift in the economy, semiskilled and unskilled jobs were relocated to the suburbs, resulting in the "greatest decline in jobs in the lower education-requisite industries" in the inner cities. Coupled with these forces was the migration of the more "advanced" members of the African American community (the Black middle class and stable working class) from the city, leaving the lower stratum of the working class

isolated, without the adequate role models for mainstream behavior and bereft of support from basic institutions in the community.

More affluent "role models" for the poverty-stricken inner city residents to improve the latter's moral character is, we submit, senseless. Those African Americans who live in poverty must first and foremost have the money (as do the more "advanced" African Americans) to purchase the requisite housing, food, clothing, education, child care and health care to make them "moral upstanding citizens." Unless this great transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor (the opposite of what has actually been occurring) were to take place, then all the role models in the world can not cover up the fact that a large and growing section of the working class—disproportionately African American—is simply superfluous to high tech capitalism and are being left to rot in the slums or on the streets of the cities of America.

Wilson also sees joblessness as the key factor in the production of female-headed households. The lack of jobs for young African American men in the inner cities makes them less attractive as marriage partners. Thus, two-parent Black families continue to decline in representation in the urban "underclass." The real problem, we suggest, is not female-headed households per se, but poor female-headed households. As noted, this is a problem of jobs, wages and affordable child care, not the marital arrangements that women may choose. Wilson, in his focus on morality rather than material reality once again offers the poor a nonsolution.

Wilson argues against "race-specific" programs. He implies that the problems suffered by the African American poor are no longer the result of racial discrimination and, since such programs are not popular among most Whites, suggests a comprehensive program of economic and social reform that will benefit ALL groups in the United States, not just poor minorities. This comprehensive program includes macroeconomic policies to promote economic growth and create a tight labor market, a nationally oriented labor market strategy, a child support assurance program, a child care strategy, and a family allowance program. Somewhat contradictorily, however, Wil-

son argues that since these policies will not immediately resolve joblessness and the pathologies of the urban "underclass," there must be targeted programs for this group. These targeted programs coupled with the comprehensive program should eventually remedy the problems of the urban "underclass." Liberals, conservatives, business, labor, government, etc., should find common ground to accomplish the task of balanced economic planning. Wilson argues that other nations (e.g., Sweden, Norway, Austria, the Netherlands, and West Germany) have already made such achievements. He draws on Harold Wileksy's arguments about why these Scandinavian and other Western European nations have better social conditions.

Critique: The Necessity of a Scientific Analysis

The publication of Wilson's book, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass and Public Policy*, in 1987 sparked the latest round of a historic debate among sociological and related scholars—as well as in the mass media—regarding the usefulness of "culture of poverty" explanations and/or macrostructural economic explanations of the growing persistence of poverty in America, especially among African Americans and female-headed households (see, e.g., Newby 1988; Geschwender 1988; Miller 1988; *The Black Scholar* 1988; Duster 1988; Jencks 1988; Reed 1988; and Stansfield 1988). This debate about the "causes of poverty" and the ways out of poverty is as old as the discipline of sociology—dating from the time of the divergent approaches of the founding fathers themselves (i.e., between the ppositivism of St. Simon, Comte and Durkheim, on the one hand, joined later by Weber's social action theory, and, on the other hand, the historical materialism of Marx) (Zeitlin 1987; Fishman and Benello 1986).

In the 1960s, with the expansion of the "New Deal" welfare state and the reforms of the civil rights movement and the "war on poverty" (in response to the "rediscovery" of poverty in America), a new round of the debate ensued (e.g., Lewis 1959, 1960; Moynihan 1965; Leibow 1967; Valentine 1968; Gans 1968; Hill 1972). While overall poverty rates declined, Black poverty remained twice that of Whites. Many scholars sought an expla-

nation in the "culture of poverty"—social pathology, deviant morality, etc.—while others sought an explanation in the historic position of African Americans within the U.S. and world political economy.

In the 1980s, despite the reforms of the past era, the effects of the introduction of advanced technology in the production process are being expressed in terms of the loss of high paying industrial and even some service jobs, poverty level wages and permanent unemployment (among all workers, but disproportionately among African American women, children and men) (Bluestone and Harrison 1986, 1988; Fishman and Newby 1986). Once again, Wilson's disclaimers notwithstanding, the "culture of poverty," this time as the "Black underclass," has emerged as the explanation of this new historic reality (Wilson 1987; Newby 1988; Geschwender 1988; Duster 1988, etc.).

To enter the debate in a way that clarifies the issues, we need to go beyond differences in the interpretation of the data (on poverty, family formation, crime, drugs, etc.). Rather, we must return to the underlying assumptions and conceptualizations of society and social life contained in the divergent theoretical traditions of sociology. The editors of *The Black Scholar* (1988, p. 1), "Theory or Fact? The Black Underclass" state: "But the black underclass is not merely a term. Like an iceberg, it carries with it a submerged mass of theory, bias and assumption." Similarly, Stanfield (1988) notes, ". . . simplistic terms such as 'new racism,' 'white backlash,' 'underclass' and 'truly disadvantaged' do not help us understand or explain how the current redesign of America into a high-tech society is changing the complex character of the status of black Americans in their diverse geographic locations. . . . We have yet to advance a theory that is based on up-to-date concepts or that explains as well as describes what is going on."

Central to the "underclass" debate is a fundamental difference in the understanding and conceptualization of "class." Is "class" a static category indicated by one's income, education, occupation, and life-style in the tradition of Weber and mainstream—positivist and functionalist—sociology? Or, is class a historically dynamic social relation of production of the necessities of life linking together the accumulation of capital and the

impoverishment of labor in the tradition of historical materialism—Marxism (Meiksins 1987)?

We suggest that Wilson's formulation of the "underclass" is based on a conceptualization of class as a static category—of income and life-style—not as a social relation of production. This masks and distorts the reality of where the poverty of the so-called "underclass" comes from. The very concept of UNDERclass has no meaning in the historical materialist formulation of "social relations." One is either, at this advanced stage of the technology of capitalist production, a capitalist who owns the means of production and employs workers or a worker who tries to sell her/his labor power. Those who are poor and permanently unemployed—disproportionately African American but a majority of whom are White—are a growing section OF THE WORKING CLASS. They are NOT OUTSIDE of the working class—some inferior grouping on the very margins of society. Rather, they represent the very essence of capitalist development which creates wealth off of workers' unpaid labor and which MUST NECESSARILY create poverty as a result of capital accumulation. In identifying African Americans as THE "urban underclass," Wilson dangerously distorts the reality of who is poor, why they are poor and what is the way out of poverty.

In short, Wilson acknowledges structural constraints (the technological transformation of the U.S. labor force from goods producing to information processing/service producing) as the root cause of current joblessness and other problems suffered disproportionately by the lower section of the working class. However, he does not deal with the class relations of capitalism, i.e., the exploitation of labor as the source of profits and accumulation of capital and the necessary technological revolution in production which constantly cheapens the value of human labor and ultimately makes human labor superfluous. Marable (1985, p. 176) notes this shortcoming in addressing the problems of the Black masses, which his quote makes clear is not unique to Wilson:

The historic inability to link theory to political endeavours contributes to the Black elite's failure to advance a systemic criticism of U.S. capitalism. The labour theory of value is alien to accom-

modationists and to most reformers. They do not comprehend that the masses of working people create all wealth, and that employers are not doing Blacks or other workers any real favours by creating jobs. . . . With the rise of social democratic ideology among Black reformers over the past three decades, the inclination to promote LAISSEZ FAIRE capitalism has been curtailed. But, at best, most reformers promote only the idea that Blacks should receive a larger "piece of the pie," and inclusion in "the organization and structure of power in the public and private sectors."

Wilson presents a critique of workfare making clear that what workers living in poverty need is WORK at wages that enable them to survive, not workfare (forced labor to receive welfare benefits). Yet, he is not able to explain how, or even IF, this can be accomplished and provide maximum profits to the capitalist class.

While Wilson discusses in some detail the technological changes in post-1960s American society that have led to problems for unskilled and semi-skilled workers, this analysis is done outside of an examination of developments in the global economy, in general, and the world market of capitalism and its current crisis, in particular. For Black workers, the mechanization of southern agriculture in the 1940s and 1950s and the increased demand for labor in the factories of the North during World War II set in motion the massive migration of African Americans from the South to the industrial centers of the North (Mandle 1978). Here they found work for a few decades until the current period of automation of industrial production. Their shift in employment from the agricultural to the industrial sector lasted only as long as their cheaper labor was needed. Now that robotics are in place, African American workers are again displaced—in many cases permanently—from employment and thus from the very ability to survive.

We cannot really discuss the likelihood of achieving comprehensive or targeted reforms in the United States without understanding the decline of this nation's share of production of goods and services and the general glut of commodities. In the 1950s, U.S. business and industry produced 52% of the world's goods and services. The U.S. share of the world market

dropped to 30% by 1970 and fell to 22% by 1984 (Kissinger 1984; Bluestone and Harrison, 1982, 1986; Fishman and Newby 1986).

The economic crisis is forcing the political motor of capitalism, i.e., the state, to the right. Blocking further reform and, indeed, rolling back current "welfare state" policies is the order of the day since U.S. capitalists will realize declining profits if they do not force their workers to adjust to a lower standard of living. Only an analysis which understands the historical development of capitalism in its international context can fully elucidate what has produced a growing number of poor people—both working and nonworking and of all nationalities, but the majority of whom are White—in the United States. Thus, an analysis of the current character of advanced monopoly capitalism as well as the current political consciousness of working people is essential to fully understand the dynamic and global historical process creating what Wilson and others have called the "urban underclass."

Similarly, Wilson's discussion of family "disorganization" and "social pathology" among the poor is not placed within this essential context of history and economic development. Yet, it should be clear that the family as a unit does not develop on its own, or just as it pleases. Instead, its development is conditioned by social forces—especially the mode of production of society. This is as true in advanced capitalism as it was in earlier modes of production such as the communal mode where clans were the primary form of family and the feudal mode where the family was also primary. Thus, in the earlier mode of manual production most of humanity was engaged in growing food and the household itself was the unit of production. Wife, husband and children, as soon as they were old enough, were essential to production; they labored where they lived. It was only "natural" that the family, under these circumstances would tend to remain intact—it was a matter of survival.

With the transition from manual to mechanical production, factory production replaced household production. The individual wage worker replaced the family as the unit of production. The factory and the office replaced the household as the

locus of much productive labor activity. Today, as each worker more and more confronts the production process as an individual, the “break up” of the nuclear family has become more and more likely. In the context of the growing atomization of workers as they confront capital, it is hardly surprising that modern America has seen the growth of more and more single Americans and more and more single female-headed households. It is the capitalist mode of production—both its distinct form of productive forces and its social relations—that has laid the conditions for the “break up” of the family.

The historic legacy of slavery, the resulting oppression of African Americans as the cheapest form of labor, and the development of ideologies of white supremacy (racism) to insure continuing division between Black and White workers place the Black worker at a real disadvantage. Those most subjected to the ravishes of capitalism (i.e., African Americans who disproportionately comprise the lower section of the working class and the reserve army of the unemployed) have not surprisingly suffered the greatest disruption of family life, but are now being followed briskly by White families. An understanding of this process of atomization of the workers as they confront capital might have led Wilson to focus not only on a campaign for full employment in order to reform unemployed males’ relationship to the labor process but also to support the equalization of wages between men and women through policies such as “comparable worth.” The poverty of single female-headed families is surely the result of the low wages of women and the lack of affordable child care for their children—not simply the “absence of a man.”

Wilson explicitly limits his sights to urban ghetto poverty among African Americans in the post-civil rights era. His treatment of both “race” and “class” is mechanical and nondialectical. Each are categories that are given a certain value in accounting for the “Black underclass.” In contrast, we suggest, that the root cause of poverty and oppression is the dynamics of capitalism and that the African American worker stands in a particular historical relationship to U.S. capital—based on slavery, history, etc. Thus, an analysis of the role of racial discrimination, historically and today, in dividing the American

working class might have led Wilson to understand the continuing import of "racism" even in the context of the increasing significance of class division.

A dialectical and historical analysis of "class" would not have allowed Wilson to employ the concept of "underclass" and to have presented it in the contradictory way he does. On the one hand he says the "underclass" is structurally produced and its members are jobless. As already noted, whether or not one is employed or not, all workers remain part of the working class. To pose a radical break between the employed and unemployed is inconsistent with an understanding of the historical process of the development of capitalism and is politically to isolate those most vulnerable. Further, most of Wilson's argument is based on the "underclass" having a different cultural and value system and life-style. Thus, he describes the crime of the "underclass," its abundance of welfare mothers, and the "underclass" alienation (geographically and morally) from the middle class. So who and what is this "underclass"?—the criminal element, welfare mothers, the jobless who lack requisite training, or all of these?

More important than this lumping of a host of "social pathologies" into the grabbag of the "underclass" is the distortion inherent in Wilson's analysis. The majority of the unemployed, of the poor, of welfare mothers and of those alienated from "middle class" morality are White; and there is a core dynamic of capitalist development that would enable us to explain these phenomena among all races and nationalities.

In contrast, Wilson's "underclass" analysis fractionalizes the working class along color lines leading one to believe that a fundamentally different dynamic is responsible for the ravages of capitalism among peoples of different color and nationality. Most importantly, Wilson's analysis politically isolates the Black lower section of the working class—that section most oppressed and exploited. The very term "underclass" connotes something negative. It is a short step from being excluded from the class system—falling "under" or outside of it—to being excluded from humanity.

The fastest growing group among those in poverty is the "working poor"—those who work for a wage so low (e.g.,

minimum wage) they still cannot purchase in the market place the necessities of life (food, housing, clothing, education, health care, etc.). Are they not part of the "truly disadvantaged?" in short, although the concept "underclass" has been around for a good while and people have defined and redefined it AD NAUSEAM, even today it seems to serve more to obfuscate reality and policy than to direct us toward solutions.

A historical materialist analysis would correct another problem with Wilson's analysis, i.e., his seeming failure to understand the process by which technology itself ultimately cheapens the value of human labor power and thus the value of human beings. Even today jobs in the computer industry are sinking in terms of wage and salary rates compared to ten or fifteen years ago. The pattern in the United States in the 1980s is for more and more "professionals" to be proletarianized, not for workers of any race to be upgraded. The polarization of classes—those at the top getting richer and those at the bottom getting poorer—is the order of the day, not simply the growth of the problematic "underclass." The solution to the problems of this growing lower section of the working class must deal with the "surge of inequality" in American society and the necessary connection between the accumulation of wealth by capital and the increasing impoverishment of the working class.

Wilson's analysis does not suggest any way to energize and mobilize that lower section of the working class and unite them with others also being squeezed by the economic contraction. His proscriptions leave the "underclass" outside of the process of their own emancipation. It is increasingly clear that the poorest section of society has no representatives within the capitalist political institutions. If their demands for the necessities of life—jobs, food, housing, education, health care, etc.—are to be realized, it will require the dismantling of the capitalist political apparatus and market system and the reorganization of society to distribute to the masses the glut of goods and services that exist and are being produced daily. This, we suggest, can only be accomplished with the fullest political mobilization and participation of those on the very cutting edge of

survival today—those whom Wilson has called the “underclass”.

Wilson’s discussion of race-specific programs is also flawed. Affirmative action, for example, was not a program designed to aid the Black poor. Rather, it was designed to aid those African Americans who were already more or less “equal” to their White counterparts but had been denied equal educational opportunity, jobs and/or promotions due to past discrimination. Affirmative action did, in fact, aid the Black middle class who had or could easily get the requisite skills and education. Why today the clarion call to eliminate affirmative action because it helped only the black middle class? Is it not worth helping to overcome past discrimination against at least this one sector of African Americans? More to the point, however, is that our efforts to propose, enact and implement policy solutions for the Blacks who are today underpaid and unemployed must still have some “race-specific” content since African American workers continue to suffer from both past and current discrimination.

Only by being honest with the masses of workers will we be able to negate the legacy of racism and hatred of Blacks that has been the historic tool of capitalist rule in America. The David Duke’s win because they lie—they tell White workers that their deteriorating living standard is caused by Blacks getting more. The reality is that BOTH Black and White workers are suffering from a declining standard of living because of capitalism. Until we put forward this reality, fascists such as Duke will feed on people’s fears and the historic ideology of white supremacy to keep us all in bondage.

Any real solutions to the poverty of Wilson’s “underclass” would necessarily challenge the profit motive of the capitalist economy. Yet, Wilson writes as if there were no genuine antagonisms, either objectively or subjectively, between labor and capital. Thus, he calls for a multiclass coalition to support his comprehensive and targeted programmatic reforms. Missing from Wilson’s analysis is a recognition of the politics of unemployment and its usefulness to capitalism in crisis, especially in curbing inflation. Also missing is a recognition of the real

diametrically opposed interests behind capital and labor. Wilson seems to suggest that so long as policies are not race-specific they will be supported by a majority of the people in both the capitalist class and working class. Yet, history demonstrates that class exploitation is so key to the evolution of American capitalism that even those willing to admit to racism are not willing to admit that anything needs to be done to change the position of the working class. As already noted, many capitalists and their political representatives in the U.S. Congress have not seen the need to raise the minimum wage above the poverty level—and this has no “race-specific” content.

In his recommendation that the United States follow the lead of the Scandinavian and several other European countries, Wilson seems not to understand the vast differences between the United States and these countries. Most of them have ethnic but no racial divisions, most have very different governmental processes, most have a long history of greater class consciousness and multiparty systems, and all occupy a very different position within the world political economy. What they achieved in the past and what the United States can achieve in this historical period of world economic contraction is vastly different.

Conclusion: Where from Here?

The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental. (C. L. R. James in Marable 1985, p. 1)

The fundamental flaw in Wilson’s exegesis on the “urban underclass” is its static and partial quality. Only Black urban ghetto poverty is presented. There is no understanding of how this is related to Black and White rural poverty (as in the Black belt South or Midwestern farm belt), to Native American urban and reservation poverty, to White working class poverty (especially in Appalachia), to Hispanic poverty, etc. Perhaps, more importantly, there is no real analysis of how poverty and wealth are inextricably interconnected within the context of

world capitalism. Of how the poverty of the workers, especially the lower unbribed section of the working class, is related to the accumulation of wealth of the capitalists. This we consider to be a major problem. Class, unlike the Marxian or historical materialist conception, is a Weberian conception in which a dynamic relation of production and distribution is transformed into static and mechanical categories of income inequality, occupation, education, and life-style. The isolation of one form of poverty from the multitude of forms that abound in this historical period, as Wilson does, masks the fundamental systemic and global quality of poverty today—a growing poverty in the midst of abundance. If science is the quest for understanding that which is real and objective, to fail to fully understand the connections between “underclass” poverty and other poverty, between wealth and poverty is to deny science.

To try to resolve the problems of poverty (including such things as family formation, drugs and “crime,” etc.) without addressing capitalist property relations that create and necessitate the driving down of workers wages and ultimate elimination of much human labor from the production process to maximize profits is futile and unscientific. The historic position of African Americans as slaves, sharecroppers, and the most exploited workers—last hired, first fired and lowest paid—means that Black workers will be hit first and hardest. This is the basis of the so-called “underclass.”

But, the attack on African American workers is just the opening round of the attack on the entire working class. And this time White workers who are increasingly unemployed, poor, homeless and hungry will have to join the fight for the reorganization of society to guarantee the necessities of life for the workers of all nationalities and their children. As Peery (1978, pp. 56–57) has observed:

The . . . [African American] workers to the extent that they occupy the strategic position of the unskilled basic workers will radicalize the majority of the working class. In order to attack the . . . [Black] workers, the government is going to have to become entangled with the majority of the working class. The position of the . . . [Black] workers is strategic and they will not fail. History

will record the stirring of the . . . [African American] proletariat as the beginning of the American Socialist Revolution.

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Poverty and Electoral Power

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The poverty of the American underclass cannot be overcome by any single strategy. But surely it will not be reduced without new government interventions in education, training, employment, housing, and social welfare. That raises the question of how the electoral power—especially electoral power exercised by the underclass itself—can be mobilized to win new public policies.

Only about half of Americans will go to the polls in November 1988, compared with turnout levels between 75% and 95% in other western democracies. Since it is the poorly-educated who vote least, Americans generally attribute low voting to inadequate civic or political education. But why then do the less-educated vote almost as much as the better-educated in other major democracies?

High turnout is encouraged in other countries because citizens are placed on registration lists automatically when they come of age, or they are registered periodically by government-sponsored door-to-door canvasses. In the United States, by contrast, it is up to each citizen to figure out how and where to register, and that may not be an easy matter, especially for poorer and minority people. As a result, only 61% of those eligible are registered; upwards of 70 million are not, and 2 out of 3 of them are below the median income. (Elections officials claim that 75% are registered, but they base this figure on local lists which are clogged with the names of millions of people who have died, or who are counted twice because they moved and reregistered elsewhere.)

Furthermore, the US Census Bureau reports that people “overwhelmingly go to the polls” *once they are registered*. In 1984, 88% of registrants voted, including 78% of those with eighth grade education or less.

It is also worth remembering that Americans had the highest rate of voting in the world in the 19th century, despite low education levels. But that was before politicians created voter registration requirements. Turnout plummeted at the beginning of the 20th century, when poll taxes, literacy tests, and longterm residency requirements were introduced. At the same time, voter registration offices were opened in county seats where citizens had to prove that they met these qualifications to officials who were often intimidating and hostile.

With blacks and most poor whites disenfranchised in the South, southern presidential turnout fell from an average of 67% in the latter half of the 19th century to a low of 19% in 1924 (and it did not rise appreciably until the post-World War II struggle for voting rights). Literacy tests and obstructive registration procedures also reduced northern presidential turnout from an average of 83% in the elections of the late 19th century to 55% in the early 1920s. Indeed, fourteen northern states were using literacy tests as late as 1970, when they were outlawed by amendments to the Voting rights Act.

A good many commentators claim that registration procedures are more liberal than ever before. True, poll taxes and literacy tests are gone. But outside of the South, the main reform in registration procedures consists of allowing people to register by mail. This reform is more apparent than real because provision is rarely made for the wide distribution of the postcard forms so that people can get ready access to them. States with mail-in systems do not have higher registration levels because people may still have to travel to a county seat, or to a downtown office in a central city simply to register.

Not only has voter registration not been liberalized to the extent claimed by many commentators, but the political parties are less likely than in the past to provide “hands on” assistance with registration procedures. National political campaigns run as media events do not put voter registration cards in people hands. The local party infrastructure created during the new

Deal to help people hurdle registration barriers has decayed. For example, the shrinking industrial unions are no longer capable of reaching many unregistered workers, especially the low-wage nonunionized workers in the vast and growing service sector. Many of the traditional big-city parties persist more to organize graft than to organize voters, or they refuse to mobilize potential black and Hispanic voters for fear of fueling racial challenges. In other words, without local organizations to help people sign up, registration barriers become more telling, gradually driving turnout down.

What continues to be astonishing about the United States, in short, is the resistance to making it convenient to register to vote. Many politicians argue that registering shouldn't be easy, that people ought to earn the privilege. But the voter registration system is supposed to be a method of *listing* eligible voters, not of weeding out those whom politicians consider undeserving. In effect, restrictions on times and places for voter registration are the functional equivalents of earlier property and literacy qualifications.

* * * *

Registration barriers are not the only reason that turnout is low, nor were they the only reason that turnout fell in the first place. With voting by the have-nots restricted in the early 20th century, party organizers turned away from the candidates, the policies, and the campaign language that would attract them. This marked a major difference with the course of political development in other industrial democracies where labor parties emerged which articulated the interests of working-class people, and mobilized them to vote. The tendency of poorer and minority people to abstain from voting in the United States because of registration restrictions has thus been reinforced by their marginalization from the political culture. This may explain much about the relative lack of class-consciousness among American workers. The labor parties of Europe were agents of class socialization, but the American parties were not forced to give form and voice to a distinctive class politics. This was especially true in the South, given the virtually total disenfranchisement of blacks and poor whites.

Even the celebrated New Deal party was not a party of working people in the same sense as the labor parties of Europe because it was based on an absurd coalition. Northern industrial workers who favored union rights and social programs were joined with better-off southern whites who favored right-to-work laws and generally opposed social welfare protections. Naturally enough, southern Democrats elected to the Congress readily joined with northern Republicans, and the resulting conservative alliance dominated post-war policy. The New Deal party, in short, was divided against itself, and against working people.

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Congress is now holding hearings on the Universal Voter Registration Act of 1988. Among other things, the bill would require that all federal agencies, and all federally-assisted state and local agencies, offer voter registration services to the public, thus making voter registration the single most widely available service offered by government. But the bill's prospects are not good.

One reason is that business, which finances the parties, is hardly likely to go along with an increase in have-not voting at a time when it is pressing Congress to cut the social programs. Party opposition is another reason. Most Republicans fear that higher voting by poorer and minority people would benefit the Democrats, even endangering their hold on the presidency. They prefer the present voter registration system because they can manipulate it to their advantage with money. Together with the Christian Right, the Republican Party has been spending millions of dollars to expand registration among conservatives and higher income whites. As for the Democrats, most probably would not favor expenditures for voter registration even if their party had the money to spend. An upsurge of have-not and minority voting would disrupt the balance of voter blocs within the Democratic party, eroding support among some groups and strengthening among other groups (as Jesse Jackson's campaign suggests).

Finally, incumbency is a major source of opposition, as

Jimmy Carter explained after his voter registration reform bill went down to defeat in 1977: "The more senior and more influential members of the Congress have very safe districts. To have a 25 or 30% increase in unpredictable new voters is something they don't relish."

Nevertheless, the Democratic party is not monolithic. A number of Democrats at the state, county, and city levels depend on minority votes. Think only of black mayors. And there is a simple, cheap, and fraud-free way by which they can act to override traditional barriers to voter registration. They can permit government employees to ask people who apply for services whether they would like to register to vote. State, county and municipal legislatures can create such voter registration programs by enacting legislation; governors, county executives and mayors can create them by issuing executive orders.

Sixteen states now have "Motor Voter" programs which allow people to register to vote in motor vehicle offices; 12 states also now allow people to register in state welfare and unemployment offices. Some of these programs resulted from legislation and others from gubernatorial executive orders. Big city councils and mayors are also acting. Registration services are now available in municipal agencies in Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Antonio, Houston, Dallas, Austin, Atlanta, Birmingham, Washington, D.C., and New York.

In other words, the agency-based reform strategy takes advantage of the oft-noted decentralized and fragmented character of the American state. It is a strategy that can be tailored to exploit the numerous openings provided by the different levels of government and by the overlapping powers of the legislative and executive branches. If registration services cannot be won at one level or by one branch, they might be won at another level or by the other branch. When state legislatures balk, for example, then perhaps county or municipal legislatures will act; or perhaps it is governors, county executives, or mayors who will act. Big city black and Hispanic mayors could, by themselves, produce millions of new registrants among poorer and minority people. A mayoralty approach is even

feasible in the South where most legislatures and governors would not want access to registration widened, but where the growing number of black mayors might.

We should also note that agency-based registration is resulting from law-suits. As a result of a consent decree negotiated by the NAACP Education and Legal Defense Fund Inc., the state of Arkansas is establishing registration services in agencies throughout the state. And a suit taken by the Southern California chapter of ACLU in Los Angeles, now on appeal before the highest state court, may result in a judgment upholding the orders of the lower courts that the county's 20,000 health and welfare workers must offer to register their clients to vote.

Most of these developments were stimulated by the state-by-state organizing, lobbying, and collaborative litigation efforts of an organization with which we are associated called Human SERVE. What makes Human SERVE voter registration reform successes significant is that it is only a small staff organization with virtually no political resources. The very fact that it has had so many successes suggests there are indeed politicians at the state and local level who have an incentive to expand the electorate from the bottom. And if influential national organizations with stakes in voting rights—such as civil rights, voter registration, public interest, women, social welfare, and religious groups—were now to join in bringing pressure to bear on state and local officials, much larger advances could be made. The climate of legitimacy is already favorable: most national bodies of public officials have already endorsed this strategy, including the National Association of Secretaries of State, and associations of both mayors and cities, and of both black and Hispanic officials.

Finally, there is a relationship between raising the local registration levels and ultimately winning national reform. If a massive rise in the local registration rolls were to occur, congressional Democrats would no longer have much reason to resist enacting comprehensive national reform—to do so would merely ratify what had already largely occurred. Given greatly increased registration levels, the main effect of national legislation would be to bring recalcitrant states into line, and

to institutionalize the process of sustaining high levels of voter registration over time.

Of course, no one can be sure that millions of poorer and minority nonvoters would go to the polls if registration procedures were reformed, or that they would vote differently than better-off whites. What is certain is that there is a good deal of opposition to finding out. Otherwise, national political leaders would have long since reformed the registration system in the sure confidence that nothing would change. So there is some reason to think that mobilizing greater electoral power at the bottom of our society might result in policies to help overcome poverty.

The Truly Disadvantaged: Structuring an Agenda for Change

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This manuscript addresses the question as to how we may best structure an agenda for change aimed at improving the economic situation for the "truly disadvantaged." I have chosen to address this question within the limits set by existing political circumstances. Policy proposals are presented because they are believed to be achievable and would be effective if implemented. It is impossible to think about this question without considering the proposals presented by William J. Wilson in his pathbreaking book, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). Consequently, I briefly describe the intellectual context within which Wilson wrote his book and analyze the basic assumptions which underlay his proposals. On the whole, I believe Wilson's analysis to be sound and the proposals that he presents to be invaluable. Nevertheless, there are some difficulties with his formulation of the problem. Some of his assumptions are flawed and, consequently, his proposals, while pointed in the right direction, do not go far enough.

Wilson's Proposals in Context

Over the past few decades, a great deal of scholarly attention has been directed toward examining changes in the social and economic position of Afro-Americans in the United States. The social science scholarship which analyzed developments in the 1960s concluded that Afro-Americans had made a great deal of progress toward achieving economic equality and tended to project this progress into the indefinite future (Wattenberg and Scammon, 1973; Moynihan, 1972; Glazer, 1975; Freeman, 1973, 1976; Farley, 1977; Featherman and Hauser, 1978; Masters, 1975; Smith and Welch, 1977; Weiss and Williamson, 1972; Welch, 1973). Other scholars reexamined the

question incorporating data from the 1970s and concluded either that much of the progress of the 1960s had been eroded during the 1970s or that the gains were illusory in that they masked the fact that much of the Afro-American community was not sharing in the progress experienced by its more advantaged strata (Jordan, 1979, 1980; Hill, 1981; Reich, 1981; Lazear, 1979; Auletta, 1982; Wilson, 1980).

Perhaps the most extensive attempt to evaluate these conflicting interpretations was that of Farley (1984) who provided the major impetus for a rebirth of optimism. He found that the ratio between Afro-American and Euro-American median family incomes increased from 53% in 1959 to 61% in 1970 before declining back to 55% in 1982 which is consistent with the interpretation that progress during the 1950s was eroded during the 1960s. However, he also noted that, while the proportion of families headed by females increased for both Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans during this time period, it increased far more rapidly for Afro-Americans. Separate analysis of trends by type of family revealed that two-parent, Afro-American families exhibited a greater increase in median family income than comparable Euro-American families during both the decade of the 1960s and the 1970s. Among female-headed families, Afro-Americans showed similar relative gains during the 1960s and then held their own during the 1970s. Farley concluded that two-parent Afro-American families have indeed, made major advances in American society, both absolutely and relative to Euro-Americans, and that the apparent relative decline in family income for Afro-Americans during the 1970s was a direct consequence of a greater increase in the number and proportion of female-headed families. Thus, he remained optimistic about the eventual complete elimination of racial inequality in America.

William J. Wilson (1980, pp. 174–75) argued that Farley's analysis is flawed because it is based upon the experience of employed persons between 25 and 64 and leaves out those Afro-Americans between 16 and 24 who have been the most excluded from the labor market. He suggested that the greatest relative disadvantage experienced by Afro-Americans may be their inability to even enter the labor market and that this is

further compounded by their higher rates of unemployment. Thus, Wilson concluded that the portion of the Afro-American community that he calls the underclass is still falling further behind middle-class Afro-Americans and is certainly not closing the gap relative to Euro-Americans. In his most recent work, Wilson (1987) concentrates his attention on the plight of the growing number of female-headed families in the Afro-American community and does not question Farley's assumption that two-parent Afro-American families are doing well relative to comparable Euro-Americans. He demonstrates that, among Afro-Americans, the number of female-headed families is increasing, in large part, in response to economic conditions which make it impossible for large numbers of males to get jobs paying a wage high enough to allow them to marry—although his index of "marriageable" men measures only employment status and not income. This contrasts sharply with the situation among Euro-American women where increases in female headed families are more likely to result from noneconomic factors.

Wilson's policy recommendations center around a series of proposed economic reforms designed to create more jobs for all. Afro-American men would, along with others, acquire these newly created jobs. This would increase the numbers of Afro-American men who could afford to marry and support a family, thereby, reducing the number of female-headed families and decreasing the number of persons living in disadvantaged circumstances. His economic proposals are quite laudable—anything which helps to create jobs for the jobless is indeed laudable. As is anything which helps make it possible for men and women to marry if they wish to do so. And in this sense, I fully support all of the measures that he proposes. However, to borrow a phrase from Jessie Jackson, "the patch just isn't big enough." *First*, the assumption that two-parent Afro-American families are doing reasonably well compared to similar Euro-American families needs to be rethought. It is too simplistic, and, consequently, tends to generate policy proposals that are inadequate to accomplish their desired objectives. Research by Geschwender and Carroll-Seguin (forthcoming) demonstrates that a much higher proportion of

the income of Afro-American two-parent families is generated by the wife's earnings than is the case for Euro-Americans. In all too many cases, it requires two workers in an Afro-American family to achieve the life-style that Euro-Americans can have with one. *Second*, it is simply not the case that all women who head families do so because of a shortage of what Wilson calls "marriageable men." Some do so by choice, and would like the opportunity to achieve a decent standard of living without having to buy a husband as part of the package. The program that Wilson proposes does not address this issue and would, if enacted, do very little to improve their circumstances. Nor is it, by itself, likely to produce very substantial gains for disadvantaged, two-parent families.

Data Analysis

In this section of the paper I use data derived from the 1980 United States Census as presented in the 5% microdata sample tapes for the state of California (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1980). Table 1 presents data on the economic status of families by ethnicity and type of family. Families are classified as poor if they are below the poverty level; disadvantaged if their income is above the poverty level, but less than twice that amount; low income if their income is more than twice, but less than three times, the poverty level; secure if their income is more than three times, but less than four times the poverty level; and affluent if it exceeds four times the poverty level. The plight of female-headed families—regardless of ethnicity—is evident. The proportion of such families living in either poor or disadvantaged circumstances ranges from a low of 33% for Japanese-Americans to a high of 73% for Vietnamese-Americans. Anglos (43%) approach the low end of the continuum while Mexican-Americans (70%) and Afro-Americans (66%) approach the high end. Male-headed, single-parent families are considerably better off ranging from 10% in poor or disadvantaged circumstances among Japanese-Americans to a high of 63% among Vietnamese-Americans. Anglos (19%) approach the low end of the continuum while Mexican-Americans (43%) and Afro-Americans (41%) approach the high end.

Table 1

Family Economic Status by Family Type and Ethnicity: California, 1980

Family Type	Economic Status	Anglo	Afro-American	Mexican-American	Japanese-American	Chinese-American	Filipino-American	Korean-American	Asian-Indian-American	Vietnamese-American
Two Parents	Poor	3.5	9.4	13.2	2.4	8.4	4.1	10.8	9.1	34.1
	Disadvan.	10.3	19.9	29.1	7.1	14.2	15.8	20.6	12.0	20.9
	Lo Income	33.0	38.2	40.3	29.1	32.2	47.0	37.6	36.9	34.5
	Secure	26.1	20.3	12.6	31.2	23.4	24.3	19.1	25.6	7.0
	Affluent	27.0	12.3	4.9	30.1	21.9	8.8	11.9	16.5	3.5
	N	17790	12036	27698	2730	32380	3275	1004	661	545
	X Income	28475.20	22534.40	19395.20	31318.80	27955.70	26547.10	24312.80	27184.20	16281.50
Male Single Parent	Poor	7.6	21.4	16.6	4.3	11.1	8.6	19.0	20.7	39.1
	Disadvan.	11.7	20.2	25.9	5.7	16.3	17.6	26.2	17.2	24.3
	Lo Income	29.3	35.3	40.2	30.0	32.1	39.2	35.7	31.0	23.5
	Secure	25.7	16.1	13.4	32.1	23.7	26.1	11.9	13.8	10.4
	Affluent	25.7	6.9	4.0	27.9	16.8	8.6	7.1	17.2	2.6
	N	751	1423	2219	140	190	222	42	29	115
	X Income	24706.70	15554.20	15717.60	25689.40	22714.30	21103.30	15973.10	20332.40	13092.90
Female Single Parent	Poor	18.2	38.3	40.3	14.2	21.8	17.9	26.2	26.5	46.0
	Disadvan.	24.6	27.9	29.9	18.6	22.4	24.3	25.2	18.4	26.6
	Lo Income	36.4	26.3	23.9	34.8	33.3	35.9	35.5	36.7	20.2
	Secure	14.6	5.7	4.8	21.2	15.0	16.1	10.3	6.1	5.7
	Affluent	6.2	1.8	1.3	11.3	7.5	5.8	2.8	12.2	1.6
	N	2530	7773	5833	345	321	465	107	49	124
	X Income	14755.30	10799.50	10587.70	18270.60	16264.00	17214.30	14826.40	17149.50	12155.10
Female Single Parent Assumption of Equality	Poor	15.3	34.1	35.0	12.2	19.3	14.8	20.6	20.4	42.7
	Disadvan.	18.3	21.2	25.3	15.4	15.0	14.2	19.6	14.3	25.0
	Lo Income	32.4	27.5	28.2	27.3	33.0	35.1	34.6	38.8	17.7
	Secure	19.9	11.9	8.3	24.4	18.7	22.6	19.6	10.2	11.3
	Affluent	14.1	5.3	3.2	20.9	14.0	13.3	5.6	16.3	3.2

Source: 1980 United States Census, State of California, PUMS 5% A Sample.

Two-parent families fare much better than either single-parent type. Nevertheless, the proportion of such families in poor or disadvantaged circumstances ranges from a low of 9% among Japanese-Americans to a high of 55% among Vietnamese-Americans. Anglos (14%) approach the low end of the continuum while Mexican-Americans (32%), Korean-Americans (31%), and Afro-Americans (29%) approach the high end. This data hardly supports the notion that marriage, by itself, is any insurance that women will have a decent standard of living. However, these data do not constitute an adequate test of Wilson's proposals. He stressed the need to stimulate the economy to produce more jobs so that more men could afford to marry and support families. The data in Table 1 do not control for employment status. Table 2 presents data on the economic status of two-parent families in which the husband is employed full-time, year around, controlling for ethnicity and wife's involvement in the labor force.

The proportion of two-parent families with the husband employed full-time, year around, who live in poor or disadvantaged circumstances ranges from a low of 5% for Japanese-Americans to a high of 33% for Mexican-Americans. Anglos (7%) and Indian-Americans (11%) approach the low end of the continuum while Vietnamese-Americans (19%) and Afro-Americans (17%) are closer to the high end. Perhaps a better indicator of the probability of a family achieving economic security by relying solely upon male earnings, is provided by data on families in which the wife is not in the labor force. The proportion of such families living in poor or disadvantaged circumstances ranges from a low of 9% among Japanese-Americans to a high of 48% among Mexican-Americans. Anglo (11%) and Indian-Americans (14%) approach the low end of the continuum while Vietnamese-Americans (46%) and Afro-Americans (33%) are closer to the high end.

It does not seem that finding and marrying a "marriageable" man—even one employed full-time, year around—is a path that a woman can follow with confidence that it will arrive at economic security. Such families are better off than those with unemployed or underemployed husbands, but, again,

Table 2

Economic Status of Two Parent Families with Male Employed Full-time by Female Employment Status and Ethnicity: California, 1980

Female Employ. Status	Economic Status	Anglo	Afro- American	Mexican- American	Japanese- American	Chinese- American	Filipino- American	Korean American	Asian Indian American	Vietnamese American
All	Poor	1.7	3.4	7.4	0.9	2.3	1.6	2.3	1.8	3.0
	Disadvan.	5.6	13.1	25.8	4.5	9.7	11.7	13.2	8.8	16.0
	Lo Income	30.0	40.7	44.8	27.1	32.9	47.1	42.5	37.0	58.7
	Secure	29.9	26.4	15.7	33.5	27.9	28.4	26.3	32.8	14.8
	Affluent	32.8	16.4	6.2	34.0	27.2	11.2	15.7	19.7	7.6
	N	11443	7083	17568	2063	2199	2121	612	457	237
	X Income	32891.10	26888.50	21914.90	34073.60	32510.90	29714.40	29875.90	31382.80	24959.70
Females Not in Labor Force	Poor	2.7	7.1	12.7	1.0	5.4	5.1	1.5	3.1	8.8
	Disadvan.	8.0	25.6	34.8	8.1	14.2	27.9	23.3	11.3	36.8
	Lo Income	35.1	44.2	39.8	37.5	41.4	47.0	40.7	40.7	45.6
	Secure	26.9	16.8	9.6	29.5	21.1	15.4	18.0	29.9	5.9
	Affluent	27.4	6.2	3.1	23.8	17.9	4.6	13.2	15.0	2.9
	N	4383	1944	7713	701	592	351	189	194	68
	X Income	31180.30	20490.80	18666.00	31367.90	28173.40	22807.70	26444.80	30403.50	19697.80
Female Employ. Less Than Full-Tm. Year Around	Poor	1.3	3.1	4.4	0.6	1.4	1.5	0.3	1.4	0.0
	Disadvan.	6.3	14.5	23.6	2.6	8.3	16.6	12.5	7.7	9.3
	Lo Income	34.6	45.0	51.0	25.0	32.4	53.1	50.0	37.8	66.7
	Secure	30.3	23.8	15.6	33.1	29.7	20.8	24.4	37.8	20.4
	Affluent	27.4	13.6	5.4	38.7	28.2	8.1	11.9	15.4	3.7
	N	3912	2268	5557	656	710	607	160	143	54
	X Income	32578.90	25910.10	22420.90	32964.70	31615.40	26715.50	27322.10	28967.20	23707.60
Female Employ. Full Time Year Around	Poor	0.6	1.2	1.9	1.0	0.8	0.6	1.2	0.0	0.9
	Disadvan.	1.6	3.5	12.6	0.7	3.9	4.3	6.5	5.8	7.0
	Lo Income	17.2	34.8	45.6	9.8	18.3	43.9	38.9	30.0	62.6
	Secure	33.5	35.1	26.9	24.9	25.9	36.4	33.6	31.7	17.4
	Affluent	47.1	25.5	13.1	63.6	51.2	14.8	20.0	32.5	12.2
	N	3136	2871	4288	706	897	1163	262	120	115
	X Income	36920.60	31993.50	27134.40	37790.40	36087.50	33370.10	33925.30	35844.50	28669.80

Source: 1980 United States Census, State of California, PUMS 5% A Sample.

male employment is simply not a big enough patch. Of course, the wife may also enter the labor force if she is childless, has children old enough to care for themselves, or can find adequate day care. Table 2 presents data which allows us to explore the consequences of this action.

The wife's entry into the labor force reduced the number of poor or disadvantaged families regardless of ethnicity. The decreases ranged from as little as 3% among Anglos, 5% among Indian-Americans, and 6% among Japanese-Americans to 15% among Afro-Americans and Filipino-Americans, 20% among Mexican-Americans, and 36% among Vietnamese-Americans. While the improvement in status brought about by women's earning is shared by all groups, the proportion of families remaining in poor or disadvantaged circumstances remains unacceptably high. Even without taking into account any cost that might be associated with child care, 10% of Chinese-Americans, 13% of Korean-Americans, 28% of Afro-Americans, 18% of Filipino-Americans, and a whopping 18% of Mexican-Americans remain in poor or disadvantaged circumstances. It is obvious that the earnings of employed married women are important to the family. The entry of the wife into the labor market along side of a fully employed husband sharply reduces the proportion of families living in poor or disadvantaged circumstances. But, women's employment also do not constitute a big enough patch.

People are not poor or disadvantaged because they are unwilling to work. There are a limited number of jobs available for either men or women. Pressures caused by the presence of children, difficulty in finding adequate child care, and its high cost, when available, make it harder for married women to enter the labor force. It is often the case that available jobs simply do not pay enough to allow the working poor to live with dignity and economic security. Nor is there any guarantee that this standard of living can be achieved even if both parents are employed full-time, year around. Approximately 15% of such Mexican-American families still live in poor or disadvantaged circumstances as do 8% of Filipino-American and Vietnamese-American families. These are frightening figures.

Discussion

Significant numbers of ethnic families—with or without a husband that is employed full-time, year around—live in poor or disadvantaged circumstances. Entry of the female spouse into the labor force, and especially full-time employment, improves their economic situation, but far too many remain disadvantaged. Perhaps the major reason why female employment does not do more to improve the economic circumstances of families is the “65 cent dollar” with which women are paid. Both Euro-American and Afro-American women—even if employed full-time—earn significantly less than comparably qualified Euro-American men (Farley 1984, pp. 72–75). There is no reason to assume that other Women of Color fare any better than Afro-American women in this regard.

Girls are socialized into feminine gender roles and women are systematically shunted into “female” occupations which are paid considerably less than “men’s jobs” even when they demand comparable levels of skill and training. Still, women’s earnings do a great deal to reduce the number of families living in disadvantaged circumstances. Table 3 presents data on the economic status of two-parent families by ethnicity and employment pattern. This will help us to determine what women’s earnings could accomplish for their families if they were paid with a 100 cent dollar—that is at the same level as similarly qualified men.

The left hand portion of the table presents the proportion of families that would be poor or disadvantaged if wives did not contribute any income, the proportion as currently existing, and the proportion that would be poor or disadvantaged if women were paid at the same level as men. This latter figure was computed through a process which involved dividing current women’s earnings by .65. The data demonstrates that, even under present conditions, women’s earnings reduce the number of families living in poor or disadvantaged circumstances by anywhere from 7 to 14%, depending upon ethnicity. The greatest impact is found among Afro-Americans, Filipino-Americans, and Korean-Americans. “Comparable Worth” legislation would further reduce the proportion of poor or dis-

advantaged families by another 2 to 13% and would increase the number of families living under affluent conditions by between 2 and 13%. This is on top of the 3 to 14% increases resulting from women's employment under present circumstances. A comparison of families under the assumption of "no earnings by wife" with those under the assumption of "Comparable Worth earnings" shows a total decline of families in poor or disadvantaged circumstances of between 8 and 28%, and a total increase of families in affluent circumstances of between 4 and 22%, depending upon ethnicity.

The right hand portion of Table 3 presents data reporting the impact of "Comparable Worth" legislation for families in which the wife is employed full-time, year around. Paying women at the same level as men would reduce the proportion of families living in poor or disadvantaged circumstances by between 7 and 20%, and increase the proportion living in affluent circumstances by between 7 and 16%, depending upon ethnicity. This represents a total increase of between 18 and 48% of families living in affluent circumstances. Data included in the lower portion of Table 1 demonstrated that women who head families would also be helped by the elimination of gender inequality in wages. The proportion of such families living in poor or disadvantaged circumstances would decrease by between 6 and 13%, depending upon ethnicity.

Conclusion

This analysis probably overstates the impact that "Comparable Worth" legislation would have upon Anglo families and understates its importance for Families of Color. Afro-American women working full-time in 1982 earned \$1,100 less than comparably employed Euro-American women (Farley 1984, p. 57). Other Women of Color are likely to be faced with a similar earnings deficit. If anything, this strengthens my argument that we must create a multi-pronged effort to drastically alter the opportunity structure in American society if we are to make serious inroads against racial inequality. Any meaningful reduction in racial inequality requires a simultaneous reduction in gender inequality. I fully support the policy proposals put forth by Wilson in the *Truly Disadvantaged*, but

believe that we must go much further. Wilson's policy proposals embody an unconscious sexism and accept the inevitability of the traditional two-parent family. This is a fine family form for those who choose it—but not everyone wishes to do so.

Wilson does not believe that this is the natural, or even the preferred, family form. He simply argues that the level of sexism that exists in our society dooms women who choose alternative life styles to disadvantaged circumstances. Nor do his proposals entirely ignore the needs of women. He emphasizes the need to create jobs for both men and women (Wilson 1987, p. 106; 150), but the major thrust throughout his book is aimed at solving the problems of women in the underclass by increasing the size of the pool of "marriageable" men. He also discusses the need for day care with reference to female-headed families (Wilson 1987, p. 153), but not in relation to the needs of two-parent families. Further, he suggests that day care should come from the private sector, which would make it prohibitively expensive for low income families. Nor would the tax credits that he advocates help all that much since low income people pay few taxes. Lowering the age for admission into preschools, as advocated by Wilson, would not help as much as it appears on the surface. Preschools often have short hours and still leave the problem of day care availability for the remainder of the day as well as the problem of providing transportation between preschool and day care. Wilson does not present any proposals related to wage discrimination against women.

Wilson's political agenda is structured on pragmatic considerations. He does not believe that racial special interest legislation can be passed in the present political context. Consequently, he urges an agenda which would create a broad based alliance by providing some potential gains for a wide spectrum of Americans. I think that he is right in his reading of the times and in his basic approach. However, it will not be possible to implement his agenda without struggle. I cannot understand why we should engage in a massive struggle to implement a program that allows for the perpetuation of sexist institutions and, consequently, would fall far short of accom-

plishing our objectives. If we are going to have to struggle to bring about change anyway, and we must, let us make these changes worthwhile. Let us also struggle to eliminate sexism at the same time. This is not utopian. We can build a broad based movement on behalf of such a program by making more people aware of exactly how sexist economic practices work to their own disadvantage.

Legislation with teeth which strengthens the bars against overt gender discrimination is both desirable and achievable. But it does not go far enough. It does not attack the problem of sex-typed occupations. The only thing that I know of that would attack this is "Comparable Worth" legislation. "Comparable Worth" legislation is essential and, I believe, achievable. We will certainly never get it if we sit back, write it off as unobtainable, and strive for lesser things. We can and must make the effort. The ERA, Comparable Worth, Federally funded day care centers, and tax laws that allow child care costs to be deducted directly from income are all essential parts of the package. Such a legislative agenda would have a major impact in reducing the number of families living in disadvantaged circumstances and would help them to achieve a minimal level of decency. This program would have a significant impact upon opportunities offered to such current members of the underclass as single women, female heads of families, and to working wives. All family types, with the possible exception of male headed, single-parent families, would gain.

It would also help a category of persons that has not yet been considered. Many Afro-American families have only recently been able to achieve what is usually referred to as middle class status and their hold upon it remains insecure (Geschwender and Carroll-Seguín forthcoming). Afro-American males, even those with advanced levels of education do not receive the same economic payoff for added years of schooling that is accorded to Euro-Americans. Afro-American families which are middle-class in terms of husbands' education and occupation, have frequently had to opt to have two income earners in order to achieve the same middle-class life style that Euro-Americans can normally achieve with one wage earner. The earnings of employed females have made it pos-

sible for many Afro-American families to achieve middle-class status—whatever that means—and these earnings are essential for its retention. There is evidence that this same pattern holds for Asian-American families as well (Geschwender and Carroll-Seguín 1988). Thus, it appears that “Comparable Worth” legislation can be as essential to middle-class People of Color as it is for the underclass.

Women’s earnings, especially for Afro-Americans, may become of even greater importance in the future. In the past few decades, inflationary trends combined with changes in the occupational structure to make it increasingly difficult for males to find jobs and, if employed, to earn an income adequate to support a family at a minimal level of decency. Males are leaving the labor force in growing numbers. Farley (1984, pp. 40–43) notes that much of the decline in the labor force participation rate of Euro-American males results from the early retirement of males over 55 while the decline for Afro-Americans, which has been greater in absolute size, is largely found among men under 54 who, presumably, cannot find jobs. If these trends continue as expected, it will be increasingly important that we incorporate an attack upon gender inequality as a major feature in any attempts to reduce racial inequality.

A Political Afterword

The proposals outlined by Wilson in his work, and those that I have outlined above, must be included in any program of action if it is to be effective. They will be characterized by many as “reformist.” They fall short of calling for the socialist transformation of American Society as the only possible solution. However, such a transformation is not going to occur within the next decade. In the meantime, there are large numbers of persons living in misery. We cannot simply leave them there in the hope that their presence will hasten the revolution. We cannot stand idle in the belief that nothing meaningful can be done under capitalism. To do this, when we might be able to alleviate their suffering is cruel and insensitive. But, it is more than that. It is bad politics. The struggle for change, especially when it is successful, helps create a sense of power in

people. It helps to create the belief that they can collectively develop the ability to control their own destiny. It helps to mobilize people and strengthen the movement for further change. These measures that advocate are reformist, but they are worth struggling for on their own merits, and they are worth struggling for because each successful struggle for reform has the potential to develop into a broader struggle for justice and equality.

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Problems of Pragmatism in Public Policy:
Critique of William Wilson's *The Truly
Disadvantaged*

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Introduction: Wilson—Then and Now

I want to begin by commending Professor Wilson for focussing his scholarly attention upon one of the more critical social problems confronting our society at this time. You will recall that in his earlier work, Professor Wilson found that the civil rights movement had made a major impact on the character of race relations in our society, particularly relative to the status of blacks. In that award-winning but controversial study, *The Declining Significance of Race*, Professor Wilson found two diverging trends within the black community: on the one hand, the growth of the black middle class which had benefitted from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; on the other, a growing sector of impoverished blacks for whom that movement had seemed to leave behind. In this regard Professor Wilson is to be commended for allowing his findings from *The Declining Significance of Race* to focus upon those forces which demand change. If the U.S. is to make claims that it is a civilized, just or compassionate society, the condition of this sector must be addressed. It is this sector which Jesse Jackson refers to as "the least of these" as he calls for a "new direction" in the political arena so that their condition, and ours, will be dramatically improved.

On the other hand, Professor Wilson might have allowed his findings from that award-winning study to focus on the finding relative to the substantial growth of the black middle class. Had he chosen that course of action there is little doubt those "success stories" would have been used as propaganda to support the status quo. Had that been the case, he may have

been joining that small, but very visible minority of black scholars who argue that capitalism, as a system, is just fine and that those blacks who have been left out, need to stop begging and join the free enterprise system so that they too can reap the wealth and other rewards which we are to believe is available to all who put forth the effort. Fortunately, Professor Wilson did not join that chorus. Instead, he chose to challenge those apologists for this country's capitalist class by demonstrating that there are structural factors which play the key role in producing this phenomenon he terms "the underclass" or *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

Given that this work is a follow-up to *The Declining Significance of Race*, we cannot really understand this work without placing it in the context of that earlier work. Many will recall that, contrary to the prevailing sentiment among black and progressive sociologists, I found considerable favor with that work back in 1978. The basis of my positive reception of that work was that it departed in a major way from making the problem of "race relations" primarily a psychological problem that is based upon the prejudiced or racist psyche of individual whites, or something as elusive as "institutional racism." Wilson's work placed the "race problem" in the context of the political economy, which I thought, particularly for a mainstream sociologist, was a major advance. The most vicious attacks on that work came from scholars, black and white, who hold the primacy of race as the predominant analytical framework for understanding the condition of black people. For this group of scholars Wilson's argument against race-specific solutions will be viewed as a continuation of what they saw as the major flaw in *The Declining Significance of Race*. It is this "primacy of race school" which is also likely to be most offended by his considerable devotion to spelling out the problems of viability of race-specific solutions for the so-called inner-city poor. While I do not disagree with Wilson's general thesis on the limitations of race-specific solutions, I do find this work to be a retreat from the path-breaking opportunity provided by *The Declining Significance of Race*. But, with Professor Wilson, I find it hard to understand that sociologists, particularly black sociologists, can continue to believe that there can be race-

specific solutions to the plight of blacks, generally, and particularly the black poor.

It seems to me that the logic to the problem is as simple as this: If you want to have decent health care for *all black* Americans, you must understand that it will not happen in the absence of decent health care for all Americans; If you want a decent job for *all black* Americans, you must understand that that will not happen in the absence of a decent job for all Americans; If you want the alleviation from poverty for *all black* Americans, you must understand that it will not happen in absence of the alleviation from poverty for all Americans. There are not sufficient moral appeals to eliminate "racism," and therefore make the outcome any different. There will not be sufficient "black political power" to make the outcome any different. Nor can there be enough black community self-sufficiency to make the outcome any different. Under these circumstances, I agree with Professor Wilson: the limitations to race-specific solutions, including affirmative action are severe. However, this should not be construed to say that I do not regard race to be significant in our lives, including our organization and analyses. In this regard, I agree with Dr. W.E.B. DuBois in his very challenging essay, "Whither Now and Why?," that one of our major concerns, in our quest for "racial equality" should be that we not commit "racial suicide." As he stated: "I am not fighting to settle the question of racial equality in America by the process of getting rid of the Negro race."

DuBois notwithstanding, the fact that Professor Wilson went beyond the interpersonal prejudice and racism paradigms and based the "race relations problem" in the productive sphere, I considered *The Declining Significance of Race* to have been on the precipice of being progressive. While that was my assessment of his earlier work, I find few similar qualities in *The Truly Disadvantaged*. For me while the issue, illumination about this most impoverished sector, is one of utmost importance, and while Professor Wilson makes a sincere effort to be bold and abandon cliché analyses, such as the "primacy of race" paradigm, *The Truly Disadvantaged* represents an almost total retreat from the promise of that earlier work.

Constructing an Ominous Reality

The Truly Disadvantaged is a reversal, toward a very conservative analysis with very ominous implications. The bibliography of *The Declining Significance of Race* contained numerous references to the works of progressive scholars such as Bonacich, Baran and Sweezy, Genovese, Foner, Oliver Cox, DuBois and others. Of the nearly 400 bibliographic references in *The Truly Disadvantaged* one is hard put to find any references to works about the problem of the so-called underclass by progressive scholars. In fact, it seems as though this whole discussion suffers from having the problem conceptualized and framed by conservatives and reactionaries such as Glen Loury, Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead.

Unfortunately, the very terms or concepts employed by Wilson emanate from the lexicon of the right-wing: "reverse discrimination"; "preferential treatment"; "social pathology"; and the "underclass." Peter Berger argues that one of the main tasks of sociology is that of debunking common-sense conceptions of how our social world is organized. I would like to take that a step further, particularly on matters in which the social implications of how a problem is framed plays such a critical role in social action or social policy. In this case, the issue is not so much a matter of debunking but demystification. As constructors of social reality, it is imperative that we not misconstrue, and therefore cloud, rather than illuminate, reality. The 1988 Republican Party National Convention provides an excellent case in point. The American people were presented a reality of "peace and prosperity," and the Party's so-called creation of 17 million jobs. This prosperity was proclaimed the context of the United States having moved from being the largest creditor nation to the largest debtor nation in the last eight years. This proclamation was made in the context of 144 bank failures so far this year, on top of approximately 190 such failures last year. This was also done in the context of an overwhelming number of those new jobs paying \$7000 or less per year. That is mystification. To accept, uncritically, such notions as "reverse discrimination" and "preferential treatment" serves to mystify reality and facilitates the discrediting of attempts to compensate for past policies of exclusion.

Similarly, one could argue that the term "social pathology" is no less a mystification. The term, I assume, is to connote a condition of disease, or deviation from normal. However, as the term is applied in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, there is little question that the "pathological" reference is to the behavior of that "large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasts sharply with [that] of the general population," rather than an economic system that requires a reserve army of unemployed persons, and who are thereby impoverished. In this case, the mystification also clouds the inherently dialectical relationship between wealth and poverty. That is to say, if there is to be wealth, its concomitant is poverty.

This brings us to the most ominous of these conceptualizations: the underclass. Professor Wilson argues the appropriateness as follows:

Regardless of which term is used, one cannot deny that there is a heterogeneous grouping of inner-city families and individuals whose behavior contrasts sharply with that of mainstream America. The real challenge is not only to explain why this is so, but also to explain why the behavior patterns in the inner-city today differ so markedly from those of only three or four decades ago. To obscure these differences by eschewing the term *underclass*, or some other term that could be helpful in describing the changes in ghetto behavior, norms, and aspirations, in favor of more neutral designations such as *lower class* or *working class* is to fail to address one of the most important transformations in recent United States history. (p. 7)

While I agree that we are witnessing "one of the most important transformations in recent United States history," I must point out that transformation is occurring, not in the responsive behavior of the population in question, but in an economic system in which they have declared to be superfluous. Furthermore, I would argue that if you had to suffer the "economic violence," including the daily indignity of being superfluous, you would behave similarly. Fundamentally, the "pathology" is in capitalism as an economic system not, primarily, its products.

Consequently, the use of the underclass concept looms

ominous. The danger of the concept is that it places the problem to be "in the people," this black inner-city "underclass." As Christopher Jenks points out, the purpose of the concept is to isolate an "undeserving" poor. What does a society, which supposedly "guarantees success" to anyone willing to work for it, do with slovenly criminals who contribute nothing but more teenagers having babies? First of all, you make sure that everyone comes to accept that this population "contrast(s) sharply" from normal human beings. After there is general agreement about this sharp difference between the normal people and "them," it is easy to accept the fact that *they* are the problem, or "The Millstone" as characterized by the *Chicago Tribune*. That is to say, that what ever goes wrong with society, its inability to put them all in jail, could result in concentration camps and possibly extermination becoming a viable alternative. It is not as though such practices are outside the realm of so-called civilized society. In sum, the problem becomes not the loss of the legacy of their foreparents stolen labor, but their lack of education and skills.

From the Subjective Isolation to the Objective "Common Ground"

To isolate this population as though they were somehow totally unique is to mystify rather than illuminate. Further, by focusing on this black impoverished population and making it distinctive from other impoverished populations obscures the role of the economy shaping not only their condition, but others similarly situated, as well. The problem is not a black problem, it represents a crisis in capitalism as a whole. Consequently, it affects both blacks and whites, as well as, other sectors of our society. In fact, Professor Wilson's "Appendix" partially recognizes the universality of the problem:

The number of central-city poor climbed from 8 million in 1969 to 12.7 million in 1982 (52%) while the proportion in poverty increased from 12.7 million to 19.9 million (or by 57 percent). Accordingly, to say that poverty has become increasingly urbanized is to note a *remarkable change in the concentration of poor people in the United States in only slightly more than a decade*. During this period poverty rose among both urban blacks and whites. Spe-

cifically, while the number of poor central city blacks increased by 74 percent (from 3.1 million in 1969 to 5.4 million in 1982), the number of poor central-city whites increased by 42 percent (from 4.8 million to 6.8 million). And while the proportion of central-city blacks increased by 52 percent (from 9.7 million to 14.5 million), the proportion of poor central-city whites increased 49 percent (from 24.3 million to 36.9 million). (p. 172)

Clearly, these figures show that the problem is not restricted to a "socially isolated" black, so-called, "underclass." Instead, these figures, for both blacks and whites, show a more general decline in the capacity of capitalism as a system to provide work for the populace, and not some set of phenomena peculiar to blacks.

Much of this "remarkable change in the concentration of poor . . . in only slightly more than a decade" is a result of profound changes in the economy and not the lack of skills and education of that so-called underclass. The computer chip and the robot represent major changes in productive forces since the "niggermentation days" at Chrysler's Jefferson Avenue Assembly, as articulated by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

More generally, what we are witnessing is, "one of the most important transformations in recent United States history." (p. 7) The only thing is, however, the transformation is primarily in the economy and now it uses its labor. In a study which sought to ascertain "What is happening to American jobs?," Barry Bluestone provides for us some interesting data. He found that between 1973 and 1979 that out of the 12 million new jobs 1 of 5 were in the low wage sector, or \$7000 or less per year. However, since 1979 over 60% of the new jobs were in this low wage sector. Presently, about 90% of the new jobs pay \$7000 or less per year. While not dismissing the "economic violence" that accompanies this occupational sector, the problem, is not restricted to the low wage sector. For those in the high wage sector (i.e., wages at least twice the median income \$28,000 or more per year), there has been a net loss 400,000 jobs. What these trends represent is that there is a general crisis in capitalism as a system. The problems are not restricted to young people, blacks or other people of color, women nor

female headed households. In fact, white males have experienced the largest relative decline in high wage jobs and the largest relative increase in low wage jobs.

Similarly, Eileen Applebaum finds that computer technology has resulted in productivity gains and at the same time reductions in unit labor requirements. U.S. corporations have been diligent in their cutting of wage costs. . . . [through the] rigid use of technology and routinizing of jobs, less skilled workers, temporary workers and concessions from labor in their collective bargaining agreements. In the 1970s and 1980s part-time employment has grown faster than full-time employment. Job growth in traditional services is fueled by the expansion of part-time employment. Part-time employment has increased by 2.5 million since 1979. Of that number, only 600,000 actually sought part-time work which means that nearly two million of that increase are persons holding part-time jobs involuntarily. Employment growth in the part-time service sector is predicated on low wages and few benefits. In fact, this sector is one of the ways in which unemployment is hidden.

These data would seem to show that what we are witnessing is a general crisis of capitalism which results from labor being expendable in the owners' insatiable thirst for profits. Most importantly, since this crisis is affecting blacks, other people of color, and whites alike, the solution to the problem must be sought in the "common ground" of the various populations. In fact, it is this "common ground" which is broadening Jesse Jackson's base. At the same time, for those upon whom the most brutal of this violence is heaped, who know that they are despised, there can be little wonder that they respond in the most brutal and most alienated ways?

Conclusion: The Next Step

Finally, by not recognizing the plight of the urban black poor as being another aspect of capitalism in crisis is to make this sector of society a scapegoat, as opposed to the most oppressed sector of an expendable working class is to cloud a very fundamental reality. Even more, the problem exists in a setting in which there is no resolution under the capitalism.

There is no more room for reforms. The system's ideologues say that in every way they can. That is the message of such black intellectuals as Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams and Glen Loury. That was the message of Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter before him. That will be the message of George Bush and Dan Quayle. That will be the message of the Michael Dukakis paired with Lloyd Bentsen. That has been the message of black mayors across the country. Can anyone imagine a white mayor approving the bombing of a black community and not being impeached? Can you imagine a white mayor forcing casino gambling down throats of a city which is 75% black against their will and him not being impeached? In instances like these I am reminded of Michner's quote that "we will take more from ours than from others." The last concession, following the rebellions of the 1960s, was an appearance of democracy for blacks, accompanied by a blackened bureaucracy which operate with the same constraints as did their white predecessors. At some point the people will be as alienated from a black petit bourgeoisie as they were from the white petit bourgeoisie post World War II.

Consequently, I find no reason to believe that a Swedish-type social democracy is anything but an intellectual exercise. In fact, Professor Wilson, himself observes:

Any significant reduction of the problems of black joblessness and the related problems of crime, out-of-wedlock births, single-parent homes, and welfare dependency will call for a far more comprehensive program of economic and social reform than what Americans have usually regarded as appropriate or desirable. In short, it will require a radicalism that neither Democrat nor Republican parties have as yet been realistic enough to propose. (p. 139)

Contradicting that realism on page 139, Professor Wilson then proposes "a hidden agenda" which will have "universal appeal" and, I assume, be voted on, passed, and signed into law by those same Democrats and Republicans who just 15 pages before would find such programs to be too "radical."

Such respectable pragmatism, itself leads to an abyss too conservative than to do anything but reinforce the *status quo* and make repression more likely. When our data and analyses

tell us that there can be no "hidden agendas," it is our responsibility, as scientists, to not hide from an empirical reality. We must be upfront with ourselves, our colleagues, and our constituent publics to inform and not "disinform." We must understand and reveal capitalism for what it is and its impact on those who do not own the means of production. We must come to understand, sociologically, the necessity of replacing a system that places profits before people with a more humane system. On this, the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, we should seriously consider carrying on the legacy of the spirit and understanding of W.E.B. DuBois in both his scholarship and practice.

A Response to Critics of *The Truly Disadvantaged*

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I appreciate the thoughtful comments by the authors of those papers that focused on my book, even though I disagree with many of the arguments. I was especially pleased with Edna Bonacich's accurate interpretation of my arguments in the first several pages of her article. And I was impressed with Andrew Billingsley's comprehensive discussion of what he takes to be the "three distinct, yet overlapping phases or central themes in" my work. I wish I were able on this occasion to discuss this broader coverage of my scholarship, but for sake of brevity, I shall only focus on the criticisms of *The Truly Disadvantaged*. My response will not include an attempt to "answer" each of the critical comments seriatim, rather it will focus on those points that allow me to highlight and clarify the most important arguments in the book. In the process I hope to correct several of the more serious misinterpretations and distortions of my thesis.

The Truly Disadvantaged: A Correct Interpretation

When the first reviews of *The Truly Disadvantaged* appeared in late October 1987, I felt that the timing of the publication of this book could not have been better. One of my purposes was to challenge the dominant themes on the underclass reflected in the popular media and in the writings of conservative intellectuals, not by shying away from using the concept of "underclass," not by avoiding a description and explanation of unflattering behavior, but by attempting to relate the practices and experiences of inner-city ghetto residents to the structure of opportunities and constraints in American society. And one of my principal arguments was that the vulnerability of poor urban minorities to changes in the economy since the early 1970s (the periodic recessions of the 1970s and early 1980s, the

downward slide in real wages, economic cutbacks, plant closings, and the relocation of manufacturing and other goods producing firms from the central city to cheaper labor sites [including sites abroad] and to the suburbs and exurbs) has resulted in sharp increases in joblessness, in the concentration of poverty, in the number of poor single-parent families, and in welfare dependency, despite the creation of Great Society programs and despite antidiscrimination and affirmative action programs.

Also, I argued that the effects of changes in the economy are most clearly felt in the concentrated poverty areas of the ghetto. The steady exodus of higher income families, together with the sharp rise in joblessness, has transformed the social structure of these neighborhoods in ways that severely worsen the impact of the continuing industrial and geographic changes of the American economy since the 1970s: periodic recessions, wage stagnation, and the restriction of employment opportunities to the low-wage sector. I pointed out that today the dwindling presence of middle- and working-class households in the ghetto makes it more difficult for the remaining residents of these communities to sustain basic formal and informal institutions in the face of high and prolonged joblessness and attendant economic hardships. And as the basic institutions decline, the social organization of inner-city ghetto neighborhoods disintegrates, further depleting the resources and limiting the life-chances of those who remain mired in these blighted areas.

One of the terms I use to help describe this process is "social isolation," which implies that contact between groups of different class and/or racial backgrounds is minimal and/or intermittent and thereby enhances the effects of living in a highly concentrated poverty area. These "concentration effects," reflected in a range of outcomes from labor-force attachment to social dispositions, are created by the constraints and opportunities that the residents of inner-city ghetto neighborhoods face in terms of access to jobs and job networks, involvement in quality schools, availability of marriageable partners, and exposure to conventional role models. Accordingly, I argued that the factors associated with the recent

increases in social dislocation among the ghetto underclass are complex and cannot be reduced to the easy explanations of racism and racial discrimination advanced by those on the left or of the welfare state promoted by those on the right. I argued that although the inner-city ghetto is a product of historic discrimination and although present-day discrimination undoubtedly contributed to the increasing social and economic woes of the ghetto underclass, to understand the sharp increase in these problems since 1970 requires the specification of a complex web of other factors, including shifts in the American economy.

In this connection, I asserted that the War on Poverty and race relations visions failed to relate the fate of the truly disadvantaged to the functioning of the modern American economy and therefore failed to explain the worsening conditions of inner-city minorities in the post-Great Society and post-civil rights periods. Liberals whose views embody these visions have been puzzled by the recent increase of inner-city social dislocations and have lacked a convincing rebuttal to the forceful but erroneous arguments by conservative scholars and policy makers that attribute these problems to the social values of the ghetto underclass. And I attempted to show that the growing emphasis on social values deflects attention from the major cause of the rise of inner-city social dislocations since 1970—changes in the nation's economy.

I further argued that any significant reduction of the problem of joblessness and related social dislocations in the inner-city ghetto will call for a far more comprehensive program of economic and social reform than what Americans have usually supported or regarded as desirable. In short, It will require a radicalism that our major political parties have been unwilling to consider. I therefore proposed a social democratic policy agenda that highlights macro-economic policies to promote balanced economic growth and create a tight labor market, public sector employment programs for those who have difficulty finding jobs in the private sector, manpower training and education programs, affirmative action programs, a child support assurance program, a child care strategy, and a family allowance program.

Finally, I argued that an important feature of this program is that it would improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass and at the same time attract and sustain the support of more advantaged groups of different racial and class backgrounds because it includes and would highlight specific universal programs.

The Truly Disadvantaged has been credited not only with stimulating a whole new round of empirical research on life in the inner-city ghetto, but also with encouraging scholars to reenter the field of urban poverty and to address openly various life experiences in the ghetto including self-destructive behavior. It has also drawn a good deal of criticism of the kind reflected in this volume. Let me react to some of this criticism and in the process put my arguments in proper perspective.

Critical Response to the Authors

One of the sections in Andrew Billingsley's thoughtful paper is entitled "Blacks as Main Cause of the Underclass." This section seriously distorts my arguments because Billingsley surprisingly misinterprets a statement I made about the demographic changes in black neighborhoods. Billingsley quotes the following statement from *The Truly Disadvantaged*: "The extraordinary increase in both the poor and nonpoor populations in the extreme poverty areas between 1970 and 1980 was due mainly to changes in the demographic characteristics of the black population." This statement was meant to convey a statistical association indicating that the increase in poverty concentration was reflected in the remarkable change in the racial composition of neighborhoods; in other words, that nearly all of the increase in the concentration of residents in extreme poverty areas was accounted for by blacks and Hispanics. Billingsley however erroneously interpreted it as a causal statement. He argues "Our own view, as we have noted elsewhere, is that it is not likely that the problem of concentration of low-income Blacks in inner cities and the problems they experience can be explained [emphasis added] by 'the demographic characteristics of the black population,' as Wilson argues. The explanation lies elsewhere, and lies outside the inner city and outside the Black population altogether. In our

view, there are much more powerful social, economic, and technological forces at work which offer a better explanation." Now I wonder what book Billingsley is talking about because *The Truly Disadvantaged* makes the same point with even greater clarity. For example in chapter two I state that "Although present-day discrimination undoubtedly has contributed to the increasing social and economic woes of the ghetto underclass, I have argued that these problems have been due far more to a complex web of other factors that **include shifts in the American economy—which have produced extraordinary rates of black joblessness that have exacerbated other social problems in the inner city**—the historic flow of migrants, changes in the urban minority age structure, population changes in the central city, and the class transformation of the inner city" (Wilson, 1987, p. 62) [emphasis added]. Any careful reader of *The Truly Disadvantaged* will know that I never argued that "Black flight from the inner city is the **primary cause** of the concentration of low-income blacks there and the attend social problem," as Billingsley asserts [emphasis added]. Indeed I pointed out, "the class transformation of the inner city cannot be understood without considering the effects of fundamental changes in the urban economy on lower-income minorities, effects that include joblessness and that thereby increase the chances of long-term residence in highly concentrated poverty areas" (Wilson, 1987, p. 62).

Several of the authors in this volume suggest that my policy prescription is designed, as Geschwender puts it, to "increase the numbers of Afro-American men who could afford to marry and support a family, thereby, reducing the number of female-headed families and decreasing the number of persons living in disadvantaged circumstances." Echoing the sentiments of Carole Marks and, to a lesser extent, Bonnie Dill, Geschwender goes on to state that "it is simply not the case that all women who head families do so because of a shortage of what Wilson calls 'marriageable men.' Some do so by choice, and would like the opportunity to achieve a decent standard of living without having to buy a husband as part of the package. The program that Wilson proposes does not address this issue and would, if enacted, do very little to improve their circumstances. Nor

is it, by itself, likely to produce very substantial gains for disadvantaged two-parent families."

To put it bluntly, this is a serious misinterpretation of my analysis and policy recommendations. Let me elaborate. Chapter four of *The Truly Disadvantaged* includes a discussion of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's recommendations to aid poor families, outlined in his 1986 Harvard University Godkin lectures, which call for enlarging personal and dependent tax exemptions, establishing a national benefit standard for child welfare aid, and indexing benefits to inflation. It is stated in *The Truly Disadvantaged* that

these are all constructive suggestions, but they need to be included in a more comprehensive reform program designed to create a tight labor market that enhances the employment opportunities of both poor men and women. Such an undertaking will do far more in the long run to enlarge the stability and reduce the welfare dependency of low-income black families than will cutting the vital provisions of the welfare state. We emphasize the need to create employment opportunities for both sexes, even though our focus in this chapter is on the problem of black male joblessness. To identify black male joblessness as a major source of black family disintegration is not to suggest that policymakers should ignore the problems of joblessness and poverty among current female heads of families. (Wilson, 1987, pp. 105–106)

It is important to note that black male joblessness was emphasized in *The Truly Disadvantaged* because I was trying to challenge the conservative argument that the increase in black solo parent families was due primarily to a "welfare ethos," an argument most prominently associated with Charles Murray who has maintained that welfare generosity is the fundamental cause of black family dissolution. To strengthen the case against Murray, Kathryn Neckerman and I develop a "male marriageable pool index" (i.e., the number of employed men per 100 women of the same race and age) in order to show that black women unlike white women were facing a shrinking pool of marriageable, i.e., employed men and that the decline in the pool of marriageable men was greatest in the inner city and accounts in large measure for the sharp increase in poor female headed families. Data collected more recently by

researchers on my large research project on poverty, joblessness and family structure in the innercity neighborhoods of Chicago dramatically reveal the importance of male joblessness and family formation. For example, in Oakland, Grand Boulevard, and Washington Park—the traditional black belt neighborhoods of Chicago—there were roughly 70 employed adult males for every 100 adult females in 1950, a ratio which was about equal to the city wide figure of 73 percent. By 1980 that proportion had slipped to 56% in Chicago, but plunged to 29% in Washington Park, 24% in Grand Boulevard, and only 19% in Oakland (Wacquant & Wilson, 1989, pp. 70–102).¹ Moreover, on the basis of a survey of inner-city parents in Chicago, researchers on our project were able to document that inner-city employed fathers are two and a half times more likely than nonemployed fathers to marry the mother of their first child (Testa et al., 1989, pp. 79–91).

To repeat, the focus on black male joblessness was to help explain the sharp rise of poor female-headed families in the inner city. This emphasis on family formation is important because female headed families are overwhelmingly impoverished families, families that are far more likely to experience persistent poverty in the United States. In Sweden, by contrast, since the poverty rate of single-mother families is very nearly equal to the poverty rate of married-couple families—both are extremely low—and since an adequate child care system to support working mothers is available, the growth of solo-parent families is not problematic. But this is not Sweden, and the factors that contribute to the rise of impoverished single-parent families cannot be ignored in the public policy debate here.

Nonetheless, several of the authors in this volume, erroneously interpreted my association of the sharp rise of black single-parent families with male joblessness to mean that I was only concerned about the job situation for men and that my policy prescription is limited to men. This is not the case. Let me quote another paragraph from chapter seven of *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

Comprehensive economic policies aimed at the general population but that would also enhance employment opportunities among the truly disadvantaged—both men and women—are

needed. The research presented in this study suggest that improving the job prospects of men will strengthen low-income black families. Moreover, underclass absent fathers with more stable employment are in a better position to contribute financial support for their families. Furthermore, since the majority of female householders are in the labor force, improved job prospects would very likely draw in others. (Wilson, 1987, pp. 150–151)

Moreover, after discussing the need for a child support assurance program, I state in the same chapter that:

low-income single mothers could combine work with adequate child support and/or child allowance benefits and therefore escape poverty and avoid public assistance. Finally, the question of child care has to be addressed in any program designed to improve the employment prospects of women and men. Because of the growing participation of women in the labor market, adequate child care has been a topic receiving increasing attention in public policy discussions. For the overwhelmingly female-headed ghetto underclass families, access to quality child care becomes a critical issue if steps are taken to move single mothers into education and training programs and/or full- or part-time employment. (Wilson, 1987, p. 153)

I think I have made my point, so let me turn to some of the other major criticisms of my book.

On the front page of the October 26th *New York Times Book Review* there is a drawing that reflects the title of the Robert Greenstein's review of *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Greenstein's long review was entitled "Prisoners of the Economy," and it presents in clear, accurate and forceful terms my central thesis that inner-city blacks and inner-city neighborhoods have been victimized by changes in America's advanced capitalist economy. Anyone who has read Greenstein's review and has the chance to read the reviews by Gomes and Fishman and, especially, by Newby in this volume might very well conclude that these latter authors have read an entirely different book.

Newby states that of the "nearly 400 bibliographic references in *The Truly Disadvantaged* one is hard put to find any reference to works about the so-called underclass by progressive scholars." If by "progressive scholars" he is referring to

those who are likely to take the approach represented in his article or in the article by Gomes and Fishman, he is right. However, my view of progressive scholars is more broad and would include the works of people like Barry Bluestone and Benjamin Harris, Chester Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Ira Katznelson, Michael Harrington, and Theda Skocpol all of whom I did cite. I find the work of the "progressive scholars" that, I assume, Newby has in mind as irrelevant to the major issues described in *The Truly Disadvantaged*. They either deny the reality of the unique problems in the inner city that I have described, or they use abstract arguments, based on categorical models or assumptions about the "way the world works," and general concepts like "working class" that fail to capture the reality of life and experience in the inner-city ghetto. And I think that this is particularly true of a good deal of Marxist scholarship of which Newby is a prime example. Let me elaborate.

Newby quotes from the appendix of *The Truly Disadvantaged* which indicates that there has been an increase in poverty among both poor whites and poor blacks. He then states that "Clearly, these figures show that the problem is not restricted to a 'socially isolated' black, so-called, 'underclass.' Instead, these figures, for both blacks and whites, show a more general decline in the capacity of capitalism as a system to provide work for the populace, and not some set of phenomena peculiar to blacks." If one is concerned only with general poverty rates, Newby is correct in emphasizing that both whites and blacks have experienced significant increases in rates of poverty. But there is another dimension of poverty that is not reflected in these statistics but that is described in considerable detail in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, namely the concentration of poverty—a dimension that Newby strangely ignores.

As I discussed in *The Truly Disadvantaged* there has been a sharp increase in the concentration of poverty in the nation's large metropolises. I illustrated this by focusing on the five largest cities based on the 1970 population census (i.e., New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Detroit) where close to half of the total poor population in the fifty largest cities live. I pointed out that although the total population in

these five largest cities declined by 9% from 1970 to 1980, the poverty population rose by 22%. However, the population residing in poverty census tracts increased by 40% overall, by 69% in high poverty areas (i.e., areas with a poverty rate of at least 30%), and by an astonishing 161% in extreme poverty areas (i.e., areas with a poverty rate of at least 40%).

I noted that poverty areas, of course, include both poor and nonpoor individuals and that the increase in the poor population in the poverty areas of these five cities was even more severe than that in the total population. More specifically, the number of poor living in poverty areas swelled by 58% overall, by 70% in high-poverty areas, and by an enormous 182% in extreme poverty areas. And I pointed out that these extraordinary increases reflected mainly changes in the demographic characteristics of the minority population. Whereas only 15% of poor blacks and 20% of poor Hispanics lived in **nonpoverty** areas in the five large central cities in 1980, 68% of all poor whites lived in such areas. And whereas 32% of all poor Hispanics and 39% of all poor blacks lived in the extreme poverty areas, only 7% of all poor whites lived in such areas. As I argue in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, if one were to conduct a study that only compared the responses of poor urban blacks with those of poor urban whites without considering the effects of living in highly concentrated poverty neighborhoods, that is without taking into account the different residential areas in which poor whites and poor blacks tend to reside, one would reach conclusions about human capital traits, attitudes, norms, and behavior that would be unfavorable to poor blacks but favorable to poor whites. Associated with the sharp increase in the concentration of poverty is the precipitous rise in the concentration of joblessness, the large growth in the concentration of single parent families, the substantial increase in the concentration of families on welfare, etc.

This is what I mean when I talk about the incredible social transformation that has taken place in the inner-city ghetto, a transformation that is not duplicated in the urban white neighborhoods, a transformation that captures the dynamic interaction of class subordination and racial isolation. And careful readers of *The Truly Disadvantaged* know that I relate the trans-

formation of the inner-city ghetto first and foremost to changes in the organization of America's advanced capitalist economy, changes that have unleashed powerful pressures that have, in combination with the exodus of higher income blacks from many inner-city neighborhoods, broken down the previous structure of the ghetto and set off a process of "hyperghettoization" (Wacquant & Wilson, 1989, pp. 8–25).² Marxist scholars like Newby are not capturing this reality in their writings. They are talking in general terms about an exploited working class as if the experiences of the various groups subsumed under this concept are similar. In contrast, I use the term 'underclass' to capture the unique reality of inner-city ghetto residents. I am fully aware, because of the pervasive and rising influence of conservative ideology, that recent discussions of the plight of ghetto blacks have been couched in individualistic and moralistic terms. The ghetto poor, in other words, "are presented as a mere aggregation of personal cases, each with its own logic and self-contained causes. Severed from the struggles and structural changes in the society, economy, and polity that in fact determine them, inner-city dislocations are then portrayed as a self-imposed, self-sustaining phenomenon. . . . Descriptions and explanations of the current predicament of inner-city blacks put the emphasis on individual attributes and the alleged grip of the so-called culture of poverty (Wacquant & Wilson, 1989, p. 9).

And Newby is right, I do use the term "social pathology" to describe some of the behavior and traits in the inner-city ghetto. I hasten to point out, however, that the use of this term is not based on the writings of conservative analysts, as Newby implies, but on the work of two of the most influential liberal scholars of the inner-city ghetto—Kenneth B. Clark and Lee Rainwater. In the mid 1960s these scholars highlighted problems of poverty, joblessness, and family structure in the ghetto, but they also discussed the problems of crime, sexual exploitation, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, drug addiction, and other forms of self-destructive behavior (Clark, 1964 and 1965; Rainwater, 1966 and 1970). As Lee Rainwater noted in his now classic article ("Crucible of identity: The Negro Lower Class Family"), individuals in inner-city ghettos creatively

adapt to this system of severely restricted opportunities "in ways that keep them alive and extract what gratification they can find, but in the process of adaptation they are constrained to behave in ways that inflict a great deal of suffering on those with whom they make their lives and on themselves." And after describing these patterns of behavior in graphic descriptive terms, scholars such as Clark and Rainwater emphasize strongly the *ultimate source* of ghetto social dislocations—*structural inequality* in American society.

However, such candid and important work on the inner city came to a screeching halt in the aftermath of the Moynihan report on the black family. And this controversy effectively discouraged liberal scholars from writing about or conducting serious research on ghetto social dislocations for more than a decade. The subject was, therefore, left free for conservative writers who, without the benefit of actual field research or first-hand knowledge of the ghetto provided their own peculiar explanation of these problems. Whereas Newby and several of the other authors in this volume do little more than complain about the use of the concept of 'underclass,' in *The Truly Disadvantaged* the dominant themes of conservative scholars were challenged not by shying away from using the concept "underclass," not by avoiding a description and explanation of unflattering behavior, but by attempting, as did writers such as Kenneth B. Clark and Lee Rainwater, to relate the practices and experiences of the truly disadvantaged to the structure of opportunities and constraints in American society.

Let me conclude with a discussion of some of the central policy issues in *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Edna Bonacich correctly observes that the book attempts to speak to the nation's political leaders. I should add that it is also designed to speak to groups that I hope would eventually form a progressive coalition for change. In this connection, several of the authors in this volume have reacted critically to my argument that a reform program to address problems such as joblessness has to be framed in universal terms in order to attract the broad based support needed to mobilize resources to effect change. Bonnie Thornton Dill argues that little progress would be made on my reform program because it is not linked to an active

political constituency and the debate surrounding the program would be limited to an arena that only includes policymakers, government officials, and politicians. Robert Newby puts it more bluntly: "Professor Wilson . . . proposed 'hidden agenda' which will have 'universal appeal' and, I assume, be voted on, passed, and signed into law by those same Democrats and Republicans who just 15 pages before would find such programs to be too 'radical.' " Once again I must quote from chapter 7 of *The Truly Disadvantaged* to set the record straight.

I am reminded of Bayard Rustin's plea during the early 1960s that blacks ought recognize the importance of fundamental economic reform . . . and the need for a broad-based political coalition to achieve it. And since an effective coalition will in part depend upon how the issues are defined, it is imperative that the political message underline the need for economic and social reforms that benefit all groups in the United States, not just poor minorities. Politicians and civil rights organizations, as two important examples, ought to shift or expand their definition of America's racial problems and broaden the scope of suggested policy programs to address them. They should, of course, continue to fight for an end to racial discrimination. But they must also recognize that poor minorities are profoundly affected by problems in America that go beyond racial considerations. Furthermore, civil rights groups should also recognize that the problems of societal organization in America often create situations that enhance racial antagonisms between the different racial groups in central cities that are struggling to maintain their quality of life, and that these groups, although they appear to be fundamental adversaries, are potential allies in a reform coalition because of their problematic economic situations. (Wilson, 1987, p. 155)

The point implied in this paragraph is that it is the development of this reform coalition not the Democrats and Republicans in Congress who will ultimately determine whether the kind of economic and social reform program I have described and recommended will become a reality.

Finally, I ought to react to the frequent observations in the critiques of my book that I am opposed to race-specific programs to address the plight of ghetto underclass in part because I feel that racism is not the cause of the emergence of

the ghetto underclass. Both conclusions are false. Nowhere in *The Truly Disadvantaged* will any careful reader find support for these arguments. I should like to reemphasize the point that *The Truly Disadvantaged* is really an attempt to challenge the conservative thesis that the sharp rise of poverty, joblessness and related social dislocations in the inner-city ghetto since 1970 was due to the liberal policies of the welfare state. The book was not written to account for the historic **emergence** of the ghetto (in which racial segregation is severely implicated, of course), rather the main purpose of the book was to explain the incredible growth of concentrated poverty and other problems in the inner-city ghetto after the passage of the most significant anti-poverty and anti-discrimination legislation in the nation's history (i.e., since 1970). And I focused on the vulnerability of poor urban minorities to changes in the economy since 1970 and the effects of the exodus of higher income minorities from the inner-city ghetto during this period. In short, racism created the inner-city ghetto, but the sharp increase in social dislocations in ghetto neighborhoods since 1970 is related to a complex set of factors that in many ways transcend the issue of race. However, as noted in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, racism and racial discrimination continue to plague the experiences of the impoverished urban minorities. That is why I include, not exclude, race specific programs such as affirmative action in my suggested program of social and economic reform. Indeed, my criticism of programs such as affirmative action is not that they are not needed, but that they alone are insufficient to address the problem of impoverished inner-city ghetto residents. Let me quote for the final time from *The Truly Disadvantaged*:

As long as a racial division of labor exists and racial minorities are disproportionately concentrated in low-paying positions, antidiscrimination and affirmative action programs will be needed even though they tend to benefit the more advantaged minority members. Moreover, as long as certain groups lack the training, skills, and education to compete effectively on the job market or move into newly created jobs, manpower training and education programs targeted at these groups will also be needed, even under a tight-labor market situation . . . For all these rea-

sons, a comprehensive program of economic and social reform would have to include targeted programs, both means tested and race-specific. However, the latter would be considered an offshoot of and indeed secondary to the universal programs. The important goal is to construct an economic-social reform program in such a way that the universal programs are seen as the dominant and most visible aspects by the general public. As the universal programs draw support from a wider population, the targeted programs included in the comprehensive reform package would be indirectly supported and protected. (Wilson, 1987, p. 154)

Andrew Billingsley wonders how my reform program relates to the problems analyzed in the first half of *The Truly Disadvantaged*. I think it is self-evident.

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Notes

1. The ratios for 1950 were computed for all males and females over fourteen and the ratios for 1980 for all males and females 16 and over.
2. On this point Wacquant and Wilson state that the “ghetto has lost much of its organizational strength . . . as it has become increasingly marginal economically; its activities are no longer structured around an internal

and relatively autonomous social space that duplicates the institutional structure of the larger society and provides basic minimal resources for social mobility, if only within a truncated black class structure. And the social ills that have long been associated with segregated poverty—violent crime, drugs, housing deterioration, family disruption, commercial blight, and educational failure—have reached qualitatively different proportions and have become articulated into a new configurations that endows each with a more deadly impact than before.”

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