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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.

Reference

- Timberlake, M., Dill, B., Tukufu, D., and Williams, B. Race and poverty in the rural south: Racial composition and economic development. Unpublished paper, 1989.

