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Editors' Introduction:
Revisiting William J. Wilson's
The Declining Significance of Race

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The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in November of 2008 prompted the co-editors of this special issue to organize a panel discussion revisiting William Julius Wilson's thesis about race and class in America at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) in 2009. Later that same day at the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare's* (JSSW) editorial board meeting, we recommended that JSSW consider a special issue entitled "*The Declining Significance or Race—Revisited*" devoted to the thesis Wilson advanced in his now-classic *The Declining Significance of Race*.

Getting a green light to do so, we invited the panelists from the thematic session to submit their papers and put out a Call for Papers that in turn yielded the articles that make up this special issue. As the co-editors of the present special issue favorably viewed the presidential election of Obama in 2008 as a

historic moment in U.S. history, we sought to tap contemporary scholarship that specifically addressed Wilson's earlier thesis about the effects of race and class on blacks over time in the United States. We were also reminded by Robert Leighninger, editor of the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, that twenty years ago *JSSW* published a special issue on Wilson's (1987) book *The Truly Disadvantaged*. That December 1989 issue benefitted from the temporal proximity to the book's publication, its subsequent national attention, and the opportunity for the special issue editor Robert G. Newby (1989) to assemble "the right scholars" as a counterbalance to the "retrogression" that had come to characterize the underclass debate "in the parlance of conservative scholars" (p. 3). This special issue also comes a timely moment, one in which black Americans experience stagnating and decreasing wages, significant reductions in net worth, elevated rates of unemployment, and housing depreciations and losses. We are hopeful that this *JSSW* edition brings attention back to important discussions that we must have about race and class in America. As David Remnick said in 2010 in an interview on the NBC Nightly News, "race is the longest and the most painful drama the country has ever known."

William Julius Wilson's legacy is a notable one. He began his academic career teaching sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. In 1972 he joined the faculty of the University of Chicago faculty where, in 1990, he was appointed the Lucy Flower University Professor and director of the University's Center for the Study of Urban Inequality. He joined the faculty at Harvard University in July of 1996 where he is now the Lewis P. and Linda L. Geysler University Professor and Director of the Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program. He has authored or co-authored seven books and written a countless number of articles. Recent publications include *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (1996), which received the Sidney Hillman Foundation Award; *The Bridge over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics* (1999); *There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial, Ethnic, and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America* (with Richard P. Taub, 2007); and *More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (2009). He is, without

doubt, well published.

In *The Declining Significance of Race*, winner of the American Sociological Association's Sidney Spivack Award and the focus of this special issue, Wilson (1978a) argued that when comparing the contemporary situation of African Americans to their situation of the past, the diverging experiences along class lines revealed that race was no longer the primary determinant of life chances for blacks in the U.S. that it had historically been. The effect of economic and political changes on the relative importance of race and class in black occupational ability and job placement, Wilson contended, had shifted from race to class. He also noted an increasing economic and cultural divide between more and less affluent blacks, due in part to affirmative action initiatives that had benefitted middle income blacks, leading him to recommend a shift in focus to more class-based, race-neutral programs.

In 1993, Neil McLaughlin noted that Wilson had been taken to task for painting an overly optimistic portrait of middle class blacks, particularly given the discriminatory practices that thwarted upward mobility (Wilkinson, 1995; Willie, 1978) as well as the effects of housing segregation that suppressed the accumulation of wealth (Harris, 1999; Massey & Denton, 1985). Wilson stood steadfastly by his work (1978b) but was also moving beyond his original thesis to embrace race-specific policies such as affirmative action, broad-based employment policies, and an expanded welfare state that would capture more popular programmatic support. In later works, Wilson (2009) also placed more emphasis on culture as a factor contributing to racial inequality (Clark, 2011). In a recent retrospective essay, Wilson (2011) amended his original thesis, withdrawing his support for solely class-based, race-neutral programs and advocating instead for both race-specific and race-neutral programs, such as affirmation action and employment programs in areas of the highest rates of joblessness to combat racial inequality.

This pull-back, as well as the articles in this special issue, are in line with a recent report by the Pew Research Center (Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011) which underscores the continuing economic vulnerability of blacks, especially vis-à-vis whites. This vulnerability, the Pew Report finds, has been

prevalent since the mid-1980s when the U.S. Census Bureau began the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), gathering household level data that included measures of wealth and race/ethnicity (Tavernise, 2011). Although all major racial and ethnic groups lost ground between 2005 and 2009 with the U.S. in recession, the distribution of those losses varied widely. Whites, for example, lost 16 percent of their net worth compared to a 53 percent loss for Blacks. The situation for Hispanics was even worse—their net worth declined by 66 percent. In addition, the ratio of white-to-Black household median net worth deteriorated (that is, increased) from 11:1 in 2004 to 19:1 in 2009; whereas the white-to-Hispanic household median net worth increased from 7:1 to 15:1. For all groups, the largest single contributor to net worth is home ownership. Home equity, however, is more vital to Blacks and Hispanics than it is to whites. In 2005, for instance, Black households derived 59 percent of their net worth from home ownership: only one other asset type exceeded 10 percent of net worth, namely 401(k) and thrift accounts (12%). By 2009, however, black households derived 53 percent of their net worth from home ownership and 14 percent from 401(k) and thrift accounts. In contrast, white households derived 44 percent of their net worth from home ownership and 11 percent from 401(k) and thrift accounts in 2005, but by 2009 derived 38 percent of their net worth from home ownership, 16 percent from stocks, and 12 percent from 401(k) and thrift accounts. A recent study by Rugh and Massey (2010) shows that black residential segregation has a causal adverse effect on foreclosure rates in the top 100 metropolitan areas in the U.S. This is, in 2011, discouraging news.

The articles in this special issue highlight the more nuanced, but nonetheless significant, effects of race on the socio-economic well-being of Blacks in the U.S. Relying on data from the National Council of Education Statistics (NCES), Heather Storer, Joseph Mienko, Yu-Ling Chang, Ji Young Kang, Christina Miyawaki, and Katie Schultz examine the interaction effects of class, race, and place on educational outcomes, operationalized as graduation rates of those enrolled in the twelfth grade at accredited high schools, throughout the U.S. In their article, "Moving Beyond Dichotomies: How the Intersection

of Race, Class and Place Impact High School Graduation Rates for African American Students" they reveal a positive relationship between the socioeconomic status of a school district and the aggregate level of educational attainment in that school district. In school districts with higher levels of African American school-age children, they found lower rates of educational attainment, although both social class and race appeared to have independent effects on educational outcomes. Interaction effects of race and class were also found among their sample. For primarily white and wealthy school districts, race was found to be the greater determinant of students' educational attainment while, in predominantly African American school districts, factors associated with socioeconomic status (SES) played a more predictive role. Spatial stratification was also found to account for variability in the rates of high school graduation. They conclude that educational attainment is influenced by a combination of factors including the socioeconomic status of one's school district, the race of one's peers in the school district, and perhaps most profoundly one's zip code.

In challenging Wilson's claims about social class superseding race, Raine Dozier turns our attention to young Black women who are degree holders. In "Young, Jobless, and Black: Young Black Women and Economic Downturns," she highlights the wage erosion that occurred among young black women during the 1980s in contrast to the wage increases among white degree holders. Important attention is given as well to the significant unemployment spells encountered by young Black women in contrast to white degree holders. What she aptly points out is the volatility experienced by young Black women, especially those with college degrees, as a result of changing economic and business conditions: African Americans, she writes "are poised to receive the worst of bad economic news regardless of socioeconomic class." The declines in the position of young Black college graduates that Dozier reveals are not in concert with Wilson's claims of class over race. They are, in fact, just the opposite, bringing about challenging consequences, including wage inequality, based on race. While she admits that race may not be "the initial sorting mechanism" it once was in the economic queue, its place in that queue is, and remains,

quite constant and persistent, impacting Black women and men in their immediate lives as well as over the trajectory of their economic life courses.

Sara Cribbs offers a unique and interesting exploration into Wilson's thesis of "class over race" by focusing attention on the racial attitudes of whites after 9/11. "Racial Attitudes in the New Millennium: Cool Feelings in Hot Times" pans over the period from 2002 to 2004, a time closely following the New York City disaster, to explore how, or if, racial attitudes of whites were affected by the occurrence of this "racialized national crisis." As Cribbs rightly asserts, the events of September 11, 2001 provided a bell-weather on issues of race in this country. Mounting tensions exacerbated by heightened concerns about immigration increases, contests over civil liberties, terrorist acts towards and against Americans abroad aggravated, Cribbs says with concern, a "revitalization" of race-based prejudices among whites. While the data can provide some indications of how these attitudes fared, she urges that we continue to engage in ongoing, serious dialogues about these very important issues and adopt "a more intersectional approach for examining social relations," one which can provide a richer social analysis which incorporates social class, race, gender, and other social locations.

Using data from a survey of 603 residents living in 92 census block groups in a largely middle class urban area, Tara Hobson-Prater and Tamara Leech assess the effects of neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., percent Black, median income, percent homeowners, percent of households with a senior resident, and percent of households with children) and perceived levels of difficulty associated with instrumental collective action and with pessimism on social cohesion. In "The Significance of Race for Neighborhood Social Cohesion: Perceived Difficulty of Collective Action in Majority Black Neighborhoods" they have constructed a 5-point Likert scale of participants' responses to five statements: "people around here are willing to help their neighbors," "this is a close-knit block," "people on this block can be trusted," "people on this block help each other when they can," and "people on this block generally don't get along with each other (reverse coded). Results indicate that majority Black middle class

neighborhoods have lower levels of social cohesion than other socioeconomically similar neighborhoods. Race and perceived difficulty of instrumental efforts were the only measures that were significantly related to cohesion. The racial disparity was largely explained by the perceived effort required to engage in group instrumental action. Black respondents, despite living in a middle class area, not only live in neighborhoods with lower median incomes and lower rates of homeownership, but the majority Black neighborhoods were also found to have lower levels of social cohesion.

In a post-Hurricane Katrina qualitative study of 40 low-income residents of New Orleans, Robert Hawkins and Katherine Maurer show how race is “concentrically connected to poverty in mezzo level interactions.” In their article, “‘Waiting for the white Man to Fix Things’: Rebuilding Black Poverty in New Orleans,” study participants cast their post-Katrina experiences in terms of how race and class mattered as they sought to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of Katrina. Hawkins and Maurer’s study supports Wilson’s contention that for the poorest African Americans, race and class are inextricably linked and function as a structural barrier to accessing wealth, resources, and opportunities. All of the African American participants stated that race played a major role in their experiences with Hurricane Katrina and many whites also saw race as a major element. Reading many of the interview excerpts in this article, one gets the impression that there was no getting away from disadvantaging effects of race immediately after the devastation, during the rebuilding process, and during the relocation process.

On the basis of the contributions to this special issue and in light of the disparate impact of the financial crisis and recent recession on household wealth, race still matters—significantly. The economic mobility and general plight of Blacks in the U.S. remains precarious as commentators and scholars have noted with an upcoming presidential campaign about to swing into high gear (King & Smith, 2011; Pollack, 2011). As such, it would be an injustice to allow market forces to be the final arbiter of the economic fate of Black Americans. We clearly realize that the effects of race go beyond economic well-being and veer into cultural aspects of interracial

interactions. And we would agree with Wilson's reformulation of his original thesis, namely that affirmative action programs remain warranted and that sustained attention to employment opportunities is crucial to address racial inequality. The contributions of this special issue continue discussions about how race matters in the U.S. It is our genuine hope that continued dialogue about the significance of race in this country will be undertaken and will ultimately result in more effective and humane policy responses, as well as a greater awareness of the issues that confront us. We are hopeful that this special issue contributes to the conversations before us.

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