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

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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.