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William J. Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy

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Title: *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*

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Reviewed by: Marc Linder

In *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, William Julius Wilson,¹ a sociologist at the University of Chicago, has once again provocatively analyzed a number of important issues that vitally affect the provision of legal assistance to the urban "underclass," a group that constitutes a significant share of the eligible clients of legal services programs. In an earlier book that made him a controversial figure a decade ago, Wilson argued that with the historical transition "from economic racial oppression experienced by virtually all blacks to economic subordination for the black underclass . . . the Negro class structure has become more differentiated."² Although Wilson maintains that the growth of the urban black underclass is more a function of economic class³ subordination than one of (contemporary) racial discrimination, he concedes that as a consequence of past racial discrimination, blacks bear the brunt of "marginality and redundancy . . . under advanced capitalism."⁴

[C]omplex problems in the American and world-wide 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 broader issues of economic organization, are not made more understandable by associating them directly or indirectly with racism. [I]t would be less ambiguous and more effective to state simply that a racial division of labor has been created due to decades, even centuries, of discrimination and prejudice; and that because those in the low-wage sector of the economy are more adversely affected by impersonal shifts in advanced industrial society, the racial division of labor is reinforced. One

does not have to "trot out" the concept of racism to demonstrate . . . that blacks have been severely hurt by deindustrialization because of their heavy concentration in the . . . smokestack industries.⁵

At the same time, Wilson has argued that the basis of racial conflict in the United States has "shifted from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order."⁶ In other words, "the issues now have more to do with racial control of residential areas, schools, municipal political systems, and recreational areas, than with the control of jobs."⁷

In his new book, Wilson repeats all of these themes, but also compiles a formidable catalog of empirical indicia of the "pathology" of the underclass, who by the 1980s had become virtually the sole residents of the ghetto. Their characteristics include long-term unemployment; declining labor force participation rates; criminal and aberrant behavior⁸; and long-term spells of poverty and welfare dependency.

One of Wilson's chief purposes in pursuing this research project is to regain, for liberal social policy analysis, the terrain that was abdicated to conservatives in the backlash against the Moynihan report in the 1960s. For fear of being excoriated as racists, liberal social scientists became reluctant "even to acknowl-

5. W. WILSON, *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED: THE INNER CITY, THE UNDERCLASS, AND PUBLIC POLICY* 12 (1987).

6. WILSON, *supra* note 2, at 23.

7. *Id.* at 121. Inasmuch as Wilson asserts that "[a]ccess to the means of production is increasingly based on educational criteria," *id.* at 151, political struggles over schools must, in his theoretical framework, assume an immediately economic class function.

8. Here Wilson has in mind the increase in black illegitimacy ratios, which he finds to be the result not of a rising rate of extramarital births, but rather of a decline in the percentage of married women and the rate of marital fertility. WILSON, *supra* note 5, at 21, 63-72. This situation, in turn, has been triggered by the shrinkage of the pool of marriageable black men, whose increasing ineligibility as husbands is a function of their diminishing attachment to the labor market. *Id.* at 42-43, 81-89. Despite the eminent plausibility of this economic-demographic argument, it does not explain why, during a period of significant increase in female labor force participation rates, economic potency must be an indispensable qualification of a prospective husband for a woman of any color. Nor does the argument explain why black adolescent mothers report far fewer of their pregnancies to be unwanted than other mothers or why fifteen times as many (male and female) black high school students expect to become parents before marriage as their white counterparts. *Id.* at 73-74.

1. Although Wilson is listed as the sole author, approximately one third of the text was coauthored by Kathryn Neckerman and Robert Aponte, who also "helped to collect and analyze data for this study." Because the redaction process has failed to integrate the chapters, most of which had appeared earlier as articles, unnecessarily repetitive material interrupts the flow of the argument.

2. W. WILSON, *THE DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE* 152-53 (1978).

3. Although nowhere in his new book does Wilson define "class," in his earlier work he referred to it as "any group of people who have more or less similar goods, services, or skills to offer for income and who therefore receive similar remuneration in the marketplace." WILSON, *supra* note 2, at ix.

4. *Id.* at 154.

edge the sharp increase in social pathologies in ghetto communities⁹ that Moynihan had prophetically analyzed. Consequently, conservatives rushed in to fill the vacuum with influential works dedicated to the proposition that the welfare state had reinforced rather than eroded the causes of black urban poverty.

In order to distinguish his position from the pessimistic, resignationist analysis and political consequences that “culture of poverty” theorists have developed,¹⁰ Wilson adopts “[t]he key theoretical concept” of “social isolation.” Together with the subsidiary notions of “social buffer” and “concentration effects,” social isolation is intended to describe mechanisms that enhance dislocation originally caused by racial subjugation but that have been strengthened recently by changes in class and economic structure. Wilson means that the exodus of working and middle class blacks from the ghetto removes the “social buffer” that could deflect the full impact¹¹ of prolonged and rising unemployment, inasmuch as they were traditionally able to sustain basic institutions, such as churches, schools, stores, and recreational facilities.¹¹ The mere presence of such families “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.”¹²

The culture of poverty thesis implies that values and attitudes have been internalized and therefore influence behavior; in order to improve life chances, social policies must change these subcultural traits. Social isolation, in contrast, focuses on the constraints and opportunities caused by concentration effects. By stressing social isolation, however, Wilson is not suggesting that cultural traits are irrelevant—“rather, it highlights the fact that culture is a response to social structural constraints and opportunities.”¹³ Consequently, public policy initiatives must shift from changing subcultural traits to changing the structure of constraints and opportunities. What distinguishes social isolation from the culture of poverty is that although both theories emphasize the association of cultural traits with the structure of social constraints and opportunities, the culture of poverty approach “places strong emphasis on the autonomous character of the cultural traits once they come into existence. In other words, these traits ‘assume a life of their own’ and continue to influence behavior even if opportunities for social mobility improve.”¹⁴

Wilson’s own ambivalence with regard to the two approaches is reflected in his reluctance “to rule out the possibility that some cultural traits may in fact take on a life of their own for a period of time and thereby become a constraining or liberating factor.”¹⁵ Moreover, the notion of social isolation implies that the underclass was always a “pathology” ready to metastasize as soon as the respectable (*i.e.*, middle and working class) immune system fled the ghetto for “safer or more

desirable neighborhoods.” This, in turn, implies that the black ghetto social system was never “mainstream.” Consequently, at least during periods in which across-the-board macroeconomic growth is not available to sustain opportunities for social mobility and thus to alter individual behavior, the question arises as to whether the social isolation approach does not in fact collapse into the culture of poverty.¹⁶

The ambiguities inherent in Wilson’s analysis reemerge in connection with his examination of the inadequacies of the race-specific policies emanating from the civil rights revolution. In his view, “neither programs based on equality of individual opportunity nor those organized in terms of preferential group treatment are sufficient to address the problems of truly disadvantaged minority group members.”¹⁷ What Wilson apparently means by the supplanting of race by class as a determinant of individual life chances is the ascendancy of behavior conforming to the cash-nexus stimuli, which are imposed on all rational actors with purchasing power in a market economy. “I believe that we would not improve the health of the ghetto underclass, in either the long or the short run, even if we tripled the number of black physicians in our large central cities.”¹⁸ The ultimate determinant of black access to physicians is Medicare and Medicaid. “There are plenty of doctors for those who can afford them.”¹⁹

It is reasonable to assume that the typical black physician, like the typical white physician, would seek out the areas of practice providing the greatest financial and professional rewards. Accordingly, the more opportunities a black physician has to practice in attractive areas, the less likely that he or she will choose to serve poor blacks . . . It is ironic that the removal of racial barriers would result in a decrease in the percentage of the most qualified black physicians practicing medicine in the black community.²⁰

By lapsing into a confusion of money, income, and class, Wilson implies that greater racial and economic equality will neutralize the class behavior (be it oppressive or solidary) of atomized market individuals.

Wilson criticizes the architects of the War on Poverty—which also gave rise to the current legal services system—for not having viewed poverty “as a problem of American economic organization.”²¹ Because they emphasized “the environ-

9. WILSON, *supra* note 5, at 6, 173.

10. Although some critics have labeled Wilson a “neoconservative,” he is a “social democrat.” WILSON, *supra* note 5, at viii.

11. *Id.* at 50, 56, 144.

12. *Id.* at 56.

13. *Id.* at 61.

14. *Id.* at 137.

15. *Id.* at 138.

16. Wilson’s ambivalence is further reflected in the following formulations. It is necessary to emphasize “the dynamic interplay between ghetto-specific cultural characteristics and social and economic opportunities.” WILSON, *supra* note 5, at 18. “The social problems of urban life in the United States are, in large measure, the problems of racial inequality.” *Id.* at 20. “There is no single explanation for the racial or ethnic variations in the rates of social dislocations.” *Id.* at 29.

17. Although Wilson supports the principle of equality of life chances in order to compensate for family background disadvantages (regarding competitive resources associated with economic class) regardless of past discrimination, even this principle must be supplemented by macroeconomic policies. WILSON, *supra* note 5, at 112, 117-18.

18. *Id.* at 116.

19. *Id.*

20. *Id.* at 210, n.16.

21. *Id.* at 131.

ments of the poor," they sought "to alter the characteristics of individuals through employment and training programs."²² Instead, he urges adoption of "a comprehensive and integrated framework . . . that shows how contemporary racial problems, . . . or issues perceived to be racial problems, are often part of a more general . . . set of problems whose origin and/or development may have little or no direct or indirect connection with race."²³

Because of the political divisiveness of such issues, however, Wilson urges the need for a "hidden agenda" of improving the life chances of the underclass by emphasizing programs that more advantaged groups of all races can support. These include macroeconomic policies designed to promote growth and a tight labor market, a national AFDC standard, nonmeans-tested child support to all single parents, and day care. Although Wilson concedes that such programs will not revitalize inner-city neighborhoods or recreate the social organization that once permeated them,²⁴ he believes that they will ultimately foster the social mobility of the underclass. The ensuing geographic mobility might then promote the deconcentration, if not dissolution, of the ghetto.²⁵

Considering that the courts have thus far been little disposed to recognize the actionability of discrimination and inequality based on economic class—as opposed to race—Wilson's endorsement of legislative initiatives to deal with "the broader problems of American economic organization"²⁶ raises obvious questions about the most effective contribution legal services advocates can make toward the elimination of poverty and inequality.

The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy, by William Julius Wilson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. 254 pp. \$19.95.

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22. *Id.*

23. *Id.* at 132.

24. Before the waves of social dislocations began transforming the ghettos in the 1960s, the ghettos had been socially organized communities characterized by vertical integration of the lower, working, and middle classes. WILSON, *supra* note 5, at 3, 7.

25. At that point they may become more similar to urban poor whites, most of whom live in nonpoverty areas with different ecological and economic situations. WILSON, *supra* note 5, at 58-60, 157-158.

26. *Id.* at 187.

A Guide to Implementing the Child Support Provisions of the Family Support Act

Turning Promises into Realities: A Guide to Implementing the Child Support Provisions of the Family Support Act of 1988, by Paula Roberts, describes the actions that states will need to take in order to establish an effective IV-D system under the Family Support Act of 1988 (FSA). Under Title I of FSA, states must amend their family laws to require in every case that (1) decisionmakers use the state's child support guidelines in establishing or modifying support awards unless to do so would be unjust or inappropriate; (2) all new child support orders provide for collection through immediate wage withholding unless both parties agree to an alternate arrangement or unless there is a finding of good cause for not ordering it; (3) all parties to a contested paternity action be required to submit to genetic testing; and (4) parents be required to furnish their social security numbers to the state's birth records agency as part of the process involved in the issuance of a birth certificate. In addition, all child support orders must be amenable to review and adjustment under the child support guidelines at least once every three years if either parent requests such action. States must also increase the number of paternities that they establish. In AFDC cases, FSA requires that states (1) clarify that the \$50 pass through is available on any child support payment made by the absent parent in the month when due, (2) send monthly notices of support collections to the family, and (3) extend for an additional year a provision in the law giving Medicaid coverage for four months to families leaving the AFDC program due to child support collections. State legislators, judges, administrative agency personnel, community advocates, and parents' groups are going to be asked by states to make recommendations or decisions to effect these changes in state law and policy. This manual is designed to assist the reader who is asked to participate in this decision-making process. It suggests state law and policy changes that will meet the federal requirements in the area of child support, and offers samples of appropriate statutory language to implement some of the author's key recommendations. Copies of the 119-page draft manual are available for \$15 from the Center for Law and Social Policy, 1616 P St., NW, Suite 350, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 328-5140.

Joint Conference on Law and Aging

The second annual Joint Conference on Law and Aging will be held Oct. 6-8, 1989 at the Crystal City Gateway Marriot Hotel in Crystal City, Virginia. For more information, see the special issue of the Review on Elderlaw

next month or contact Al Chiplin, National Senior Citizen's Law Center, 2025 M. St., NW, Suite 400, Washington, D.C., 20036 (phone: 202-887-5280).