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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.



