



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 16  
Issue 4 *December*

Article 10

December 1989

# Problems of Pragmatism in Public Policy: Critique of William Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*

Robert G. Newby  
*Central Michigan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Public Policy Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Newby, Robert G. (1989) "Problems of Pragmatism in Public Policy: Critique of William Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol16/iss4/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



Problems of Pragmatism in Public Policy:  
Critique of William Wilson's *The Truly  
Disadvantaged*

ROBERT G. NEWBY

Central Michigan University

Introduction: Wilson—Then and Now

I want to begin by commending Professor Wilson for focussing his scholarly attention upon one of the more critical social problems confronting our society at this time. You will recall that in his earlier work, Professor Wilson found that the civil rights movement had made a major impact on the character of race relations in our society, particularly relative to the status of blacks. In that award-winning but controversial study, *The Declining Significance of Race*, Professor Wilson found two diverging trends within the black community: on the one hand, the growth of the black middle class which had benefitted from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; on the other, a growing sector of impoverished blacks for whom that movement had seemed to leave behind. In this regard Professor Wilson is to be commended for allowing his findings from *The Declining Significance of Race* to focus upon those forces which demand change. If the U.S. is to make claims that it is a civilized, just or compassionate society, the condition of this sector must be addressed. It is this sector which Jesse Jackson refers to as "the least of these" as he calls for a "new direction" in the political arena so that their condition, and ours, will be dramatically improved.

On the other hand, Professor Wilson might have allowed his findings from that award-winning study to focus on the finding relative to the substantial growth of the black middle class. Had he chosen that course of action there is little doubt those "success stories" would have been used as propaganda to support the status quo. Had that been the case, he may have

been joining that small, but very visible minority of black scholars who argue that capitalism, as a system, is just fine and that those blacks who have been left out, need to stop begging and join the free enterprise system so that they too can reap the wealth and other rewards which we are to believe is available to all who put forth the effort. Fortunately, Professor Wilson did not join that chorus. Instead, he chose to challenge those apologists for this country's capitalist class by demonstrating that there are structural factors which play the key role in producing this phenomenon he terms "the underclass" or *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

Given that this work is a follow-up to *The Declining Significance of Race*, we cannot really understand this work without placing it in the context of that earlier work. Many will recall that, contrary to the prevailing sentiment among black and progressive sociologists, I found considerable favor with that work back in 1978. The basis of my positive reception of that work was that it departed in a major way from making the problem of "race relations" primarily a psychological problem that is based upon the prejudiced or racist psyche of individual whites, or something as elusive as "institutional racism." Wilson's work placed the "race problem" in the context of the political economy, which I thought, particularly for a mainstream sociologist, was a major advance. The most vicious attacks on that work came from scholars, black and white, who hold the primacy of race as the predominant analytical framework for understanding the condition of black people. For this group of scholars Wilson's argument against race-specific solutions will be viewed as a continuation of what they saw as the major flaw in *The Declining Significance of Race*. It is this "primacy of race school" which is also likely to be most offended by his considerable devotion to spelling out the problems of viability of race-specific solutions for the so-called inner-city poor. While I do not disagree with Wilson's general thesis on the limitations of race-specific solutions, I do find this work to be a retreat from the path-breaking opportunity provided by *The Declining Significance of Race*. But, with Professor Wilson, I find it hard to understand that sociologists, particularly black sociologists, can continue to believe that there can be race-

specific solutions to the plight of blacks, generally, and particularly the black poor.

It seems to me that the logic to the problem is as simple as this: If you want to have decent health care for *all black* Americans, you must understand that it will not happen in the absence of decent health care for all Americans; If you want a decent job for *all black* Americans, you must understand that that will not happen in the absence of a decent job for all Americans; If you want the alleviation from poverty for *all black* Americans, you must understand that it will not happen in absence of the alleviation from poverty for all Americans. There are not sufficient moral appeals to eliminate "racism," and therefore make the outcome any different. There will not be sufficient "black political power" to make the outcome any different. Nor can there be enough black community self-sufficiency to make the outcome any different. Under these circumstances, I agree with Professor Wilson: the limitations to race-specific solutions, including affirmative action are severe. However, this should not be construed to say that I do not regard race to be significant in our lives, including our organization and analyses. In this regard, I agree with Dr. W.E.B. DuBois in his very challenging essay, "Whither Now and Why?," that one of our major concerns, in our quest for "racial equality" should be that we not commit "racial suicide." As he stated: "I am not fighting to settle the question of racial equality in America by the process of getting rid of the Negro race."

DuBois notwithstanding, the fact that Professor Wilson went beyond the interpersonal prejudice and racism paradigms and based the "race relations problem" in the productive sphere, I considered *The Declining Significance of Race* to have been on the precipice of being progressive. While that was my assessment of his earlier work, I find few similar qualities in *The Truly Disadvantaged*. For me while the issue, illumination about this most impoverished sector, is one of utmost importance, and while Professor Wilson makes a sincere effort to be bold and abandon cliché analyses, such as the "primacy of race" paradigm, *The Truly Disadvantaged* represents an almost total retreat from the promise of that earlier work.

### Constructing an Ominous Reality

*The Truly Disadvantaged* is a reversal, toward a very conservative analysis with very ominous implications. The bibliography of *The Declining Significance of Race* contained numerous references to the works of progressive scholars such as Bonacich, Baran and Sweezy, Genovese, Foner, Oliver Cox, DuBois and others. Of the nearly 400 bibliographic references in *The Truly Disadvantaged* one is hard put to find any references to works about the problem of the so-called underclass by progressive scholars. In fact, it seems as though this whole discussion suffers from having the problem conceptualized and framed by conservatives and reactionaries such as Glen Loury, Charles Murray and Lawrence Mead.

Unfortunately, the very terms or concepts employed by Wilson emanate from the lexicon of the right-wing: "reverse discrimination"; "preferential treatment"; "social pathology"; and the "underclass." Peter Berger argues that one of the main tasks of sociology is that of debunking common-sense conceptions of how our social world is organized. I would like to take that a step further, particularly on matters in which the social implications of how a problem is framed plays such a critical role in social action or social policy. In this case, the issue is not so much a matter of debunking but demystification. As constructors of social reality, it is imperative that we not misconstrue, and therefore cloud, rather than illuminate, reality. The 1988 Republican Party National Convention provides an excellent case in point. The American people were presented a reality of "peace and prosperity," and the Party's so-called creation of 17 million jobs. This prosperity was proclaimed the context of the United States having moved from being the largest creditor nation to the largest debtor nation in the last eight years. This proclamation was made in the context of 144 bank failures so far this year, on top of approximately 190 such failures last year. This was also done in the context of an overwhelming number of those new jobs paying \$7000 or less per year. That is mystification. To accept, uncritically, such notions as "reverse discrimination" and "preferential treatment" serves to mystify reality and facilitates the discrediting of attempts to compensate for past policies of exclusion.

Similarly, one could argue that the term “social pathology” is no less a mystification. The term, I assume, is to connote a condition of disease, or deviation from normal. However, as the term is applied in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, there is little question that the “pathological” reference is to the behavior of that “large subpopulation of low-income families and individuals whose behavior contrasts sharply with [that] of the general population,” rather than an economic system that requires a reserve army of unemployed persons, and who are thereby impoverished. In this case, the mystification also clouds the inherently dialectical relationship between wealth and poverty. That is to say, if there is to be wealth, its concomitant is poverty.

This brings us to the most ominous of these conceptualizations: the underclass. Professor Wilson argues the appropriateness as follows:

Regardless of which term is used, one cannot deny that there is a heterogeneous grouping of inner-city families and individuals whose behavior contrasts sharply with that of mainstream America. The real challenge is not only to explain why this is so, but also to explain why the behavior patterns in the inner-city today differ so markedly from those of only three or four decades ago. To obscure these differences by eschewing the term *underclass*, or some other term that could be helpful in describing the changes in ghetto behavior, norms, and aspirations, in favor of more neutral designations such as *lower class* or *working class* is to fail to address one of the most important transformations in recent United States history. (p. 7)

While I agree that we are witnessing “one of the most important transformations in recent United States history,” I must point out that transformation is occurring, not in the responsive behavior of the population in question, but in an economic system in which they have declared to be superfluous. Furthermore, I would argue that if you had to suffer the “economic violence,” including the daily indignity of being superfluous, you would behave similarly. Fundamentally, the “pathology” is in capitalism as an economic system not, primarily, its products.

Consequently, the use of the underclass concept looms

ominous. The danger of the concept is that it places the problem to be "in the people," this black inner-city "underclass." As Christopher Jenks points out, the purpose of the concept is to isolate an "undeserving" poor. What does a society, which supposedly "guarantees success" to anyone willing to work for it, do with slovenly criminals who contribute nothing but more teenagers having babies? First of all, you make sure that everyone comes to accept that this population "contrast(s) sharply" from normal human beings. After there is general agreement about this sharp difference between the normal people and "them," it is easy to accept the fact that *they* are the problem, or "The Millstone" as characterized by the *Chicago Tribune*. That is to say, that what ever goes wrong with society, its inability to put them all in jail, could result in concentration camps and possibly extermination becoming a viable alternative. It is not as though such practices are outside the realm of so-called civilized society. In sum, the problem becomes not the loss of the legacy of their foreparents stolen labor, but their lack of education and skills.

#### From the Subjective Isolation to the Objective "Common Ground"

To isolate this population as though they were somehow totally unique is to mystify rather than illuminate. Further, by focusing on this black impoverished population and making it distinctive from other impoverished populations obscures the role of the economy shaping not only their condition, but others similarly situated, as well. The problem is not a black problem, it represents a crisis in capitalism as a whole. Consequently, it affects both blacks and whites, as well as, other sectors of our society. In fact, Professor Wilson's "Appendix" partially recognizes the universality of the problem:

The number of central-city poor climbed from 8 million in 1969 to 12.7 million in 1982 (52%) while the proportion in poverty increased from 12.7 million to 19.9 million (or by 57 percent). Accordingly, to say that poverty has become increasingly urbanized is to note a *remarkable change in the concentration of poor people in the United States in only slightly more than a decade*. During this period poverty rose among both urban blacks and whites. Spe-

cifically, while the number of poor central city blacks increased by 74 percent (from 3.1 million in 1969 to 5.4 million in 1982), the number of poor central-city whites increased by 42 percent (from 4.8 million to 6.8 million). And while the proportion of central-city blacks increased by 52 percent (from 9.7 million to 14.5 million), the proportion of poor central-city whites increased 49 percent (from 24.3 million to 36.9 million). (p. 172)

Clearly, these figures show that the problem is not restricted to a "socially isolated" black, so-called, "underclass." Instead, these figures, for both blacks and whites, show a more general decline in the capacity of capitalism as a system to provide work for the populace, and not some set of phenomena peculiar to blacks.

Much of this "remarkable change in the concentration of poor . . . in only slightly more than a decade" is a result of profound changes in the economy and not the lack of skills and education of that so-called underclass. The computer chip and the robot represent major changes in productive forces since the "niggermation days" at Chrysler's Jefferson Avenue Assembly, as articulated by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

More generally, what we are witnessing is, "one of the most important transformations in recent United States history." (p. 7) The only thing is, however, the transformation is primarily in the economy and now it uses its labor. In a study which sought to ascertain "What is happening to American jobs?," Barry Bluestone provides for us some interesting data. He found that between 1973 and 1979 that out of the 12 million new jobs 1 of 5 were in the low wage sector, or \$7000 or less per year. However, since 1979 over 60% of the new jobs were in this low wage sector. Presently, about 90% of the new jobs pay \$7000 or less per year. While not dismissing the "economic violence" that accompanies this occupational sector, the problem, is not restricted to the low wage sector. For those in the high wage sector (i.e., wages at least twice the median income \$28,000 or more per year), there has been a net loss 400,000 jobs. What these trends represent is that there is a general crisis in capitalism as a system. The problems are not restricted to young people, blacks or other people of color, women nor



female headed households. In fact, white males have experienced the largest relative decline in high wage jobs and the largest relative increase in low wage jobs.

Similarly, Eileen Applebaum finds that computer technology has resulted in productivity gains and at the same time reductions in unit labor requirements. U.S. corporations have been diligent in their cutting of wage costs. . . . [through the] rigid use of technology and routinizing of jobs, less skilled workers, temporary workers and concessions from labor in their collective bargaining agreements. In the 1970s and 1980s part-time employment has grown faster than full-time employment. Job growth in traditional services is fueled by the expansion of part-time employment. Part-time employment has increased by 2.5 million since 1979. Of that number, only 600,000 actually sought part-time work which means that nearly two million of that increase are persons holding part-time jobs involuntarily. Employment growth in the part-time service sector is predicated on low wages and few benefits. In fact, this sector is one of the ways in which unemployment is hidden.

These data would seem to show that what we are witnessing is a general crisis of capitalism which results from labor being expendable in the owners' insatiable thirst for profits. Most importantly, since this crisis is affecting blacks, other people of color, and whites alike, the solution to the problem must be sought in the "common ground" of the various populations. In fact, it is this "common ground" which is broadening Jesse Jackson's base. At the same time, for those upon whom the most brutal of this violence is heaped, who know that they are despised, there can be little wonder that they respond in the most brutal and most alienated ways?

#### Conclusion: The Next Step

Finally, by not recognizing the plight of the urban black poor as being another aspect of capitalism in crisis is to make this sector of society a scapegoat, as opposed to the most oppressed sector of an expendable working class is to cloud a very fundamental reality. Even more, the problem exists in a setting in which there is no resolution under the capitalism.

There is no more room for reforms. The system's ideologues say that in every way they can. That is the message of such black intellectuals as Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams and Glen Loury. That was the message of Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter before him. That will be the message of George Bush and Dan Quayle. That will be the message of the Michael Dukakis paired with Lloyd Bentsen. That has been the message of black mayors across the country. Can anyone imagine a white mayor approving the bombing of a black community and not being impeached? Can you imagine a white mayor forcing casino gambling down throats of a city which is 75% black against their will and him not being impeached? In instances like these I am reminded of Michner's quote that "we will take more from ours than from others." The last concession, following the rebellions of the 1960s, was an appearance of democracy for blacks, accompanied by a blackened bureaucracy which operate with the same constraints as did their white predecessors. At some point the people will be as alienated from a black petit bourgeoisie as they were from the white petit bourgeoisie post World War II.

Consequently, I find no reason to believe that a Swedish-type social democracy is anything but an intellectual exercise. In fact, Professor Wilson, himself observes:

Any significant reduction of the problems of black joblessness and the related problems of crime, out-of-wedlock births, single-parent homes, and welfare dependency will call for a far more comprehensive program of economic and social reform than what Americans have usually regarded as appropriate or desirable. In short, it will require a radicalism that neither Democrat nor Republican parties have as yet been realistic enough to propose. (p. 139)

Contradicting that realism on page 139, Professor Wilson then proposes "a hidden agenda" which will have "universal appeal" and, I assume, be voted on, passed, and signed into law by those same Democrats and Republicans who just 15 pages before would find such programs to be too "radical."

Such respectable pragmatism, itself leads to an abyss too conservative than to do anything but reinforce the *status quo* and make repression more likely. When our data and analyses

tell us that there can be no "hidden agendas," it is our responsibility, as scientists, to not hide from an empirical reality. We must be upfront with ourselves, our colleagues, and our constituent publics to inform and not "disinform." We must understand and reveal capitalism for what it is and its impact on those who do not own the means of production. We must come to understand, sociologically, the necessity of replacing a system that places profits before people with a more humane system. On this, the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, we should seriously consider carrying on the legacy of the spirit and understanding of W.E.B. DuBois in both his scholarship and practice.