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"Occasional Labourers and Chronic Want": A Review of *The Truly Disadvantaged*

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The Truly Disadvantaged is an important book which brings the subject of poverty back into the forefront of sociological discourse. William Wilson's intent is to redirect its study by simultaneously mounting challenges to the ideological orthodoxy of the left and of the complacency of the right. Throughout, he attempts to subtly reconstruct current debates and controversies and to mould them into a form more palatable to the skeptical, voting age masses. For those interested in public policy formation, there is value in both the underlying purpose of such an exercise and in much of its form. Though the work is not meant as definitive, it does manage in a few pages to address many topics which are important to our understanding of poverty in the midst of plenty. Discussions of the role of joblessness, the inadequacy of the welfare dependency thesis, and the problem of institutional failure in the schools are particularly insightful.

Yet the *Truly Disadvantaged* is not without warts and blemishes. It never fully breaks away from the shortcomings of previous articulations, generating in many instances more of a modest proposal than a truly new understanding. The intent of this critique, however, is not to detract from the acknowledged contribution of the original but to debate some of its more problematic parts in the hope that discussion will further the author's own call for new directions in the study of poverty.

The most problematic section involves his discussion of the "shrinking pool of marriageable and economically secure men." On the surface, there is substance to what is essentially a descriptive observation which suggests that female-headed

families are a consequence of poverty and demographic change. Demographically, an existing sex imbalance at birth within the black community is compounded by high rates of incarceration and homicide to produce low rates of "eligible men." In cities like New York and Washington, black females outnumber males 25 to one. Economically, inner city industrial job loss has disproportionately affected minority working populations. And finally, intact black families with employed males have a much lower incidence of poverty than do female headed ones. The problem is not the emphasis on men but the decided neglect of women. Moreover, such a discussion is easily transformed into a cure which develops a kind of useful life of its own and begs the question. As Hilda Scott suggests in her work *Working Your Way to the Bottom*, simply finding an employed man does not alter the exploitative character of women's work itself. Indeed, given the number of working women within so-called stable black families, it may well be that it is their labor "that keeps families from falling into poverty" rather than the other way around. Indeed, Mary Jo Bane has developed a concept of "reshuffling" to describe already poor black families, who, by virtue of separation, become poor female headed households, a pattern more evident in black than in white families (Quoted in Baca-Zinn, 1988, p. 9). What is needed, then, is a discussion of the problem of increased wages for women as well as men, as well as more skills training and greater assistance with day care.

To ignore or gloss over gender when seeking a policy alternative for the entire black community seems not only shortsighted but harmful to our ultimate understanding of the relations between family and social structure. As Maxine Baca-Zinn has commented, "the economic demise of large numbers of black men affects the meanings and definitions of masculinity and reinforces the public patriarchy that controls minority women through their unequal dependence on welfare" (Baca-Zinn, 1988, p. 24). Centering the discussion on these issues rather than the ambiguous one of "non-mainstream values" would have made it more pathbreaking.

Further, the Male Marriageable Pool Index (MMPI) itself does not work in the way that one might expect in two of the

four regions of the country examined. In the West, where there is an admittedly small black population, it is shown that the "substantial" pool of eligible men does not reverse the trend of female-headed households, although we are told that they are not the same kind of households. In the South, where blacks are known to concentrate in low-waged, low-skilled labor, the finding that families are intact as a result of these "eligible" men is hardly worthy of celebration (Wilson, 1987, p. 99).

The discussion of the passing of black role models with the exodus of the black middle and working classes from central city neighborhoods also seems somewhat forced. So Wilson writes, "The very presence of these families during such periods 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, not the exception" (Wilson, 1987, p. 56). Forced because of Wilson's own inclusion of Bowles and Gintis's description of the school environment, an environment that does not separate black middle and underclass areas. They write, "Blacks and minorities are concentrated in schools whose repressive, arbitrary, generally chaotic internal order, coercive authority structures and minimal possibilities for advancement mirror the characteristics of inferior job situations" (Wilson, 1987, p. 103). It is hard to imagine, in this setting, honestly conveying to poor black children an impression that there is "a connection between education and meaningful employment" (Wilson, 1987, p. 56).

Moreover, the black middle class of the 1940s and 1950s was, by all accounts, a tiny population. It was a population that tried to stay as far away from the poor as it could get, in a social sense, by establishing a protected enclave with exclusive clubs and churches (Landry, 1987, pp. 59–62), and by supporting mechanisms like tracking in the schools to keep the student apart. While it may be correct to suggest that this population has left the inner city, whether they ever represented significant role models for the "underclass" is problematic and more attributable to what one reviewer called notions of "a largely mythical past." Particularly so is the suggestion that

they might convey to the poor "the habit of waking up early in the morning to a ringing alarm clock" (Wilson, 1987, p. 60).

Further, it is a somewhat romantic idea to label them as "black middle class professionals." E. Franklin Frazier suggests, many of those who had money at that time did so by virtue of participation in quasi-legal and illegal activites, a situation, one might add, that they shared with many emerging immigrant groups. Black professionals of this time were often living at the edge of poverty, a point also discussed by Landry who indicates that "they occupied a very ambiguous position" and that "their activities were severely circumscribed by the racial norm of a still very segregated society" (Landry, 1987, p. 50). They gained position, if at all, not from their practices but from working second jobs (Landry, 1987, p. 51), from being slum landlords or middlemen for mainstream enterprises. In Philadelphia, for example, black undertakers, a distinguished group within the community, would often exchange votes and influence for the right to claim unidentified bodies at the city morgue. The notion that this Gogolesque population would have swayed the poor from a life of crime to good deeds by example seems a bit overstated.

But more curious is the notion, perhaps more implied than stated, that black middle and working class populations have abandoned the inner city for exclusive suburbs or more affluent peripheries, expressed at one point simply as "the large out-migration of nonpoor blacks" (Wilson, 1987, p. 50). We know from most demographic accounts that black suburbanization has, at best, been a minor movement even in these last decades of expansion and that the black working class exodus has trailed that of the middle class. Massey and Denton (1987), for instance, conclude, "Some blacks may be moving to suburban areas, but this movement does not seem to be related to their socioeconomic characteristics. . . . Either blacks are moving to suburbs in numbers too small to make a difference, or suburbs and central cities are qually segregated" (p. 823). These groups have to be sure, migrated to the peripheral communities at the edges of central cities but they have not gone alone. In Wilmington, Delaware, for example, a city that is over 60% black, the poor live in every census track in which there is a sizeable

black population. In the most prestigious black area, 14% of the population is below the poverty line. Further, in only two of the 21 census tracts of the city are there exclusive concentrations of the poor, and in one of these there is a fairly high racial mixture. Moreover, there is no evidence to indicate that the poor who live in more affluent census tracts are any better off than those who live in less affluent ones. What this suggests, more disturbing than what Wilson argues, is that the decline has occurred in the midst rather than in the absence of "verticle integration."

In a related way, Professor Wilson gives very little weight to the political changes that have occurred in the decades of "unprecedented prosperity," changes that directly affected the working poor. He states, for example, given the most comprehensive civil rights legislation and the most comprehensive antipoverty program in the nation's history, it becomes difficult for liberals to explain the sharp increase in inner city poverty" (Wilson, 1987, p. 30). Yet, in 1975, nearly 80% of the jobless were eligible for unemployment compensation. After 1980, changes were made in federal requirements reducing that figure to only 29%. Similarly, the Department of Agriculture's food stamp program was cut by seven billion dollars and, once again, eligibility requirements were changed. It is estimated by Brown that in 1985 only 19 million of the more than 33 million living in poverty were receiving food stamps. In 1982, alone, one million children previously participating in school lunch programs, were made ineligible. In a study of the homeless in Delaware, it was found that "almost half—44%—of the total said they had no income at all, including public assistance." (Wilmington *News Journal*, April 19, 1988). Is it not possible that these policy changes may have swelled the ranks of the underclass, and also contributed to the rise in the crime rate, regardless of isolation or role model demise?

And third, Professor Wilson is much persuaded by the notion that the poor are "increasingly isolated socially from mainstream patterns and norms of behavior." Indeed, his apparent rejection of the "virulent liberal attack on Moynihan" and acceptance of his "historical analysis" (Wilson, 1987, p. 21) place him in the peculiar position of having to explain Moy-

nihan's contradictory argument that "because of housing seg-regation it is immensely difficult for the stable half (of the Negro community) to escape from the cultural influences of the unstable one" (Moynihan, 1965, p. 29).

Further, the "negative cultural influences" common to both Wilson and Moynihan are disquieting because so much eth-nographic research reveals that the poor are a lot more con-nected than we admit to the hopes and dreams of the dominant society. Williams and Kornblum in the work, *Growing Up Poor* found that the teenage mothers of their sample spend hours and hours watching television, leading to the suspicion that they get many more of their ideas about life from the media than they do from each other. The authors found, for example, a strong awareness by young drug dealers of the latest wea-ponry not from their community connections but from Clint Eastwood movies.

This issue becomes particularly enjoined when one dis-cusses the subject of having babies. The media is full of roman-tic notions of the joys of motherhood, values extolled hourly in television commercials and in such recent movies as "Baby Boom," "Three Men and a Baby," and "Having Babies." Is it surprising that young girls in the absence of other badges, translate these images into visions of their own self-worth? Or that they fail to understand that nobody wants them to have babies, not that having babies is bad per se?

Beyond the limits of these underlying themes, lies more central questions which remain unanswered or only partially answered. Are the truly disadvantaged a new population qual-itatively different from the much larger group of working poor of the present? Are race and inner city residence the key ingre-dients of the underclass? Is there a white underclass? If not, how is it that a recent race-specific malady (i.e., occurring after the role model exodus of the 1950s) is not generated by current racism?

Initially, the message seems to be clear. There are differ-ences in problems of welfare dependency, teenage pregnancy and violent crime which set the underclass apart from the more familiar, liberal versions of the deserving poor. The origins of

these differences are found in patterns of historic discrimination which were compounded by social isolation for those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy. And that the solutions to these problems must be achieved by expansive rather than restrictive policies.

But towards the end, joblessness is presented as the root cause of these "pathologies" suggesting either that the initial cultural discussions (telling liberals things they did not want to hear) were actually insignificant or that the poor with no jobs behave less well (i.e., are more criminal) than those with bad jobs. The former perspective would lead most liberals to say, "where's the change?" and the latter to thrill the hearts of conservatives who have always advocated forcing the poor into employment of any kind, at any wage.

A similar uncertainty surrounds the issue of race. At first, race seems somewhat incidental to the underlying structural origins of the class. We are warned to not "rely heavily on the easy explanation of racism" (Wilson, 1987, p. 19). In fact, evidence is presented which suggests that inequalities of similar magnitude though not of strength affect a white population. We are told, for example, that in 1978 74% of all poor black families were headed by women and 39% of all poor white families were as well. We could conclude from much of Wilson's own data, that whites are behind but catching up. As a matter of fact, a recent study of violent crime by researchers at Rutgers found that "the rural areas of the West, rather than the American urban ghetto, is where youth is far more likely to suffer violent death." The authors concluded, "Typically, those counties had higher death rates among their white population than high-crime cities showed for urban blacks" (New York Times, October 12, 1987, p. 13).

Of course, if whites are in the underclass then both the historic discrimination and urban isolation explanations must be recast to fit the contours of this mostly rural population which has not been victimized by the same racial disadvantage. This is a point Wilson, at times, seems unwilling to concede as he argues, "Any observed relationship involving race would reflect, to some unknown degree, the relatively superior eco-

logical niche many poor whites occupy with respect to jobs, marriage opportunities, and exposure to conventional role models" (Wilson, 1987, p. 60).

The problem here may well be one of emphasis. But at the same time, we are told that liberals must be brought to task for being "unwilling to mention *race* when discussing issues such as the increase of violent crime, teenage pregnancy, and out-of-wedlock births." What it is that we should mention about race in this connection is unclear. We are given James Q. Wilson's "critical mass theory" which suggests that when the numbers of young persons in a community reach a certain point "a self-sustaining chain reaction is set off that creates an explosive increase in the amount of crime, addiction and welfare dependency" (Wilson, 1987, p. 38). But a theory which has as its basis the notion that too many young people (in all examples black) produce bad things, at its best does not seem very explanatory.

While *The Truly Disadvantaged* leaves some important concerns unanswered and unresolved, it does raise other issues which spark the imagination. First, the whole spectrum of the workings of the underground economy are suggested and need to be examined. In the past, many people on welfare supplemented benefit levels with employment; either of their own or of a spouse/boyfriend. This "cheating" of the system was viewed as necessary because formal employment was sporadic and uneven and because such things as health care benefits were not available for many of the working poor. In the face of the loss of formal employment in inner city communities, has this alternative also been diminished or abolished? If it still exists, must not the welfare system itself be seen as a mechanism for sustaining marginal employment at least as much as it is as a producer or conveyor of nonmainstream norms of behavior?

The last point brings up the more general one of what we truly know about the lives of these people. In our discipline, we are particularly drawn in Berger's terms to a certain voyeurism in choices of topics to study (Berger, 1963). Departments are filled with courses on nuts and sluts—which not only help dwindling enrollments but apparently encourage

some of the best work in the field. Lifestyles of the not rich and infamous seem to peak our imaginations and numerous examinations of out-of-wedlock, teenage pregnancies, street crimes and school drop outs grace our shelves. The link between lifestyles and poverty is always a tenuous one. Does poverty create conditions which bring on certain attitudes toward work and play? Are behaviors predominately found among the poor, routinely or in proportions little better than those which would be predicted by chance? We know very little about how people make it in society, a question which ultimately may be of greater significance than examinations of how they fail.

In addition, we carry around a lot of potentially biased information about how they live their lives. Professor Wilson, for example, cites Oscar Newman's *Defensible Space* in discussing the fact that in poor areas "residents have difficulty identifying their neighbors. They are, less likely to engage in reciprocal guardian behavior. Events in one part of the block or neighborhood tend to be of little concern to those residing in other parts" (Wilson, 1987, p. 38). Newman's work was published as part of a grant from the Law Enforcement Agency, investigating the need for the introduction of techniques of sophisticated surveillance. Does that affect the finding? It certainly contradicts the images of supportive networking found in Carol Stack's work, *All Our Kin* (1974).

What happens to the money that is illegally funneled into these communities? We are told that people are buying fancy cars and clothes and teenagers are buying boom boxes and gold chains as well as drugs. But are they also giving money to their grandmothers to pay electric and rent bills? What does this say about the ghetto economy and about the norms and values of its residents?

What is the role and structure of the systems of extended family and friends? Many biographies reveal successful branches of underclass families as well as the inevitable, individual rags to riches sagas. Is there no contact between those who make it within a family and those who do not? Wilson indicates, "They also seldom have sustained contact with friends or relatives in the more stable areas of the city or in the

suburbs" (Wilson, 1987, p. 60). Did they at some point have more contact with the black middle class than with friends or relatives?

What is the basis of the difference in these groups, class role models, a caring and hardworking parent, religion, luck? We know, although as sociologists we sometimes forget, that people do not actually live in census tracts. Do they leave their neighborhoods to shop, to work, to play?

But perhaps most importantly, we need to expand our study of the truly disadvantaged from a domestic to an international arena. Professor Wilson is writing about the wretched of the earth, "groups marginalized by the market mechanisms of capitalist society." According to Dahrendorf, industrialization brought on the abolition of the system of norms and values which guaranteed and legitimized the order of preindustrial society, an order "endowed by the patina of centuries." In its stead, classes arose defined by the crude indices of possession and nonpossession, with the emphasis placed on economic function rather than behavior. Classes, according to classical definitions, were formed in this stage only in so far as they were engaged in a common struggle with another class, and as the identity of their interests produced a community and a political organization. The "underclass" in most of our current formulations hardly constitutes a class in this sense but rather represents an "unstable entity" which may yet be formed but presently plays a more significant role in attempting to overcome the various crises of the economic system.

In this guise, there are striking parallels to our study of the underclass in the United States and the formation of certain ethnic minorities in Western Europe. As Stephen Castles points out, from 1945 until the midseventies, the import of labor power was a marked feature of all economically advanced countries (Castles, 1984). Estimates are that over 30 million people entered the Western European democracies as workers or workers' dependents after Wordl War II. Not all remained, indeed net migration increased by about 10 million by 1975 and to 16 million by the mid 1980s.

It is not necessary to describe the social costs associated with such movements but only to point out that the costs were

often differentially distributed among certain sectors of the indigenous working class as well as the elderly and the unemployed. Migration was seen as a cause of their problems and campaigns to expel the newcomers were numerous. Obviously each country represented a specific case where social, democratic and economic conditions affected what went on, from Sweden's fairly liberal settlement policy to West Germany's fairly restrictive one. Race also played a complicated and varied role. But beyond the particulars, were significant common threads. First, the economic moment in which migrations occur represents a stage of development, with the transformation of mass production and the deskilling of labor. Second, new jobs are created which are often dirty, unhealthy, unpleasant and it is to these, in particular, that migrants are recruited. Similar to the period of the 1920s in the United States, a period of homogenization occurred in Western Europe after the war, characterized by worker substitutability and exploitation.

But as all good things come to an end, in the United States the development of automated systems in the 1950s and the movement of capital to labor, a pattern duplicated in Europe at a later period, made these populations obsolete. By the mid-seventies in Europe, restrictive policies were found in all countries again with only slight variation.

But the cessation of recruitment did not end the presence and in all countries new ethnic enclaves emerged, filled with groups characterized by nationality, often physical traits, culture, and lifestyles distinct from the indigenous populations. Their numbers, though not approaching the concentrations of minorities in the United States, were not inconsequential. In 1981, for example, foreign born populations comprised 9.4% of the population of West Germany, 5.1% of the population of France, 5.4% of the population of Yugoslavia and 11% of the population of Spain.

And in an all too familiar set of results, there are today large concentrations of impoverished populations living in inner-city areas and an upsurge of racism, fears of the destruction of national culture, the growth of neo-nazi movements and strong beliefs that immigrants are the cause of economic uncertainty and should be returned. There are frequent media dis-

cussions of foreigners who take away other workers' jobs, sponge off the welfare state, and exposes of minority youth and their threats to public order, their criminality and drug proliferation. In short, the makings of a dangerous underclass, yet one without slavery, the absence of mainstream role models or the vestiges of historic discrimination, to reveal its source.

Their inclusion in the model need not "leave unexplained the question of why black unemployment was lower not after but before 1950" (Wilson, 1987, p. 30) and expand the discussion of the disadvantaged to the true parameters of "chronic want" which have disturbed us at least since the days of Charles Booth.

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