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A Critique of *The Truly Disadvantaged*: A Historical Materialist (Marxist) Perspective

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"Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."

—Karl Marx ([1887] 1967, p. 301)

Introduction: A Difference of Philosophy and Theory

Scholars such as William J. Wilson, public policy analysts, politicians, media personalities and journalists have, in recent years, turned their attention to the pervasive and growing poverty, permanent unemployment and inequality in American society. They have noted the disproportionate occurrence of these phenomena among African Americans—especially women and children—and in the "inner city ghettos" of the former centers of industrial production. At the same time, they have either ignored or severed any connection between the deepening poverty of one section of society—whom they have called the "underclass"—and the vast accumulation of wealth among the capitalist class.

This has allowed for the revival of an "explanation" of poverty in which the "victims"—in this case, the "Black underclass"—are guilty of "causing" their own poverty. The fundamental social arrangements of the capitalist political economic system—i.e., the sale of one's labor power to the capitalist in exchange for wages that are, in turn, used to purchase the necessities of life (food, housing, clothing, health care, education, etc.) in the marketplace—are found "innocent." The social relations that the legal system protects—that the capitalist owns all that the workers produce and pays the workers as little as possible (often below subsistence with a minimum wage of \$3.35 an hour)—are to be left intact.

Our problem is not so much with the “facts” that Wilson and others have marshalled in support of their “underclass theory,” though we find they have looked at some facts and conveniently ignored others. Rather, our difference is more in the philosophical and theoretical understanding of society and history that provides the “scientific” explanation of these data—permanent unemployment and poverty, etc.

In contrast to Wilson’s “underclass theory,” historical materialism (Marxism) provides an understanding of poverty as a necessary result of the drive for maximum profits by capital, i.e., the driving down of labor costs by lowering wages and ultimately displacing labor by technology (computer automated production, robotics, etc.). Capitalism and poverty (of all races and nations) are dynamically interconnected. At a certain stage of the development of the technology of production, if the masses are to survive, it becomes necessary to reorganize society around human needs rather than exchanging non-existent wages for the necessities of life such as housing, food, clothing, health care, education, etc.

The historical materialist view (Marx [1887] 1967) that wealth and poverty are dynamically interconnected and increasingly polarized in society (i.e., wealth is the “unpaid” wages of workers) is borne out by recent U.S. data. These data indicate that as the lowest section of society has become poorer in recent years, the rich have gotten richer. For example, the top fifth of the U.S. population had 45.7% of all income in 1986, while the bottom fifth had 4.7% and the next poorest had 10.6% (THE WASHINGTON POST 1988, p. A18). This income inequality is part of a historical process of the polarization of wealth and poverty. Thus, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means (1989, pp. 984–986) reports that between 1973 and 1987 the richest fifth of the population GAINED 24% in average family income while the poorest fifth LOST 11% in income. The top fifth’s average family income of \$60,299 in 1973 jumped to \$68,775 in 1987 (in constant 1987 dollars), while the lowest fifth’s average family income dropped from \$5,507 in 1973 to \$5,107 in 1987. This income for the poor represented 93% of the poverty level in 1973 and only

83% of poverty in 1987. At the same time, the income of the top fifth was 6.86 times the poverty level in 1973 and increased to 8.51 times poverty by 1987 (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Ways and Means 1989, p. 984–986).

In Wilson's work not only is poverty disconnected from the accumulation of wealth, but Black inner city poverty and permanent unemployment—the basis of the "underclass" formulation—is isolated intellectually and, thus, politically from the poverty and unemployment in rural America, in Appalachia, and among White, Hispanic, Native American and other workers in the United States and in the neocolonies of the Third World. Surely the fifth of the population living on an average family income of \$5,107 is not all African Americans and not all African Americans are in this lower section of the working class. Yet the connections between different expressions of poverty, which would be essential to a full scientific understanding, are left unexplored. The poverty of African Americans in the "ghettos" is thus presented as different from other forms of poverty and, (unlike other forms of poverty?) is caused by the moral failings of the victims themselves. The intellectual basis of the political isolation of this most vulnerable section of the U.S. population—poor African Americans many of whom are women and children—is thus accomplished.

Further, Black inner city poverty is ripped out of its historic context of the economic contraction that is currently gripping the United States and the global economy (e.g., the farm crisis and bankruptcies, the 1987 Stock Market crash, the S&L and bank crisis, the soaring budget deficit and trade deficit, the threat of Third World default on billions of dollars of loans, the housing crisis, ballooning consumer debt, and the glut of commodities that cannot be sold, etc.). As a result, the solution offered by Wilson depends almost exclusively upon influencing the ruling class and its political representatives to reform the system through congressional legislation and policies—a "solution" that has already shown itself to be ineffective (see below). It leaves the whole question of the systemic and historic crisis of capitalism and the necessity of the political mobi-

lization and empowerment of the masses across color, nationality and gender lines if they are to get out of their poverty and survive unexplored.

Wilson and others are led to ask "WHO is poor?" and "why are THEY poor?" The question "WHY DOES/MUST POVERTY EXIST?" is never asked. The "labor theory of value" (Marx [1887] 1967), which explains that the accumulation of wealth by capital necessitates the exploitation and impoverishment of larger and larger sections of labor by a constant revolution in the technology of production, is not considered for its policy implications. If it were, it would be clear that piecemeal legislative tinkering with the system is not the SOLUTION to the poverty of African Americans in the inner cities—nor is it the solution to any other form of poverty in the U.S. or the world today. Legislative reform can be a useful TACTIC in political struggle, but to offer it, as does Wilson, as the final resolution to Black inner city poverty is a cruel hoax at this moment in history.

We offer as evidence of this assertion the fact that today, in 1989, the hourly minimum wage of \$3.35 (in effect since 1981) has remained unchanged for longer than any other period in its 51 year history and has fallen to a mere 35% of average wages, its lowest ever (Kirkland 1989, p. A19). Both houses of Congress have voted to raise the minimum wage to \$4.55 by 1992. Three years from now the minimum wage would STILL be less than the \$4.58 per hour in 1989 that would be comparable to \$3.35 in 1981. Moreover, President Bush has threatened to veto anything more than \$4.25 (by 1992) and the political word is that there is no will in the Democratically controlled Congress to override this veto. The point is that if this straightforward piece of legislation directly related to poverty cannot make it through Congress in the current climate of economic contraction and political reaction, nothing of any substance will. Other legislation—the Equal Rights Amendment for women and "comparable worth" pay legislation—that would address the disproportionate number of African American women, especially those heading households, in poverty has not made it through the legislative channels despite a social movement and over a decade of struggle. (Iron-

ically, Wilson seems to suggest that women are poor because they are unmarried, with the solution being marriage. We suggest that women are poor because they are unemployed or paid poverty level wages.) In short, Wilson, we argue, does not deal objectively with the economic and political realities of this period in U.S. history in which even earlier reforms are being rolled back.

In the preface to his book, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy*, Wilson states his philosophical and theoretical position. He is, he says, a "social democrat," and offers his book as a "refocused liberal perspective" (p. 18). Wilson draws on the works of "liberals" such as Kenneth Clark (1965), Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965), Herbert Gans (1968) and Lee Rainwater (1970) and "social democrats" such as Michael Harrington (1962, 1984). He claims he is not of the "culture of poverty" school, and yet suggests that what is noteworthy in today's Black inner city poverty population is its "social pathology." He presents Scandinavian social democracy as a model for reform, and calls for a rekindling of the liberal reform agenda in the public policy arena.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, when the economy was expanding and reform was fiscally possible, the views of liberals and social democrats were "progressive." What we see in Wilson's work, however, is that what was once "progressive" is now unsatisfactory, at best, and reactionary, at worst, as economic conditions deteriorate (Fishman and Newby 1986). What one critic of the "New Left" and "neo-Marxism" has said of these scholars we find applicable, as well, to Wilson's presentation of the "underclass."

While New Left theorists have insisted on the importance of class analysis to an understanding of contemporary society, the actual result of their labor has not been fundamentally different or markedly superior to mainstream sociological analyses of inequality. More importantly, they have not been able to undermine the central arguments of their adversaries: They have replicated their static analyses of class structure, and they have accepted, without adequate theoretical or empirical justification, several significant points in their critique of classical Marxist class analysis (Meiksins 1987, p. 49).

Even further, the works of many of these well-intentioned liberal "idealist" theorists—including Wilson—have been appropriated by conservatives and play into the hands of the reactionary classes. "Culture of poverty" arguments were ultimately appropriated by conservatives such as Edward Banfield (1970) to argue against the role of government in solving poverty and other problems. And, to be sure, some conservatives are already using Wilson's arguments to undercut support for affirmative action and a host of social welfare measures.

The prominence given to "social pathology" and "moral breakdown" rather than systemic economic factors in getting at the root of African American poverty in the inner cities and the disconnectedness between this "underclass" poverty and other forms of poverty is, we suggest, a critical aspect of the intellectual climate of several recent set-backs in the political arena. These include, but are certainly not limited to, the Supreme Court decision in *Richmond V. J.A. Croson* declaring unconstitutional minority set-aside programs, the "welfare reform" bill mandating work for "welfare" benefits without guaranteeing affordable day care and adequate wages, the 1989 election of an open fascist "former" Ku Klux Klansman, David Duke, to the Louisiana state legislature, the rise of the skin-heads and other fascist gangs as well as the increase in racist attacks on campuses, etc.

The notion that the "ghettos" are havens of "underclass social pathology"—drugs, crime, etc.—has certainly been part of the rationale for the actions by Congress and "drug czar" William Bennett to militarize the inner cities. With Washington, D.C. as the "test case," we are witnessing the government's and the capitalists' "solution" to poverty—more monies for police and arming them with 9 mm semi-automatic weapons, more monies for prisons, and bringing in the National Guard to "aid" in law enforcement and the provision of special anti-terrorist surveillance equipment not otherwise available domestically.

In our critique we argue that any scientific analysis of the question of the "underclass," i.e., poverty, permanent unemployment and inequality, must be grounded philosophically

and methodologically in a theory of society which is historical, wholistic and materialist—in short, in historical materialism or Marxism (Levine and Lemboke 1987). The very concept of class must be seen as a dynamic and antagonistic relation of production between capital and labor, not a static category of income, education, occupation and life-style (Meikins 1987). Furthermore, solutions to the problems of poverty and unemployment must be presented within the context of what is objectively possible at this stage of the crisis of monopoly capitalism and not simply as the subjective wishes of liberal scholars and policy makers (Fishman, Scott, Gomes and Newby 1989).

Wilson's Thesis

Wilson's book makes a provocative contribution to current debates about the conditions and problems of the lower section of the working class, where African Americans are disproportionately concentrated. He takes great pains to separate himself from "culture of poverty," "blame the victim" and other currently conservative (but once "liberal") positions. For Wilson, the "underclass" is produced not by culture or welfare, but by structural forces in the economy.

Wilson tries to link race and economic indicators (not class, as noted earlier) to explain the "social pathology" (female-headed households, drugs, crime, etc.) of the urban "underclass." His basic argument (highly simplified here) is that joblessness among young African Americans in the inner city is the pivotal factor in the whole nexus of pathologies of the urban "underclass." Joblessness stems from structural changes in the economy (from goods producing to service producing activity) along with demographic forces and past discrimination. With the shift in the economy, semiskilled and unskilled jobs were relocated to the suburbs, resulting in the "greatest decline in jobs in the lower education-requisite industries" in the inner cities. Coupled with these forces was the migration of the more "advanced" members of the African American community (the Black middle class and stable working class) from the city, leaving the lower stratum of the working class

isolated, without the adequate role models for mainstream behavior and bereft of support from basic institutions in the community.

More affluent "role models" for the poverty-stricken inner city residents to improve the latter's moral character is, we submit, senseless. Those African Americans who live in poverty must first and foremost have the money (as do the more "advanced" African Americans) to purchase the requisite housing, food, clothing, education, child care and health care to make them "moral upstanding citizens." Unless this great transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor (the opposite of what has actually been occurring) were to take place, then all the role models in the world can not cover up the fact that a large and growing section of the working class—disproportionately African American—is simply superfluous to high tech capitalism and are being left to rot in the slums or on the streets of the cities of America.

Wilson also sees joblessness as the key factor in the production of female-headed households. The lack of jobs for young African American men in the inner cities makes them less attractive as marriage partners. Thus, two-parent Black families continue to decline in representation in the urban "underclass." The real problem, we suggest, is not female-headed households per se, but poor female-headed households. As noted, this is a problem of jobs, wages and affordable child care, not the marital arrangements that women may choose. Wilson, in his focus on morality rather than material reality once again offers the poor a nonsolution.

Wilson argues against "race-specific" programs. He implies that the problems suffered by the African American poor are no longer the result of racial discrimination and, since such programs are not popular among most Whites, suggests a comprehensive program of economic and social reform that will benefit ALL groups in the United States, not just poor minorities. This comprehensive program includes macroeconomic policies to promote economic growth and create a tight labor market, a nationally oriented labor market strategy, a child support assurance program, a child care strategy, and a family allowance program. Somewhat contradictorily, however, Wil-

son argues that since these policies will not immediately resolve joblessness and the pathologies of the urban "underclass," there must be targeted programs for this group. These targeted programs coupled with the comprehensive program should eventually remedy the problems of the urban "underclass." Liberals, conservatives, business, labor, government, etc., should find common ground to accomplish the task of balanced economic planning. Wilson argues that other nations (e.g., Sweden, Norway, Austria, the Netherlands, and West Germany) have already made such achievements. He draws on Harold Wileksy's arguments about why these Scandinavian and other Western European nations have better social conditions.

Critique: The Necessity of a Scientific Analysis

The publication of Wilson's book, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass and Public Policy*, in 1987 sparked the latest round of a historic debate among sociological and related scholars—as well as in the mass media—regarding the usefulness of "culture of poverty" explanations and/or macrostructural economic explanations of the growing persistence of poverty in America, especially among African Americans and female-headed households (see, e.g., Newby 1988; Geschwender 1988; Miller 1988; *The Black Scholar* 1988; Duster 1988; Jencks 1988; Reed 1988; and Stansfield 1988). This debate about the "causes of poverty" and the ways out of poverty is as old as the discipline of sociology—dating from the time of the divergent approaches of the founding fathers themselves (i.e., between the positivism of St. Simon, Comte and Durkheim, on the one hand, joined later by Weber's social action theory, and, on the other hand, the historical materialism of Marx) (Zeitlin 1987; Fishman and Benello 1986).

In the 1960s, with the expansion of the "New Deal" welfare state and the reforms of the civil rights movement and the "war on poverty" (in response to the "rediscovery" of poverty in America), a new round of the debate ensued (e.g., Lewis 1959, 1960; Moynihan 1965; Leibow 1967; Valentine 1968; Gans 1968; Hill 1972). While overall poverty rates declined, Black poverty remained twice that of Whites. Many scholars sought an expla-

nation in the "culture of poverty"—social pathology, deviant morality, etc.—while others sought an explanation in the historic position of African Americans within the U.S. and world political economy.

In the 1980s, despite the reforms of the past era, the effects of the introduction of advanced technology in the production process are being expressed in terms of the loss of high paying industrial and even some service jobs, poverty level wages and permanent unemployment (among all workers, but disproportionately among African American women, children and men) (Bluestone and Harrison 1986, 1988; Fishman and Newby 1986). Once again, Wilson's disclaimers notwithstanding, the "culture of poverty," this time as the "Black underclass," has emerged as the explanation of this new historic reality (Wilson 1987; Newby 1988; Geschwender 1988; Duster 1988, etc.).

To enter the debate in a way that clarifies the issues, we need to go beyond differences in the interpretation of the data (on poverty, family formation, crime, drugs, etc.). Rather, we must return to the underlying assumptions and conceptualizations of society and social life contained in the divergent theoretical traditions of sociology. The editors of *The Black Scholar* (1988, p. 1), "Theory or Fact? The Black Underclass" state: "But the black underclass is not merely a term. Like an iceberg, it carries with it a submerged mass of theory, bias and assumption." Similarly, Stanfield (1988) notes, ". . . simplistic terms such as 'new racism,' 'white backlash,' 'underclass' and 'truly disadvantaged' do not help us understand or explain how the current redesign of America into a high-tech society is changing the complex character of the status of black Americans in their diverse geographic locations. . . . We have yet to advance a theory that is based on up-to-date concepts or that explains as well as describes what is going on."

Central to the "underclass" debate is a fundamental difference in the understanding and conceptualization of "class." Is "class" a static category indicated by one's income, education, occupation, and life-style in the tradition of Weber and mainstream—positivist and functionalist—sociology? Or, is class a historically dynamic social relation of production of the necessities of life linking together the accumulation of capital and the

impoverishment of labor in the tradition of historical materialism—Marxism (Meiksins 1987)?

We suggest that Wilson's formulation of the "underclass" is based on a conceptualization of class as a static category—of income and life-style—not as a social relation of production. This masks and distorts the reality of where the poverty of the so-called "underclass" comes from. The very concept of UNDERclass has no meaning in the historical materialist formulation of "social relations." One is either, at this advanced stage of the technology of capitalist production, a capitalist who owns the means of production and employs workers or a worker who tries to sell her/his labor power. Those who are poor and permanently unemployed—disproportionately African American but a majority of whom are White—are a growing section OF THE WORKING CLASS. They are NOT OUTSIDE of the working class—some inferior grouping on the very margins of society. Rather, they represent the very essence of capitalist development which creates wealth off of workers' unpaid labor and which MUST NECESSARILY create poverty as a result of capital accumulation. In identifying African Americans as THE "urban underclass," Wilson dangerously distorts the reality of who is poor, why they are poor and what is the way out of poverty.

In short, Wilson acknowledges structural constraints (the technological transformation of the U.S. labor force from goods producing to information processing/service producing) as the root cause of current joblessness and other problems suffered disproportionately by the lower section of the working class. However, he does not deal with the class relations of capitalism, i.e., the exploitation of labor as the source of profits and accumulation of capital and the necessary technological revolution in production which constantly cheapens the value of human labor and ultimately makes human labor superfluous. Marable (1985, p. 176) notes this shortcoming in addressing the problems of the Black masses, which his quote makes clear is not unique to Wilson:

The historic inability to link theory to political endeavours contributes to the Black elite's failure to advance a systemic criticism of U.S. capitalism. The labour theory of value is alien to accom-

modationists and to most reformers. They do not comprehend that the masses of working people create all wealth, and that employers are not doing Blacks or other workers any real favours by creating jobs. . . . With the rise of social democratic ideology among Black reformers over the past three decades, the inclination to promote LAISSEZ FAIRE capitalism has been curtailed. But, at best, most reformers promote only the idea that Blacks should receive a larger "piece of the pie," and inclusion in "the organization and structure of power in the public and private sectors."

Wilson presents a critique of workfare making clear that what workers living in poverty need is WORK at wages that enable them to survive, not workfare (forced labor to receive welfare benefits). Yet, he is not able to explain how, or even IF, this can be accomplished and provide maximum profits to the capitalist class.

While Wilson discusses in some detail the technological changes in post-1960s American society that have led to problems for unskilled and semi-skilled workers, this analysis is done outside of an examination of developments in the global economy, in general, and the world market of capitalism and its current crisis, in particular. For Black workers, the mechanization of southern agriculture in the 1940s and 1950s and the increased demand for labor in the factories of the North during World War II set in motion the massive migration of African Americans from the South to the industrial centers of the North (Mandle 1978). Here they found work for a few decades until the current period of automation of industrial production. Their shift in employment from the agricultural to the industrial sector lasted only as long as their cheaper labor was needed. Now that robotics are in place, African American workers are again displaced—in many cases permanently—from employment and thus from the very ability to survive.

We cannot really discuss the likelihood of achieving comprehensive or targeted reforms in the United States without understanding the decline of this nation's share of production of goods and services and the general glut of commodities. In the 1950s, U.S. business and industry produced 52% of the world's goods and services. The U.S. share of the world market

dropped to 30% by 1970 and fell to 22% by 1984 (Kissinger 1984; Bluestone and Harrison, 1982, 1986; Fishman and Newby 1986).

The economic crisis is forcing the political motor of capitalism, i.e., the state, to the right. Blocking further reform and, indeed, rolling back current "welfare state" policies is the order of the day since U.S. capitalists will realize declining profits if they do not force their workers to adjust to a lower standard of living. Only an analysis which understands the historical development of capitalism in its international context can fully elucidate what has produced a growing number of poor people—both working and nonworking and of all nationalities, but the majority of whom are White—in the United States. Thus, an analysis of the current character of advanced monopoly capitalism as well as the current political consciousness of working people is essential to fully understand the dynamic and global historical process creating what Wilson and others have called the "urban underclass."

Similarly, Wilson's discussion of family "disorganization" and "social pathology" among the poor is not placed within this essential context of history and economic development. Yet, it should be clear that the family as a unit does not develop on its own, or just as it pleases. Instead, its development is conditioned by social forces—especially the mode of production of society. This is as true in advanced capitalism as it was in earlier modes of production such as the communal mode where clans were the primary form of family and the feudal mode where the family was also primary. Thus, in the earlier mode of manual production most of humanity was engaged in growing food and the household itself was the unit of production. Wife, husband and children, as soon as they were old enough, were essential to production; they labored where they lived. It was only "natural" that the family, under these circumstances would tend to remain intact—it was a matter of survival.

With the transition from manual to mechanical production, factory production replaced household production. The individual wage worker replaced the family as the unit of production. The factory and the office replaced the household as the

locus of much productive labor activity. Today, as each worker more and more confronts the production process as an individual, the “break up” of the nuclear family has become more and more likely. In the context of the growing atomization of workers as they confront capital, it is hardly surprising that modern America has seen the growth of more and more single Americans and more and more single female-headed households. It is the capitalist mode of production—both its distinct form of productive forces and its social relations—that has laid the conditions for the “break up” of the family.

The historic legacy of slavery, the resulting oppression of African Americans as the cheapest form of labor, and the development of ideologies of white supremacy (racism) to insure continuing division between Black and White workers place the Black worker at a real disadvantage. Those most subjected to the ravishes of capitalism (i.e., African Americans who disproportionately comprise the lower section of the working class and the reserve army of the unemployed) have not surprisingly suffered the greatest disruption of family life, but are now being followed briskly by White families. An understanding of this process of atomization of the workers as they confront capital might have led Wilson to focus not only on a campaign for full employment in order to reform unemployed males’ relationship to the labor process but also to support the equalization of wages between men and women through policies such as “comparable worth.” The poverty of single female-headed families is surely the result of the low wages of women and the lack of affordable child care for their children—not simply the “absence of a man.”

Wilson explicitly limits his sights to urban ghetto poverty among African Americans in the post-civil rights era. His treatment of both “race” and “class” is mechanical and nondialectical. Each are categories that are given a certain value in accounting for the “Black underclass.” In contrast, we suggest, that the root cause of poverty and oppression is the dynamics of capitalism and that the African American worker stands in a particular historical relationship to U.S. capital—based on slavery, history, etc. Thus, an analysis of the role of racial discrimination, historically and today, in dividing the American

working class might have led Wilson to understand the continuing import of "racism" even in the context of the increasing significance of class division.

A dialectical and historical analysis of "class" would not have allowed Wilson to employ the concept of "underclass" and to have presented it in the contradictory way he does. On the one hand he says the "underclass" is structurally produced and its members are jobless. As already noted, whether or not one is employed or not, all workers remain part of the working class. To pose a radical break between the employed and unemployed is inconsistent with an understanding of the historical process of the development of capitalism and is politically to isolate those most vulnerable. Further, most of Wilson's argument is based on the "underclass" having a different cultural and value system and life-style. Thus, he describes the crime of the "underclass," its abundance of welfare mothers, and the "underclass'" alienation (geographically and morally) from the middle class. So who and what is this "underclass"?—the criminal element, welfare mothers, the jobless who lack requisite training, or all of these?

More important than this lumping of a host of "social pathologies" into the grabbag of the "underclass" is the distortion inherent in Wilson's analysis. The majority of the unemployed, of the poor, of welfare mothers and of those alienated from "middle class" morality are White; and there is a core dynamic of capitalist development that would enable us to explain these phenomena among all races and nationalities.

In contrast, Wilson's "underclass" analysis fractionalizes the working class along color lines leading one to believe that a fundamentally different dynamic is responsible for the ravages of capitalism among peoples of different color and nationality. Most importantly, Wilson's analysis politically isolates the Black lower section of the working class—that section most oppressed and exploited. The very term "underclass" connotes something negative. It is a short step from being excluded from the class system—falling "under" or outside of it—to being excluded from humanity.

The fastest growing group among those in poverty is the "working poor"—those who work for a wage so low (e.g.,

minimum wage) they still cannot purchase in the market place the necessities of life (food, housing, clothing, education, health care, etc.). Are they not part of the "truly disadvantaged?" in short, although the concept "underclass" has been around for a good while and people have defined and redefined it AD NAUSEAM, even today it seems to serve more to obfuscate reality and policy than to direct us toward solutions.

A historical materialist analysis would correct another problem with Wilson's analysis, i.e., his seeming failure to understand the process by which technology itself ultimately cheapens the value of human labor power and thus the value of human beings. Even today jobs in the computer industry are sinking in terms of wage and salary rates compared to ten or fifteen years ago. The pattern in the United States in the 1980s is for more and more "professionals" to be proletarianized, not for workers of any race to be upgraded. The polarization of classes—those at the top getting richer and those at the bottom getting poorer—is the order of the day, not simply the growth of the problematic "underclass." The solution to the problems of this growing lower section of the working class must deal with the "surge of inequality" in American society and the necessary connection between the accumulation of wealth by capital and the increasing impoverishment of the working class.

Wilson's analysis does not suggest any way to energize and mobilize that lower section of the working class and unite them with others also being squeezed by the economic contraction. His proscriptions leave the "underclass" outside of the process of their own emancipation. It is increasingly clear that the poorest section of society has no representatives within the capitalist political institutions. If their demands for the necessities of life—jobs, food, housing, education, health care, etc.—are to be realized, it will require the dismantling of the capitalist political apparatus and market system and the reorganization of society to distribute to the masses the glut of goods and services that exist and are being produced daily. This, we suggest, can only be accomplished with the fullest political mobilization and participation of those on the very cutting edge of

survival today—those whom Wilson has called the “underclass”.

Wilson’s discussion of race-specific programs is also flawed. Affirmative action, for example, was not a program designed to aid the Black poor. Rather, it was designed to aid those African Americans who were already more or less “equal” to their White counterparts but had been denied equal educational opportunity, jobs and/or promotions due to past discrimination. Affirmative action did, in fact, aid the Black middle class who had or could easily get the requisite skills and education. Why today the clarion call to eliminate affirmative action because it helped only the black middle class? Is it not worth helping to overcome past discrimination against at least this one sector of African Americans? More to the point, however, is that our efforts to propose, enact and implement policy solutions for the Blacks who are today underpaid and unemployed must still have some “race-specific” content since African American workers continue to suffer from both past and current discrimination.

Only by being honest with the masses of workers will we be able to negate the legacy of racism and hatred of Blacks that has been the historic tool of capitalist rule in America. The David Duke’s win because they lie—they tell White workers that their deteriorating living standard is caused by Blacks getting more. The reality is that BOTH Black and White workers are suffering from a declining standard of living because of capitalism. Until we put forward this reality, fascists such as Duke will feed on people’s fears and the historic ideology of white supremacy to keep us all in bondage.

Any real solutions to the poverty of Wilson’s “underclass” would necessarily challenge the profit motive of the capitalist economy. Yet, Wilson writes as if there were no genuine antagonisms, either objectively or subjectively, between labor and capital. Thus, he calls for a multiclass coalition to support his comprehensive and targeted programmatic reforms. Missing from Wilson’s analysis is a recognition of the politics of unemployment and its usefulness to capitalism in crisis, especially in curbing inflation. Also missing is a recognition of the real

diametrically opposed interests behind capital and labor. Wilson seems to suggest that so long as policies are not race-specific they will be supported by a majority of the people in both the capitalist class and working class. Yet, history demonstrates that class exploitation is so key to the evolution of American capitalism that even those willing to admit to racism are not willing to admit that anything needs to be done to change the position of the working class. As already noted, many capitalists and their political representatives in the U.S. Congress have not seen the need to raise the minimum wage above the poverty level—and this has no “race-specific” content.

In his recommendation that the United States follow the lead of the Scandinavian and several other European countries, Wilson seems not to understand the vast differences between the United States and these countries. Most of them have ethnic but no racial divisions, most have very different governmental processes, most have a long history of greater class consciousness and multiparty systems, and all occupy a very different position within the world political economy. What they achieved in the past and what the United States can achieve in this historical period of world economic contraction is vastly different.

Conclusion: Where from Here?

The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental. (C. L. R. James in Marable 1985, p. 1)

The fundamental flaw in Wilson’s exegesis on the “urban underclass” is its static and partial quality. Only Black urban ghetto poverty is presented. There is no understanding of how this is related to Black and White rural poverty (as in the Black belt South or Midwestern farm belt), to Native American urban and reservation poverty, to White working class poverty (especially in Appalachia), to Hispanic poverty, etc. Perhaps, more importantly, there is no real analysis of how poverty and wealth are inextricably interconnected within the context of

world capitalism. Of how the poverty of the workers, especially the lower unbribed section of the working class, is related to the accumulation of wealth of the capitalists. This we consider to be a major problem. Class, unlike the Marxian or historical materialist conception, is a Weberian conception in which a dynamic relation of production and distribution is transformed into static and mechanical categories of income inequality, occupation, education, and life-style. The isolation of one form of poverty from the multitude of forms that abound in this historical period, as Wilson does, masks the fundamental systemic and global quality of poverty today—a growing poverty in the midst of abundance. If science is the quest for understanding that which is real and objective, to fail to fully understand the connections between “underclass” poverty and other poverty, between wealth and poverty is to deny science.

To try to resolve the problems of poverty (including such things as family formation, drugs and “crime,” etc.) without addressing capitalist property relations that create and necessitate the driving down of workers wages and ultimate elimination of much human labor from the production process to maximize profits is futile and unscientific. The historic position of African Americans as slaves, sharecroppers, and the most exploited workers—last hired, first fired and lowest paid—means that Black workers will be hit first and hardest. This is the basis of the so-called “underclass.”

But, the attack on African American workers is just the opening round of the attack on the entire working class. And this time White workers who are increasingly unemployed, poor, homeless and hungry will have to join the fight for the reorganization of society to guarantee the necessities of life for the workers of all nationalities and their children. As Peery (1978, pp. 56–57) has observed:

The . . . [African American] workers to the extent that they occupy the strategic position of the unskilled basic workers will radicalize the majority of the working class. In order to attack the . . . [Black] workers, the government is going to have to become entangled with the majority of the working class. The position of the . . . [Black] workers is strategic and they will not fail. History

will record the stirring of the . . . [African American] proletariat as the beginning of the American Socialist Revolution.

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