

**More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City**, William Julius Wilson, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2009, 190 pp, \$24.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-393-06705-7

William Julius Wilson critiques the long-term tendency among social scientists to tiptoe around cultural explanations of poverty and racial inequality. He conscientiously stresses our duty to emphasize structural factors given American individualism; however, Wilson does a superb job of opening the discussion to both structural and cultural factors.

Why are black, inner city residents so much more likely to be in poverty and why is it so difficult them to escape it? Wilson identifies several structural factors that indirectly disadvantage and isolate poor blacks: transportation policies shifted jobs from cities to suburbs; mortgage policies contributed to middle-class outmigration; urban renewal and highway construction destroyed low income black neighborhoods; New Federalist policies cut aid to cities; and labor market and tax policies reduced workers' ability to support families (p. 144-5). Economic changes further contributing to racial inequality include decreased demand for low-skilled workers, decline of manufacturing jobs, and "spatial mismatch" between inner city residents and suburban jobs (p. 145). Given these structural constraints, cultural coping mechanisms emerge to help understand and enable life in poor neighborhoods. Wilson convincingly argues that both structural and cultural factors have autonomous effects and reproduce poverty over generations, with cumulative neighborhood effects playing an underappreciated and important role.

Concrete examples support for his model of social reproduction. Using black males and poor black families, Wilson examines evidence on several cultural explanations for racial inequality. While evidence is mixed for countercultures, such as a "cool-pose culture" and subcultures of defeatism and resistance, there is evidence of a culture of distrust and strong individualism, which hinders development and use of informal job networks among low-income blacks. In terms of the poor black family, the argument that the legacy of slavery causes marital devaluation is not empirically supported. Some research suggests that women of all races respond similarly to urban poverty. Wilson suggests this is likely true, but African American women may have particular views of family due to racial oppression.

In sum, Wilson argues that "culture *mediates* the impact of structural forces" (p. 133). Both structure and culture interact to reproduce poverty and segregation. The applicability of his thesis to the reproduction of poverty among other groups makes it even more convincing. For example, poor rural residents are constrained by both structure and culture; job opportunities, geographic isolation, and transportation limit mobility and cultural values (strong family ties, collective identity, strong boundaries) developing from that structural isolation hinder social integration even if structural factors could be overcome.

While *More Than Just Race* is a valuable contribution to understanding urban poverty, it does not completely identify the indirect effect of structure through culture. Emphasis on

the causal role of culture tends to neglect the cultural bias generated by structural inequality. Culture is made to matter through structure. For example, those with power and money have more say in the knowledge and values expected in schools, putting the poor at a disadvantage. Political inequality ensures legal cultural bias. Inequality builds cultural bias into institutions, which predetermines culture as an important factor in reproducing inequality. In other words, political and structural inequalities generate cultural inequalities in part through institutions; structure makes culture matter and makes it an important mode of maintaining power.

*More Than Just Race* suggests important research initiatives. For example, what is the concrete relationship between structure and culture? How do examples of structural inequality generate cultural differences? How do resulting cultural differences reproduce inequality and how might institutions reduce their cultural biases? Wilson has opened the door to a variety of new and important questions.

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