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Book Review: The Declining Significance of Race

Gregory S. Kears

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Books

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The Declining Significance of Race

By William J. Wilson
University of Chicago Press
\$12.50

Reviewed by Gregory S. Kearse

Two years ago, William Julius Wilson, a Black psychologist at the University of Chicago, produced an ambitious and controversial thesis, the central theme of which suggests that race is a declining factor in determining the life chances of Blacks in America.

It is ambitious in that the author, in less than 200 pages, attempts to reduce the complex sociology of race relations in the United States in the context of an historical perspective to explain the limitations of Black privilege and power. The controversy stems from the arguments of educators, other sociologists, scholars and social architects who claim that race, at best, is an *inclining* factor in determining the life chances of Black people.

The most glaring weakness of this book, second only to the highly tenuous assumption on which it is based, is that Wilson never shows or proves how race, in fact, is a *declining* factor. Interestingly, every chapter seems to be an apology for his rather lofty position. From the preface to the last and seventh chapter, Wilson admits that race relations are complex, and that no one factor is independent of the other. Yet he goes through a considerable publishing expense—and in the opinion of his many critics, an expense of professional integrity, to suggest that *class* is more significant a factor in determining how Blacks survive in America.

What Wilson's book is, then, is a rather tediously annotated and redundant statement that race relations in the United States is and has historically been complex. He seems to take particular pride and pain in justifying the

self-evident, and goes through considerable mental gymnastics to anticipate his critics at the expense of an otherwise intriguing thesis.

As a relevant aside, the new wave of neo-conservatives (mostly white, male Jewish intellectuals) look upon Wilson as a minor deity with the new panacea. They would prefer that government not get involved in correcting social ills for any segment of society and Wilson, in the final analysis, suggests a return to the "good old days" when government paid little attention and offered little help to the plight of the nation's poor minorities.

Further, he writes: "... the income discrepancies between black and white workers is basically a reflection of differences in seniority."

The question to Wilson is this: On what basis is that seniority founded? Unless one is suffering from blindness, or unless one has a profoundly uncritical reading of history, the answer is clear. The Black man has little to do with seniority because he has been systematically denied entrance into the educational outlets and also the job markets, both of which would ensure a certain degree of access into the American mainstream. Wilson does concede, however, in a rare moment of clarity, that in a "racist society the economic class position of individual minorities is heavily determined by race."

All that needs to be done, therefore, is to show that America is entrenched in a racist ideology in order to refute the book.

The *Bakke* decision (which Wilson curiously omits) and *Weber*, this nation's more recent excursion into supreme judicial folly, are race issues—not class issues. Both cases resulted from *white* reaction to affirmative action for *Blacks* in arenas which had traditionally excluded Blacks.

Wilson need not follow sports to know that professional athletes are generally college graduates, well-paid and upper-class citizens in this society. But the attendance record at New York's Madison Square Garden has declined significantly since the Knickerbockers became an all-Black team. In several independent polls, white fans have said that they would not attend a basketball game if there were no white players. Even in the sports arena, class has very little to do with who plays and who attends.

For the Black man in America, race is *ipso facto* the issue. Historically, his color has determined his place in society, whether it be on the cotton plantations, or in segregated units of the armed services. Slavemongers did not travel and invest small fortunes in Europeans, but they did invest in Africans. Strip a man of all clothing and the quality that is most obvious is his *race*, not his class.

Wilson seems to suffer from a severe case of tunnel vision, for in his rather myopic analysis he does not even cite the Kerner Commission report which had clearly noted that America is moving toward two societies, one Black and the other white. This obvious omission is a mockery of scholarship. It takes no genius or particular sensitivity to recognize present day realities: Blacks are disproportionately represented in higher education; they and other minorities are incarcerated at alarmingly disproportionate rates in America's jails; Blacks are grossly unemployed and underemployed as compared to whites with equal or similar qualifications; they make up an insignificant percentage of elected officials; they make up a miniscule proportion of the professions (with Howard University and several other predominantly Black colleges graduating a large portion of these); they have little to do with the decision-making process in today's mass communications outlets;

they are depicted on television and in the movies (when they find work at all) in an abnormal number of "clown" roels; *ad infinitum*. Blacks, Blacks, Blacks.

In order for Wilson's thesis to have any degree of credibility, he would have to at least prove that class, and not race, affected the above statistics. In this country, the issue has always been race, and there are no clear signs of change. Race, if anything, becomes an *increasing* factor in light of this nation's sleepy-eyed awakening to affirmative action and other measures designed to correct past acts of racial discrimination.

Unquestionably, the three most vital areas of preoccupation in America today are: racism, classism, and sexism. With the possible exception of sexism, there is no sign that any of these areas is declining in significance. Perhaps Wilson should have focussed his thesis on the declining significance of sex. And even in that instance, the Black woman is shown in statistic after statistic to be relegated to the lower rungs of the economic, social, educational and political spectrums.

Facts are obstinate things, for they are stubborn and don't quit. Yet it is unclear why Wilson chose to ignore the facts.

The book's second premise is even more specious. Wilson suggests that there is a widening gap between the Black classes and that these groups—the Black middle class and the Black lower classes—are losing touch. One remarkable case leaps to mind immediately to refute the notion. Recently, Birmingham, Alabama elected its first Black mayor. On the surface, that would seem to support Wilson's first hypothesis of the declining significance of race. In fact, it refutes both in light of how the Black and white blocs marked their ballots: About 94% of the Blacks voted

for the Balck candidate, while better than 96% of the whites voted for the white candidtate. This is clearly a racially-polarized situation. What ultimately gave the Black candidate the election was a more than 74% Black voter turnout as compared to a 64% white turnout.

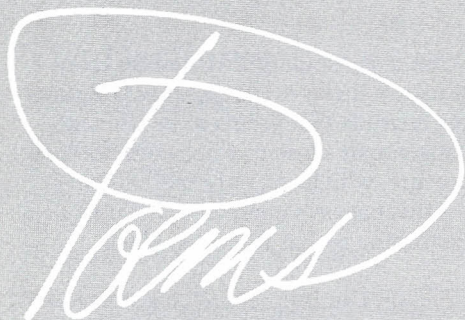
Further, Richard Arrington, the winner, is a Ph.D., which puts him in the upper class stratum. Yet, the majority of the Black voters in Birmingham are relegated in what would be considered to be the lower or impoverished classes. According to Wilson's thesis, there would be an automatic split between Arrington and this core of voters. That is clearly not the case in Birmingham.

What Wilson overlooks is the stronger bond of history and the thread of unity that class distinction cannot erase in the Black psyche. Despite the changed times, the essential stumbling block to Black progress has been the white power structure. In case after case, where Black elected officialdom is on the rise, there seems, in fact, to be a stronger bond between the Black classes!

Indeed America has come a long way in its 200-year history. Yet it is almost ironic that during this nation's bicentennial celebration a Black official was attacked by an angry white mob with the American flag in Boston, Massachusetts. It is sad that we have not come far enough away from what happened more than a decade ago in Birmingham in a small church in which four little Black girls were murdered by a racist bomb. Greensboro, North Carolina, where a thriving nest of the Ku Klux Klan shot and killed at least four protesters in 1979 is an outrage. The Wilmington 10 case was an outrage. The assassination of King was an outrage. Redlining by mortgage bankers is an outrage. One could go on for pages citing the racial quality of life in America.

What is particularly frightening about Wilson's thesis is that it reflects a growing attitude that seems to be shifting dangerously close to a neo-conservative posture, which can only spell disaster for this nation's oppressed. What is disturbing is that Wilson is Black. □

The reviewer is an editor with the Howard University Press.



Your People Believe In Majic

They want the urban jungle swept
 clean.
 They want spirited songs when out the
 cage windows we lean.
 They want smiles on sad faces – smiles
 that beam.
 They want us to celebrate the denial of
 the dream.
 They want joy out of what is trajic –
 Your people believe in majic!

Wilma D. Perry
 Silver Spring, Md.

As It All Began

In the beginning
 there was
 some earth, some air,
 some water
 The beginning really began
 with a man?
 a woman?
 a child?
 Ask the animals
 it really began with
 them.
 Grab a fish
 by the tail
 and glide
 through the sea –
 in transit
 ask him about
 the beginning
 it really began
 with him.

Rosalee Terry
 Alexandria, Va.
 Published by Digital Howard @ Howard University,

Love

Love is extremely powerful,
 it can be described as a force.
 It can only survive when
 it has a foundation or source.
 Love is the only force capable of
 turning an enemy into a friend.
 It's installed in you when you're born
 and it's existent in the end.
 To meet hate with hate intensifies
 the hatred already present.
 But, to meet hate with love reduces
 the hater to a peasant.
 The hardhearted person is too cold
 to feel affection for another.
 And they are too self-centered to
 share joy and sorrow with others.
 Some are so in love,
 they seek no love in return.
 But a relationship only survives,
 when both are truly concerned.
 It's frightening to see someone,
 tough-minded as a perpetual winter,
 for it is not long after when
 bitterness begins to enter.
 Some are fearful of love because of
 results it may bring;
 But they will unconsciously search for
 someone or something in which to cling.
 Love is very precious, so be careful
 of those you give it to.
 However you may spend love,
 the price will be paid by you.
 A love affair is on its deathbed
 when neither person leads or follows.
 Because equality is essential,
 and without it love is hollow.

Iley Brown
 Howard University

Happiness

If you must economize
 Let it be more, or less,
 On food, Clothes, just anything
 But not on happiness.
 Don't sacrifice happiness
 For anything on earth
 For if it is denied you
 Life is of little worth.
 Let nothing stand in the way,
 Remember this one fact,
 Happiness that's lost today
 Never again comes back.
 Economize on worry,
 Trouble, sorrow and strife
 But get all the happiness
 That you can out of life.

Rachel Bratton
 Washington, D. C.

Have You Heard of America

Have you heard of America, No answer
 do I receive
 My voice so faint to the ocean that's
 echoed by the sea.
 Daily to this bank, with only my
 question, I come
 I feel sometimes silly, sometimes dumb
 Have you heard of America, where the
 eagle braves the sky.
 Where backs turn and doors slam in
 hope that opportunity
 Passes them by.
 Have you heard of America, I wonder
 how it would be
 With man so just, and man so free
 With laws to protect his liberty.
 Might this be foolish or unwise
 But will I visit there before I die?
 The Home of the brave and land of the
 free
 That has become an obsession with me
 Have you heard of America, a strange
 voice answers me
 I've seen no sails, I've heard no oars,
 What business could you have with me.
 I've heard of America, and America has
 heard of thee
 God bless America my country 'tis of
 thee
 You heard no oars, you saw no sails,
 Come
 Take this trip with me. You are welcome
 aboard my ship
 Whose sails you did not see.
 You say that Kings and Queens await us
 And welcome us aboard. What about
 America
 Tell me, I want to hear more. America
 is beautiful
 America you will like, come now
 aboard ship, we set sail tonight.
 America has great need of you to soothe
 her growing pains
 How will you introduce me, I give you
 not my name
 Need you not more comfort than your
 bracelets and your chains
 Have you heard of America, I wonder
 how it would be
 With man so just, and man so free
 With laws to protect his liberty
 Might this be foolish or unwise
 But will I visit there before I die?
 The home of the brave, and land of the
 free
 That once was an obsession with me.

Cleveland Christmas
 Englewood, N.J.

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