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## Book Review: The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy by William Julius Wilson

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# Book Review

by  
James Jennings



**The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy** by William Julius Wilson, University of Chicago Press, 245 pp., \$19.95.

William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* represents the debate of the last 10 to 20 years about race, poverty, and public policy. Part of Wilson's rationale for the book is the belief that conservative policy analysts and ideologues have gained the upper hand in presenting their case about black urban poverty. He hopes to provide a framework of liberal analysis that will allow a better understanding of the causes of the intensifying black poverty.

Wilson presents several powerful arguments and supporting data that debunk the claims of some conservative social policy analysts regarding urban poverty and race. The book also makes significant contributions to the state of knowledge regarding race, poverty, and public policy. But despite the achievements of the book, Wilson is limited by his assumption that debates about urban poverty and race must be confined between liberals and conservatives.

The author amasses impressive evidence that the major cause of growing poverty and pathology in the black community is the increasing joblessness of black males, as well as the declining number of black males available to support families. He writes:

. . . contrary to popular opinion, there is little evidence to provide a strong case for welfare as the primary cause of family breakups, female-headed households, and out-of-wedlock births . . . the evidence for the influence of male job-

lessness is much more persuasive . . . we argue that both the black delay in marriage and the lower rate of remarriage, each of which is associated with high percentages of out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households, can be directly tied to the labor-market status of black males. As we have documented, black women, especially young black women, are facing a shrinking pool of "marriageable" (i.e., economically stable) men.

## Social Isolation

The well-documented breakup of the black family has occurred under a context of "social isolation," and not a "culture of poverty" as some liberals-turned-conservatives contend. While the latter concept emphasizes individual and group attitudes as well as a social and psychological pathology, the former emphasizes "the class transformation of the inner city, including the growing concentration of poverty in the inner-city neighborhoods."

This transformation, in Wilson's view, cannot be understood without considering the effects of fundamental changes in the urban economy on the lower-income minorities. Wilson's concept of social isolation is much more comprehensive and useful than the culture-of-poverty thesis, which presumes the social system to be neutral in its effects on individuals and groups despite their different relative economic, cultural, and political positions.

Wilson boldly calls for a comprehensive public policy to address black poverty that will "require a radicalism that neither Democratic nor Republican

parties have as yet been realistic enough to propose.” In his final chapter, Wilson presents his public policy proposals. These include programs responding not to a culture of poverty, but rather to those social and economic forces that have produced the truly disadvantaged and the pathology associated with this status. Wilson calls for job training programs, balanced economic growth, and full employment.

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### De-emphasizing Race

Despite Wilson’s contributions to debates of urban poverty and race, several weaknesses remain in *The Truly Disadvantaged*. He tends to de-emphasize the role of race in American society. It is one thing to show that broad economic forces and demography should be the major targets of a program for social change aimed at benefitting blacks, rather than job discrimination on the basis of race; it is quite another thing to analyze social situations involving blacks as if race were no longer significant.

While many intellectuals, both black and white, would agree with Wilson that genuine social change must address society’s fundamental economic and technological dynamics, rather than discrimination per se, many would see the denial of a racial reality in America as unfounded, to say the least. A report issued by the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal, for example, documented more than 2,900 cases of “hate violence” ranging from vandalism to murder between 1980 and 1986.

According to some accounts the problem of racial violence has been increasing. This has led the U.S. Congress to begin investigating racial violence under the auspices of its Judiciary Committee’s subcommittee on criminal justice. Wilson correctly points out that problems of poverty, crime, and family destabilization reflect broad forces of “societal disorganization” rather than merely racism or job discrimination.

Wilson seems to be moving toward a class analysis of the social ills that he is studying. But this does not negate nor run contrary to the fact of an existing racial hierarchy, which helps maintain the status quo. Wilson’s implied dismissal of episodes like Howard Beach and Forsyth County and his downplaying of continuing urban de facto segregation reflects a lack of touch with the everyday reality of black Americans.

### Intellectual Diversity

Wilson’s view of the black activist sector as intellectually monolithic is also problematic. Throughout the book he makes references to “black” viewpoints without citation. It can be argued, however, that socioeconomic differences within the black community have become a major theme in the writings and speeches of black scholars and activists.

In many instances Wilson’s discussion of these viewpoints suggests an unfamiliarity with ongoing debates in the black community about such issues as urban poverty, class, and race. This is typical of the ideological blindness of many “liberal” scholars who seek to discuss or explain the positions of blacks on public issues without full knowledge of their myriad writings, speeches, or scholarship, and the spectrum of ideology in the black community. Wilson and other liberal writers may overlook this diversity because their thinking, approaches, and analyses of social issues in the black community are confined within a liberal-conservative paradigm.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of Wilson’s book is his romanticism about politics. The public policy proposals that he briefly notes would indeed have a major impact on the black underclass in some of America’s cities. He is correct in calling for solutions that would seem radical compared to solutions traditionally advocated by the two national parties. But in discussing how such a program can be implemented, the author states simplistically that the agenda “for liberal policymakers is to improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass by emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races and class backgrounds can positively relate.”

In other words, if we can somehow couch beneficial public policy for blacks in ways that either do not threaten whites or that powerful interest groups can also benefit from, we may be able to create programs to help the black underclass. This reflects Wilson’s meekness regarding class analysis. It also plays into the hands of neoconservative thinkers who would argue that liberal public policy is keeping blacks in a position of dependency. Wilson’s liberal political solution calls for black interests to be confined and limited by what powerful white groups may believe is in their best interests.

### Coalition Problems

He suggests that the problems of the truly disadvantaged may require “nonracial” solutions such as full employment, balanced economic growth, and manpower training and education. Such efforts would certainly go much further than affirmative action palliatives, but how is this transformation to be accomplished? Many of the historical and current social, cultural, and economic benefits enjoyed

by whites are due to entrenched class and race hierarchies. And while some public issues can be resolved by bringing together the needs of various social sectors, many other issues are zero-sum in nature.

Wilson also speaks of broad, reform-oriented coalitions, but such coalitions will not emerge until the truly disadvantaged organize themselves politically. Many liberal (and white "leftist") scholars seem to shy away from the need for the truly disadvantaged to organize politically. This is important not only as a coalition-building tool, but also as a way for them to begin controlling those economic and social forces transforming their neighborhoods.

The broad political coalition that Wilson calls for will not respond effectively to the needs of the

poorer sectors of the black community if these sectors are but "junior" partners. Blacks must organize themselves on the basis of enhancing the quality of life in their communities and on the basis of political equality with their potential allies in any coalition.

Wilson's book provides an excellent liberal rejoinder to the neoconservatives. Yet, despite its important contribution to ongoing public policy debates regarding race and poverty, it falls short of a complete class and racial analysis and still approaches the black urban poor as politically incompetent.

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