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# THE CHANGING, BUT NOT DECLINING, SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE

*Thomas F. Pettigrew\**

THE DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE: BLACKS AND CHANGING AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS. † By *William Julius Wilson*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1978. Pp. xii, 204. \$12.50.

White America has always needed to repress its knowledge of injustice to black America, to believe that the enslaved and the segregated were somehow happy and well treated. Today this need expresses itself in the dominant racial myth that racial problems were basically solved during the 1960s, and thus that there is no continuing necessity for such measures as affirmative action programs and metropolitan approaches to public school desegregation.

With this myth abroad, anything that even superficially appears to support it is seized upon and cited widely as further "proof." It is this situation, I believe, that has brought Professor Wilson's modest sociological work immediate attention and caused law reviews throughout the country to take unusual interest in it. For after all, if even a respected black sociologist at the University of Chicago thinks race is declining in significance, then, perhaps, these prevalent beliefs are based on solid fact.

So let me come to the point at once. First, the book's thesis is considerably more differentiated than its title implies. William Wilson does not make these fashionable arguments; in fact, I am certain he would repudiate them forcefully. Second, the main conclusion implied in the title, however tangentially related to today's mythology it may be, is not in my view substantiated in the book or widely shared by other specialists in American race relations. Third, the volume does focus on a major trend in black America today that specialists agree exists—namely, a growing schism between the trained, who have increasing opportunities, and the untrained, who have decreasing opportunities. This trend is broad and serious, and it has numerous implications for civil rights law.

Turning to the volume itself, three facets of it must be considered in order to evaluate it: (1) its analysis of black-white

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† Professor Pettigrew will be publishing another review of this book in the January 1980 issue of *Contemporary Sociology*.—Ed.

relations throughout American history; (2) its intimations of a theoretical alternative to "orthodox Marxist" and split labor-market theory; and (3) its conclusion that the significance of race is now declining.

(1). The author divides American race relations into three historical stages—the *preindustrial* ("the period of *plantation economy and racial-caste oppression*" extending to the Civil War), the *industrial* ("the period of *industrial expansion, class conflict, and racial oppression*" extending from the Civil War to the New Deal), and the *modern industrial* ("the period of *progressive transition from racial . . . to class inequalities*" extending from World War II to the present). The book then attempts to demonstrate that each stage's unique form of racial interaction was shaped by its distinctive economy and polity.

Such a thesis is hardly ground-breaking. And since *The Declining Significance of Race* is barely 50,000 words with considerable repetition, the historical review is necessarily highly selective and a bit superficial at points. For example, it is repeatedly asserted that Jim Crow segregation was legalized at the turn of the century at the behest of the South's white lower class alone (pp. 17, 56-57, 146). This statement fits Wilson's simplified scheme of economic determinism, but it ignores the highly mixed evidence presented by sociological and historical sources. In some states, such as Virginia, the elite was largely responsible, and in others it was deeply implicated. Nonetheless, Wilson presents a brief overview of American racial history that is provocative and engaging, if not novel and definitive. But its purpose is more ambitious, for it is proposing a new theoretical perspective.

(2). Wilson briefly outlines two economic class theories of race relations. "Orthodox Marxists" are said to view racial conflict as a "mask for privilege" that conceals the capitalists' efforts to divide workers and exploit minorities. Edna Bonacich's split labor-market theory is cited in opposition to the Marxist position. Instead of associating racial stratification with capitalist manipulations, Bonacich associates it with the higher-paid, white working class that endeavors to exclude the lower-paid, black working class. Wilson then tests out these rival predictions in his historical descriptions.

Some eras are regarded as consistent with Marxist contentions—slavery in the antebellum South and the short-lived Black Codes immediately following the Civil War. Others appear consistent with split labor-market ideas—racial stratification in the late-antebellum North and the postbellum South. But neither

theory, Wilson contends, can account for all of these key eras, and neither is relevant to the present modern industrial stage. Both theories fail because they do not focus on the constraints imposed by the particular systems of production in each region and period. And they shed little light on the present period because they do not focus sufficiently on the polity.

One criticism of Wilson's argument is that it attacks incomplete forms of these class theories. Marxists *have* provided explanations for the rise of Jim Crow legislation. Wilson may not find such explanations persuasive, but his abbreviated discussion does not consider them.

A deeper criticism, however, is that the book fails to define an alternative. It is interesting to argue the central importance of particular systems of economic production; but, without an explicit general statement tying this argument together with testable predictions, no theory is being offered. The author realizes this weakness, for he writes in a footnote:

Of course, for our purposes, it would be desirable to develop a more comprehensive theory that systematically integrates propositions concerning the role of the system of production with propositions drawn from the economic class theories. Although I do not attempt such an ambitious project in this book, I do believe that my theoretical arguments have sufficient scope to deal with a variety of historical situations and constitute at least an implicit theory of social change and race relations. [Pp. 164-65]

But it is precisely this "ambitious project" that would have made this work a major contribution.

(3). As the attention-provoking title suggests, Wilson concludes his volume by maintaining that "class has become more important than race in determining black life-chances in the modern industrial period" (p. 150). A segmented labor market leads to shrinking opportunities for poorly trained blacks and "unprecedented job opportunities in the growing government and corporate sectors" for well-trained blacks. And, Wilson reasons, this increasing importance of class must signify the decreasing importance of race.

The rapidly increasing stratification within the black world has long been recognized. President Lyndon Johnson made this phenomenon the basis of his famous 1965 address to Howard University (which, ironically, was written in part by the present junior senator from New York State). The point was formalized by the economist Andrew Brimmer in the 1966 edition of *The*

*American Negro Reference Book*.<sup>1</sup> Brimmer, later a Governor of the Federal Reserve Board, showed that income was increasingly becoming more maldistributed among non-white than white families. Neither these early uses nor later economic critiques of the idea are cited by Wilson, though reference is made to two later unpublished papers on the subject by Brimmer.

What *is* new, however, is the notion that this widening stratification within black America somehow necessarily signals the declining significance of race. None of the many writers who have drawn attention to the former phenomenon ever advanced this conclusion. Certainly, these observers view the trend as indicating the *changing* significance of race. But neither the phenomenon itself nor the data provided in the book reveal any decline in the importance of race as such. Indeed, only two of the volume's fifteen tables are relevant, for they combine class and race effects on unemployment (Table 11) and on whether children live with their own parents (Table 15). These tables show strong main effects for both the class and race variables, moderate interactions between the two variables, and no evidence whatsoever of "the declining significance of race."

The fallacy seems to lie in the author's belief that an increase in the predictive power of one set of variables (class) necessitates a decrease in the predictive power of another set (race). Others interpret these same data to mean that, while social class *is* increasing as an indicator for economic outcomes, the race and class interaction terms are also increasing and that race persists as an important indicator. Alas, it would be a startling and positive mark of the nation's racial progress were Wilson correct. But the black poor are far worse off than the white poor, and the black middle class still has a long way to catch up with the white middle class in wealth and economic security. Black median family income is not closing the gap with white median family income despite the growing disparity within black America.

To be sure, Wilson hedges on his conclusion. He admits that it applies only to the economic sphere (though, unfortunately, this is not indicated in the sweeping title). He is fully aware that white resistance continues to rage against residential integration, public school desegregation, and black control of central cities—all signs of "*the unyielding importance of race in America*" (p. 152, emphasis added). But these remaining "antagonisms,"

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1. Brimmer, *The Negro in the National Economy*, in *THE AMERICAN NEGRO REFERENCE BOOK* 251, 267 (J. Davis ed. 1966).

he insists, are far less crucial historically and individually for access to opportunities than economic antagonism is. This counter-argument assumes the relative independence of economics from the "sociopolitical" sectors of life—a completely unwarranted assumption in the light of the social science research literature in general and the racial discrimination research literature in particular. The author himself implies these connections exist when he stresses the economic consequences of the current concentration of blacks in declining core cities.

Consequently, I believe the chief conclusion of this volume—the declining significance of race—to be premature at best, dangerously wrong at worst. Preferable to the present volume, then, would have been a book entitled "The *Changing* Significance of Race" that spelled out the author's theoretical ideas in detail. And such a volume could have helped to communicate more widely the serious implications of present social class trends for the future of American race relations. Briefly, then, allow me to close this review by turning from the book itself in order to sketch out these trends and suggest some of the legal implications.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s *did* make a fundamental difference in the lives of younger, educated blacks, but it achieved only modest gains for older, less-educated blacks. The Movement's goals were generally status and dignity for the black middle class rather than bread and butter for the black working class.

The black middle class has markedly expanded in recent years. If one adopts a rough definition of middle-class status in terms of employment, education, and real income, then about two-fifths of all blacks are now "middle class," contrasted with only one-twentieth of all blacks in 1940 and about two-thirds of all whites at present. Hence, thirty-eight percent of the employed blacks in 1974 were either in white-collar or skilled blue-collar occupations; sixty-four percent of the employed whites had such occupations. The 1970 percentages of adult blacks and whites who were high school graduates were thirty-eight and sixty-five. Likewise, thirty-eight percent of the black families had incomes over \$10,000 during 1974 compared to sixty-seven percent of the white families.

Given this roughly eightfold proportional growth in the black middle class combined with almost a doubling of the black population since 1940, it is safe to assume that over ninety percent of the black families of middle-class status today are first-

generation middle class. And like other first-generation middle-class families, they are typically anxious to consolidate their newly gained status and pass it on to their children.

The rapid growth of the black middle class raises a methodological point for comparative racial research. Social scientists often deceive themselves and others both inside and outside of courtrooms into thinking that they have "controlled" for socioeconomic status across race by equating solely for present education, occupation, and/or income, without checking on wealth and recentness of status. Other implications are political. Militant black ideology today emphasizes group unity, precisely because unity is becoming more difficult to achieve as the growing middle class acquires interests that conflict with those of poor blacks. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was probably the last black national leader who could appeal to a wide spectrum of black America.

A further effect of this trend involves white Americans. Black poverty is largely beyond the purview of most whites. But the growing black middle class, with its new jobs in formerly all-white settings, is highly conspicuous to whites. This differential association process lends visible support to the myth that the racial problems of the country were solved during the civil rights era of the 1960s. This process is furthered by the growing trend of the two black Americas to live apart. Younger, educated black families are beginning to live in the suburbs as well as continuing the older black middle-class pattern of living on the outer boundaries of the ghetto. The poorly educated and older families, however, are largely still part of the central black areas in the core cities. This relationship is imperfect, to be sure; some poor blacks in such places as East St. Louis are recorded as "suburban," and most middle-class blacks still reside in the central cities. But as both of these processes continue, a geographical as well as socioeconomic distance is likely to develop between the two status poles of the black world. Note, too, how this housing process mirrors the economic conditions described earlier. Most of the increasing suburbanization of black Americans is not taking the form of salt-and-pepper, racially mixed living. Indices of racial housing segregation in urban America are not improving significantly. So while there is a sharply changing picture of black housing, race as such remains crucial while class also becomes crucial.

These trends obviously have both positive and negative features. Black America is belatedly becoming as socially stratified as many other ethnic communities. Life-chances and choices are at last expanding for at least educated, young, black citizens. But

when the middle-class leadership for black communities in core cities departs, a dangerous political vacuum is created. And these trends reveal that, while the nation has the capacity to enlarge the black middle class, it has yet to demonstrate a comparable capacity to combat black poverty effectively. Wilson cites in his book many of the structural and human factors that bid to continue to hold the black poor down. He could have also mentioned the operation of the law.

The fourteenth amendment has served black and other minority citizens well over the past three decades. But there is no similar amendment for the poor. Moreover, as race and class increasingly fuse at the root of many of our national problems, the operation of the fourteenth amendment may well become increasingly less certain. Just as the white public's willingness to support meaningful racial change subsides because of differential association with the "successes" of the black middle class, and just as policy-makers have begun to lose their way in the thicket of race and class interacting, so, too, are Supreme Court Justices losing the clear vision of the Warren Court. The publicized *Bakke*<sup>2</sup> case is only one example—though it is a critical one, since affirmative action programs have been crucial in the rise of the black middle class in recent years. More important to the black poor was the denial of a metropolitan remedy for Detroit's racially segregated public schools in *Milliken v. Bradley*.<sup>3</sup> One remarkable phrase in Justice Potter Stewart's opinion highlights the confusion wrought by our more complicated racial scene of the 1970s. He commented that Detroit's "predominantly Negro school population" is "caused by *unknown and perhaps unknowable factors* such as immigration, birth rates, economic changes, or cumulative acts of private racial fears."<sup>4</sup> This confused "social theory," untouched by the vast and solid social science evidence on the known and quite knowable operation of blatant racial discrimination in housing, reflects a more general problem in informed thinking in America today both on and off the bench.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, *The Declining Significance of Race* will not dispel this confusion; it may even add to it. But the question now

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2. *Regents of Univ. of Cal. v. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978).

3. 418 U.S. 717 (1974).

4. 418 U.S. at 756 n. 2 (Stewart, J., concurring) (emphasis added).

5. See Pettigrew, *A Sociological View of the Post-Bradley Era*, 21 WAYNE L. REV. 813 (1975); Taylor, *The Supreme Court and Urban Reality: A Tactical Analysis of Milliken v. Bradley*, 21 WAYNE L. REV. 751 (1975).

is whether American law can effectively secure a handle on this new reality of race and social class intertwined, of a black poor that is doubly barred from the full exercise of its rights. The *Bakke* and *Bradley* decisions are not reassuring in this regard. Even more critical for the key economic issues of the black poor, however, will be the seniority-versus-affirmative-action cases involving white and black workers that are now winding their way to the Supreme Court.