

COMMONWEAL

THE RESEGREGATION OF AMERICA

PROMISE & THE UNDERCLASS

Jim Sleeper on 'The Truly Disadvantaged' & 'Plural but Equal'

For lots of compelling historical and ideological reasons, most of American society — our popular culture, formal government, electoral politics, and media — have never been very straightforward on the subject of social class.

Our popular and official understanding has come down to something like this: there may be dramatic, even intolerable disparities of income and opportunity in America, but there is also a saving grace: the sheer dynamism and fluidity of our market economy, democratic polity, and open culture insure that no specific individual or group need be trapped at the bottom of the social scale. Low birth and bad luck are formidable obstacles, but less decisive in America than anywhere else. Any family may go "from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves" in three or four generations as fortunes are won, lost, and won again. Individual capacity and our protean economy reinforce each other, creating a kind of permanent revolution; each generation of Americans, from the lowliest immigrants to scions of great wealth, must be sent out onto its playing fields and trained for its rigors. No matter which players win or lose, society as a whole reaps the rewards of their strivings.

But the permanent revolution has had a permanent exception — blacks, who were written as such right into the Constitution by its framers. It isn't surprising that the Communists of the 1930s and forties, anxious to discredit this American fantasy of a society without permanent classes and eager to sow a different sort of revolution whose goal was classlessness itself, championed (and, to their credit, practiced) racial integration. For the Communists, of course, weaving the black thread right into the center of the social fabric was really a way to unravel the fabric itself, exposing its contradictions and lies: this society was not, and under capitalism could not be, a fount of endless opportunity; it had to marginalize some portion of its population, black or otherwise; it had to violate its own stated creed. With blacks visible

and insistent, Americans wouldn't be able to delude themselves about that any longer.

Liberals welcomed the challenge, confident that the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth could offer opportunity to all. All that was needed was some collective action to lift the bottom of the social scale in order to facilitate the old game of opportunity on terms more open and fair than before. Indeed, the New-Deal, wartime, and Cold-War economies outflanked the radical left for more than forty years.

But a catch in the liberal dispensation has caught up with it: the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth has become an increasingly interdependent part of a larger capitalist world economy that has no stake in America's resolution of its own, comparatively minor inequities. If the Communists earlier failed to win Americans to their vision of inevitable confrontation and complete social reconstruction, liberals seem now to



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have failed in their promise of energetic accommodation and adjustment based on an ever-expanding, ever more balanced economy. Expanding the economy might still be; balanced and controlled by Americans it is not; and unskilled, low-skilled, and blue-collar workers, along with unemployed people, categories including most blacks, are the losers.

For them, the default of the liberal promise is all the more embittering for the fanfare with which that promise was affirmed by the War on Poverty and the Great Society of the 1960s. At the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King characterized constitutional guarantees of liberty and the pursuit of happiness as a kind of "promissory note" which blacks had finally come to cash. "We refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt," he added, putting liberals on the line. Twenty-five years later, in the very term "underclass," the old left's divisive notion of social class seems to have reasserted itself in American life with a kind of spectral vengeance, haunting white liberal and black integrationist affirmations of the equal opportunity myth.

As usual, though, the economy itself and its changing class structures escape serious scrutiny in the public debate. Traditional liberals cling to the faith that the economy can be variably taxed, regulated, and subsidized in order to forestall destitution in some quarters and buy social peace in others. In so doing, they hand easy targets to conservatives like George Gilder, Charles Murray, and Lawrence Mead, who also refuse to challenge the nature of the economy; instead, as liberal tinkering fails, these conservatives charge liberals with coddling the poor into chronic dependency and distorting capitalism through irresponsible impositions which also undermine the culture of individual merit and initiative. In other words, unemployment and its ravages are the liberals' fault, not the economy's.

Stung, some liberals have edged toward the right, blaming the left and even the underclass itself for the intractable new poverty. Implicitly, at least — and, I would suggest, irresponsibly — they acquiesce in the conservative drive for a restoration of the classical liberal (i.e., nineteenth-century) opportunity society so well established in American myth, with emphasis (perhaps also worthy of the nineteenth century) on the social rehabilitation of those who, despite liberals' best efforts to expand opportunity, have declined to suit up and come out on the field. In this view, advanced, for example, by Nicholas Lemann in a two-part *Atlantic* article, "The Origins of the Underclass," new programs ought to push and pull minority ghetto dwellers out of their debilitating isolation from the rest of society in order to socialize them to work and responsibility. The rest of society's stake in creating and maintaining ghettos is scarcely mentioned, let alone examined.

Some neoliberals do candidly acknowledge that changing structures of opportunity throughout the society are perverting middle- and upper-class cultures as well as the culture of the underclass. Many of the more fortunate among us also weasel out of the risks and rigors of the opportunity game in favor of elaborate protections that only harden class lines and deepen ghetto isolation, even amid progress against overt racial dis-

crimination. But, for the most part, these considerations are muted; the question of class rears its head only in preoccupation with the "underclass," which threatens the corporate capitalist consensus. No wonder King's faith in racial integration has been rejected bitterly by so many of his black legatees. No wonder a minor branch of neoconservative scholarship has dedicated itself, not to examining the new economic underpinnings of class division, but to demonstrating that King was really a tool of Communist advisors intent upon sowing such division.

This inconclusive and largely disingenuous debate has only deepened the disaffection of thoughtful blacks like Harold Cruse, Professor Emeritus of History and Afro-American Studies at the University of Michigan and author of *Plural but Equal* (William Morrow, \$22.95, 420 pp.). If white America will do almost anything but acknowledge its class divisions, why should blacks allow white liberals and the left to keep using them as stalking horses for compromised and/or hopeless agendas? Aren't both liberal pieties about racial integration and leftist dreams of progressive, interracial coalition ultimately dead ends? And, for that reason, isn't liberal and left solicitude toward blacks just another dimension of racism itself?

Despairing of conservative market solutions, liberal integrationist reforms, and leftist coalitions for social reconstruction, Cruse believes that only a deeper, more self-directed black marginality holds any hope of black dignity and power, such as it may be in an intractably divided, inhospitable society. And make no mistake: his is an intelligent man's despair. As anyone will know who has watched Louis Farrakhan's rallies and the effective demagoguery of the black attorneys for the victims of New York's awful Howard Beach assaults, Cruse speaks for a growing if not yet large number of bitterly alienated middle-class blacks. They have benefited from whatever economic and social integration liberalism in its heyday was able to provide, only to find it empty of genuine social promise. Even in "succeeding," they feel isolated, unfulfilled, and so are withdrawing into a cold, internal, often largely unspoken separatism.

Liberals who take Cruse seriously enough to be frightened by what he and other disaffected, well-educated blacks are saying may find themselves driven into the arms of William Julius Wilson. I hope so. Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (University of Chicago, \$19.95, 295 pp.) is the best effort yet to sort out the confused debate about race and class in our postwar political economy. It is a flawed book, tediously academic in style, unlikely to capture the imaginations of those enthralled by Gilder's luminous metaphors or Mead's pieties about the social obligations of the poor. But it is an invaluable midcourse correction to liberalism's wobbly march through the swamps of race and class since the waning of the early civil rights movement. And it is at the same time a potent reproof both to conservatives who would leave corporate capitalism unchallenged and to blacks who indulge separatist

fantasies of autonomy and/or flamboyant assertions of black power and black rights.

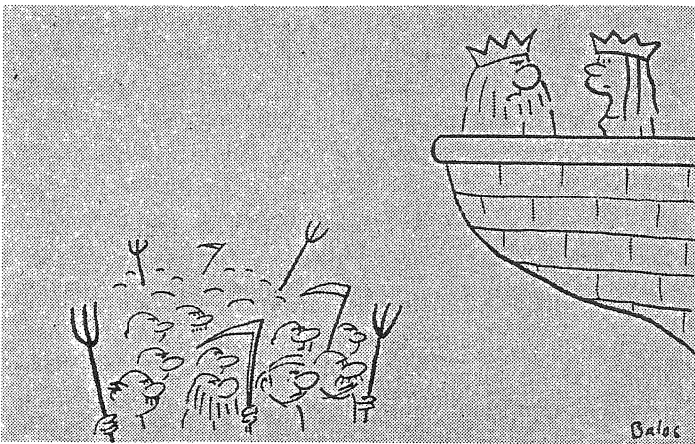
What does Wilson, a social democrat and professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, say to liberals? That neither the early civil rights movement's emphasis on individual liberties nor the later, often contradictory effort to tease "group rights" out of the Constitution is adequate to address the problems of the truly disadvantaged or confront the economy's class divisions. He reminds us how radically liberals have zigzagged across the constitutional battleground in their pursuit of justice: government, under the liberal aegis, went from insuring "that people were not formally categorized on the basis of race" to insuring that they *were* — whether or not they wanted to be or even, in some cases, needed to be. This liberal shift from equality of individual opportunity, which emphasizes a color-blind respect for a person's merits and rights beneath the skin, to equality of condition, which submerges those considerations in a color-based respect for the putative "rights" of whole racial or ethnic groups historically victimized by society, was a fateful, typically American dodging of the more fundamental issue of social class, which transcends both individuals and racial groupings.

Liberals' habitual confusion of historic discrimination with current discrimination prevents them from seeing the contradictions between these two very different emphases, Wilson claims. To their credit, liberals have done much, often heroically, to reduce current racial discrimination, only to discover

that — as Lyndon Johnson emphasized in a famous speech at Howard University — the cumulative disadvantages bequeathed to blacks by historical discrimination have kept many of them from making the most of a more open society where individual rights are protected. Liberals' consequent emphasis on "equal opportunity for historically victimized groups through a system of collective racial and ethnic entitlements" is a legitimate, if perhaps temporary, expedient in the struggle to overcome the effects of past discrimination on the basis of race.

Where liberals go wrong, according to Wilson, is in their failure to recognize that the rather crude expedient of lumping different individuals together on the basis of skin color cannot, in fact, be "temporary" in a corporate capitalist economy, with its inevitable class divisions and its marginalizing of a growing stratum of working poor and structurally unemployed people. Yet the longer the emphasis on race-based group entitlements persists, the more it actually undermines political and economic support for the truly disadvantaged. Blacks who, thanks to these very expedients, are no longer disadvantaged continue to qualify for preferments on the basis of skin color alone, while whites, who constitute two-thirds of the poor, and who are joining the ranks of the working poor as steel and auto workers are laid off, do *not* qualify, even though they *are* truly disadvantaged. The result is that the costs of even means-tested programs that *aren't* based on race, like AFDC or Medicaid, are blamed on blacks by hard-pressed,





"I got them all jobs, and now they want salaries"

moderate-income white taxpayers, who foot the bills but don't qualify for the services.

The only solution Wilson can find is a two-fold social democratic agenda whose prongs are political and economic. Politically, programs that are means-tested or targeted on the basis of race must be superseded by universal, Social Security-like programs, such as guaranteed minimum incomes and child-support allowances given to all citizens, regardless of class or race. Economically, there must be a democratic socialist reconstruction that guarantees full employment. Without social programs to which all citizens can relate personally and positively, and without burgeoning entry-level job opportunities, there will be neither political support nor the economic wherewithal to dissolve the underclass.

Where the political support for such dramatic changes will come from in a society whose people are already factionalized and clinging to their meager prerogatives within the system as it is, Wilson does not say. He leaves it to other students of society, like Robert Reich in his *Tales of the New America* (Times Books, 1987), to explore just how Americans might be persuaded to exchange outmoded, shortsighted mythologies of individual success for more compelling visions of cooperation and solidarity. But Wilson insists, rightly, I think, that unless liberals can somehow transcend themselves to embrace his solutions, they cannot hope to help the underclass or reduce the cynicism, fear, and selfishness spreading among the other classes.

Wilson's analysis rests on an important distinction which he feels liberals and conservatives alike have failed to grasp. The pathologies of an overwhelmingly minority underclass are real, all right, just as conservatives have been saying. The left-liberal attempt to pretend otherwise in the drive for race-based entitlements during the 1970s only made those conditions worse by refusing to address them. But that does *not* mean that cultural reconditioning or behavior modification holds any promise for the underclass. There is an important difference of analysis here. The conservative and neoliberal view of the "culture of poverty" holds that underclass pathol-

ogy has taken on a life of its own and has become impervious to economic incentives. Wilson argues that the pathology, while deep and powerful, is ultimately *situational* — a product of the physical *isolation and concentration* of poor blacks in ghettos, which in turn reflects not so much their own culture but the economy, politics, culture, and historic racial discrimination of the whole society — the fundamental American hypocrisy about class.

Americans *want* to reduce problems of class division and impoverishment to failures of individual initiative and of group subcultures; and the neoliberal and conservative preoccupation with rehabilitating the underclass reflects this hypocrisy as much as does the racist assumption of black inferiority. Special solicitude toward blacks is as damaging as racism itself, for it undermines political and cultural support for the universal social programs, like child support allowances and guaranteed minimum incomes, which, coupled with full employment, hold the only hope of ending black poverty and, indeed, poverty itself.

What is Wilson saying specifically to conservatives? In a sense, very little, because they are even less willing than liberals to contemplate his political and economic agenda. It is worth noting, though, that Richard Nixon and Daniel Patrick Moynihan tried to pass a guaranteed minimum income program, only to be beaten back (in part) by liberals enthralled by the language of group entitlements based on race. But the latter were not the traditional New Deal liberals, nor were Nixon and Moynihan true conservatives; perhaps the sharpening of ideological divisions in subsequent debate has clarified some issues in ways that might actually lead to more intelligent consensus. Since the corporate capitalist center of gravity will remain unmoved, however, Wilson's grounds for optimism are weak. Only if Robert Reich's new legends of social cooperation take root as the economy and society evolve will there be much hope for Wilson's agenda.

Finally, what is Wilson saying to black separatists and nationalists? He is saying that, however tempting the frustration of his own social democratic agenda may make black nationalism seem, black nationalism's political and economic programs hold even less promise. Harold Cruse argues — compellingly, on the basis of the historical record he cites — that the drive toward racial integration and assimilation represents a wrong turn taken by black leaders after the post-Reconstruction South quashed not only integration, but also the truly "separate but equal" vision which Cruse champions, in contrast to Kenneth Clark and other supporters of the *Brown* decision mandating school integration. Truly equal and separate black schools would have done more for black professionals and black pride than integration has done, Cruse argues, the more so because the society has amply demonstrated its determination and its ability to resegregate itself even in the wake of *Brown* and all that flowed from it.

Wilson does not directly address this argument, because he holds that current conditions make it moot, in two senses. Such

black separateness as we have is so intolerably disadvantaged that nothing constructive can come of it; and, for those blacks who have succeeded at least modestly, the absorptive powers of an increasingly interdependent society are irresistible, even if skewed and enormously frustrating.

I doubt that Wilson would oppose a deepening of black cultural awareness and pride, or even the informal but potent political and economic solidarity so effectively practiced by inner-city white ethnics in the past and some of the newer minority immigrant groups today. But political and economic initiatives undertaken along publicly and explicitly black lines will only undermine public support for both the existing, legitimate race-targeted programs and, more importantly, for the fundamental political and economic restructuring which alone can conquer poverty. In America today, Wilson insists, the suffering of the disadvantaged of all races — and indeed, especially of disadvantaged blacks — can be addressed only through what he calls the “hidden agenda” incorporated into universal social programs and full employment.

I think he is right, and — given liberal hypocrisy about full employment, conservative intransigence about economic planning, and growing black alienation from white America — he is courageous.