



William Julius Wilson (1987).

The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Poverty, segregation, and exclusion are serious problems characteristic of most of the world's cities. Since the mid-twentieth century, this fact has generated an intense scholarly debate on *urban segregation* that has left us with two dominant and conflicting approaches. One group, consisting mostly of conservative scholars, argue that social exclusion is essentially the result of a specific "culture of poverty", wherein the *underclass* reproduces its disadvantages in competitive labor markets through intrinsic values and cultural norms that imply a reluctance to adopt a specific work ethic. On the other hand, progressive scholars tend to argue that the marginalization of socially excluded groups is mainly explained by structural changes and public policies.

Parallel to this debate, a significant number of mainstream sociologists posit that the process of "individualization" in late capitalist societies goes hand-in-hand with a decline of class differences (Beck, 2007). The popularity of this thesis in the social sciences is, if anything, surprising. In fact, decades of serious quantitative and qualitative research indicates a strong persistence of class inequalities in key sociological variables, such as earnings, educational attainment, and neighborhood conditions (Crompton, 2010). It is in this context that the origins of urban segregation remains a critical area of research and debate with obvious policy implications.

In *The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy*, William J. Wilson made an outstanding contribution to the aforementioned debates. This book, originally published in 1987, remains an essential piece of work to this day. Mirroring the case of the 1980s, unemployment and poverty have increased dramatically in most Western societies as a result of macroeconomic dynamics, particularly among ethnic minorities and "low-skilled" workers. Today, much like three decades ago, we are witnessing an increasing tendency amongst conservative sectors to blame the most socially excluded groups (i.e. jobless people, ethnic minorities and low-income families) as the responsible parties perpetuating the so-called "culture of poverty" and "welfare dependency".

Wilson's work is a strong critique of the position taken by conservative scholars on the underclass. In *Losing Ground*, Charles Murray (1984) explicitly stated that welfare generosity was the fundamental cause of the disintegration of black families and joblessness in poor areas. In contrast, Wilson presents

us with his theory of the underclass, defined as the group of “individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment or are not members of the labor force, (...) are engaged in street crime (...), and experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency” (p. 8). Through rigorous analyses of several American cities, he shows that the cultural approach adopted by conservative scholars lacks an empirical foundation and ultimately criminalizes the truly disadvantaged.

In his attempt to uncover why the conditions of the black community deteriorated so rapidly after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Wilson argues that variations in behavior reflect differentials in group access to channels of privilege and influence. Contrary to Murray’s argument, he shows that from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s welfare benefits for households with dependent children remained almost unchanged in the U.S. However, figures of family disruption, crime rates and joblessness increased dramatically among the black community. According to Wilson, the switch from an economy that produces goods to an economy of services is the key explanation of this process, which primarily affected black and Latino families. In reality, this apparently racial “targeting” was in large part the result of an increase in the impoverishment and residential marginality of working classes.

Delving deeper into the mechanics of these dynamics, Wilson argues that the societal changes found in the social transformation of the inner city can best be explained through concepts he calls *concentration effects* and *buffer effects*. While the former “refers to the constraints and opportunities associated with living in a neighborhood in which the population is overwhelmingly socially disadvantaged”, the latter “refers to the presence of a sufficient number of working- and middle-class professional families to absorb the shock or cushion the effect of uneven economic growth and periodic recessions on inner-city neighborhoods” (p. 144). Analysis based on these concepts reveals that “the removal of higher-income families from the inner city following the Civil Rights Act made it more difficult to sustain the basic institutions in the inner city (including churches, stores, schools, recreational facilities, etc.) in the face of prolonged joblessness” (p. 144). Therefore inequality not only increased across ethnic groups, but within ethnic groups. A minority of black families moved out to middle-class neighborhoods, which in turn created greater spatial inequality within the black community.

By re-casting the problems of joblessness, poverty, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, and welfare dependency as disproportionately concentrated in the black community due to historic racial oppression, Wilson highlights racial differences in rates of social dislocation in order to clarify those problems which are common to all of the ghetto underclass. In so doing, he is able to point to the shortcomings of race-specific policies in addressing the fundamental problems of the truly disadvantaged. And while many readers may be put off by his seemingly harsh appraisal of the influence of the Black Power movements (which, he argues, were enabled by the disproportional burden placed on black Americans during the recession of the 1970s and ultimately shifted the focus of discussions of racial inequality to the terrain of racial identity), in truth Wilson’s critique of U.S. economic and societal organization is far more radical than many of the prominent inequality scholars of his time. As the author sees it, “the competitive resources developed by the advantaged minority members (...) result in their benefiting disproportionately from policies that promote the rights of *minority individuals*” (page 114). Meanwhile, a focus on *group* rights also favors the advantaged minority members, for they are likely to be disproportionately represented among the minority members most qualified for preferred positions (higher-paying jobs, college admissions, promotions, and so on).

As an alternative to these approaches, Wilson advocates a third liberal philosophy known as Fishkin's principle of *equality of life chances*. This principle posits that "if we can predict with a high degree of accuracy where individuals will end up in the competition for preferred positions in society merely by knowing their race, sex, or family background, then the conditions under which their talents and motivations have developed must be grossly unequal." (Fishkin, 1973; pp. 116-7). In keeping with this concept, the task of rectifying the problems experienced by the ghetto underclass goes far beyond addressing persistent issues of racial discrimination. Wilson instead calls for an overhaul of U.S. economic organization through universal programs of economic and social reform which highlight "macroeconomic policies to promote balanced economic growth and create a tight-labor-market situation, a nationally oriented labor-market strategy, a child support assurance program, a child care strategy, and a family allowances program" and includes means-tested and race-specific targeted programs -the latter of which would be considered secondary to the universal program (p. 154).

The theoretically well-founded and empirically rigorous analyses of the *Truly Disadvantaged* inspired later studies on racial and urban segregation (e.g. Jencks & Peterson, 1991; Massey & Denton, 1993). Admittedly, his work has also received criticism. Wacquant (2008) points out that the common usage of concepts like *underclass* and *inner city* usually stigmatizes poor communities, creating analytical categories that might obscure the real world of the ghettos in different historical moments and geographies. This question motivates new studies on the underclass. Moreover, the process of capital accumulation of the rich and dispossession of the working classes, namely neoliberal policies (Harvey, 2005), needs a more detailed focus in Wilson's work, as well as the structural problem of mass incarceration among black people in the U.S. (Wacquant, 2008). Finally, issues of hierarchy and economic organization at the level of the workplace also deserve serious consideration, especially in light of Wilson's macro-level findings.

Yet the questions begged by Wilson's work in *The Truly Disadvantaged* are largely the result of the breadth of his findings and the explanatory power of his theories. While some issues demand more consideration, the author's groundbreaking study clearly points to the urgent necessity of removing the structural holes of economic inequality in order to produce racial and social equality. What this book makes quite clear is that social scientists must understand urban and social environments in order to explain social processes. Thus, critical analytical scholars must remain active in the task of demonstrating how neoliberal policies and conservative discourses contribute to produce (and reproduce) class inequalities and social isolation.

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