Why William Julius Wilson Matters

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The study of race and poverty in the nation’s cities has been a central—if not the central—concern of sociology and other social sciences generally for at least three decades. William Julius Wilson can take a large share of the credit for this phenomenon. It is difficult to overstate the profound impact of his scholarship. Perhaps more importantly, he has the ear of people who matter—foundation executives, newspaper editors, and elected officials, including, of course, at least two presidents. What he thinks matters particularly because it influences what so many others in nonacademic worlds think. More Than Just Race extends his line of inquiry, revisiting many (and repeating some) of his earlier arguments. Whether it will have the same impact remains to be determined, but there is one dramatic change from his series of books going back at least to The Declining Significance of Race published in 1978. Wilson no longer emphasizes universalistic approaches to racial inequality. His rejection of a color-blind approach is most provocative at a time when so many are claiming we now live in a post civil rights, color-blind nation. With Obama in the White House and expectations higher in progressive policy circles than at any time in living memory, it may well be that Wilson could matter more than ever before.

Perhaps the most important feature of William Julius Wilson’s work is his challenge to conventional wisdom that relies on individualistic traits and actions to explain who gets what and why in the United States. Time and again, Wilson has demonstrated the importance of structural and contextual forces at work—some explicitly racial, others arguably with no racial animosity but yielding unequal racial outcomes—and the need for collective responses to preeminently social problems. In previous work he has called for concrete policies to respond to those structural realities: the disappearance of jobs, the need for universal healthcare, the shortage of effective schools. The agenda is far less ambitious in this book. The overriding message of More Than Just Race is the importance of “framing.” And this is its most important limitation.

Many familiar themes run throughout this book. Most salient is an ongoing commentary on the intersection of culture and structure. Wilson emphasizes the importance of taking culture and behavior seriously and chastises those who criticize such work as victim-blaming. He repeats the debate over Moynihan’s report “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” with which readers of his earlier books are quite familiar, but he is quick to assert that culture is rooted in structural realities and that structure

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trumps culture as an explanation for urban poverty, particularly in minority communities. As he concludes, “cultural arrangements reflect structural realities” (p. 117). But by structure Wilson means far more than just racial discrimination (either as intentional treatment or disparate impact). He refers to the reduced demand for low-skilled workers, globalization, free-trade policies, advancing technology, erosion of the minimum wage, and declining support for cities, among others, as structural themes. He spells out the central role of public policy as well as the actions of private actors. Most telling are comparisons between the individualistic approach in the United States and the collective approach in many European countries in defining and developing policy responses to social problems.

On occasion, Wilson sees colorblindness where color clearly matters. He refers to Katrina as a natural disaster where “devastation ... was broadly visited upon the residents of New Orleans—black and white, rich and poor, property owner and public housing tenant alike” (p. 26). But, of course, not all segments of the community were treated alike. The New Orleans neighborhoods damaged by the storm were 46% black compared to 26% in undamaged areas. Over 20% of those in damaged areas were poor compared to 15% in undamaged areas (Logan, 2006). One year later, a local citizens group survey found that 23% of blacks compared to 13% of whites reported losing a job as a result of Katrina and 13% of blacks compared to 5% of whites reported losing their health insurance. These figures reflect public policies and private practices that have concentrated poverty and nurtured racial segregation in New Orleans and virtually all other urban areas, as Wilson notes.

A central dynamic in this pattern and process of racial inequality is the failure to maintain the nation’s infrastructure, most visibly the levees in New Orleans, but also the roads, bridges, schools, sewer systems, and more in cities throughout the United States (American Society of Civil Engineers, 2005). It is the nation’s poorest communities, where racial and ethnic minorities are concentrated, that fare the worst (Bullard and Wright, 2009).

Katrina may have been a natural event but its catastrophic consequences, and the uneven impact by race and class, were hardly natural (Hartman and Squires, 2006). And the beat goes on. After the storm, St. Bernard Parish issued an ordinance requiring those renting property to only rent to “blood relatives.” (The parish was 94% white.) This was struck down as racially discriminatory in violation of the Federal Fair Housing Act. Then the parish issued a temporary moratorium on the construction of all multifamily apartments, which was also struck down as a fair housing violation; this was followed by a contempt citation for the parish’s refusal to comply with the order (Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, 2009). Katrina has not been the color-blind phenomenon that Wilson suggests. His assertion here will strike many critics of his previous work as eerily familiar.

In fact, most of More Than Just Race will be quite familiar to followers of Wilson’s work. But there is one notable departure. As he states, in the past he has put “an emphasis on policies that would directly benefit all groups, not
just people of color. My thinking was that, given American views about poverty and race, a color-blind agenda would be the most realistic way to generate the broad political support necessary to enact the required legislation. I no longer hold to this view ... So now my position has changed: in framing public policy we should not shy away from an explicit discussion of the specific issues of race and poverty” (p. 141).

Wilson’s past emphasis on universalistic approaches over race-specific remedies is what proved to be so controversial. The title of an earlier book, *The Declining Significance of Race*, captured that message presaging the heat that followed. The message in *More Than Just Race* would appear to be a sea change, but, given the salience he attributes to the framing of public and academic discourse, the change in his thinking, although notable, is not as great as a seeming rejection of his previous approach would suggest.

While calling for an explicit discussion of race and poverty, key to that discussion is the framing. Wilson endorses the approach Obama took in his March 18, 2008 speech on race in Philadelphia, when, according to Wilson, he combined “a powerful discussion of structural inequities with an emphasis on personal responsibility” (p. 143). Wilson concluded, “I feel that the perspective offered in Obama’s speech is exactly the type of framing that can result in broad support to address the problems of race and poverty” (p. 143).

Obama offered the same perspective in his July 2009 speech at the NAACP’s 100-year anniversary convention in Cincinnati when he acknowledged: “Yes, if you’re African-American, the odds of growing up amid crime and gangs are higher. Yes, if you live in a poor neighborhood, you will face challenges that someone in a wealthy suburb does not ... But that’s not a reason to get bad grades, that’s not a reason to cut class, that’s not a reason to give up on your education and drop out of school ... No one has written your destiny for you. Your destiny is in your hands and don’t you forget that.”

Personal responsibility, again, is the concluding theme of these messages.

But where is the evidence that blacks have exhibited less personal responsibility than whites? Even if this is the case, is it reasonable to conclude that such behavior accounts for any meaningful portion of persistent racial disparities in income, wealth, homeownership, education, health, incarceration rates, or anything else? Personal responsibility may be a theme that resonates with many Americans, particularly those who have not been strong civil rights supporters over the years and who have expressly rejected affirmative action. Perhaps it is necessary to echo this theme to get Congress to pay serious attention to the social policies Wilson has endorsed in his previous work. But such framing provides the opportunity for those opposed to a progressive agenda to latch on to Wilson’s (and the president’s) words about personal responsibility while dispensing with the rest of the message. From a very unscientific sample of my own reading of the media reports immediately following Obama’s NAACP address, virtually all the discussion focused on his comments regarding personal responsibility. The rest seemed lost.
Scholars cannot be held responsible entirely for how their work is used or misused. In Wilson, we have a scholar who has done more than most to elevate structural barriers into the policy discussion of race and poverty. Whether comments about personal responsibility make policies leading to progressive structural social change more acceptable or weaken the primary message and, therefore, the policy implications, remains to be seen. In any case, Wilson, as a scholar and policy advocate, will be part of the discussion.

But it is also the case that far more than the framing of an argument is required to translate an idea into actual policy, as Wilson knows well. Organizing is critical, even community organizing on occasion. Access to lobbyists and the funds to invest in those resources are essential. Even when good law is enacted, it can be undercut in the rule-making process when, again, powerful lobbyists help enforcement agencies write regulations. Good ideas and appropriately framed arguments are important, but several factors go into the formation of legislation and implementation of public policy, be it progressive, regressive, or otherwise. In previous work Wilson has, of course, offered provocative policy recommendations. That is not so much the case in *More Than Just Race*. A question that emerges is how much influence this book will have when its primary “policy” recommendation is a call for more effectively framing questions of race and poverty.

Right now, with Obama in the White House and the Democrats controlling both houses of Congress by large margins, there would appear to be a rare opportunity to concretely address the issues to which Wilson has devoted his long, distinguished career. Wilson has the ear of this president. He has written another informative and provocative book. He remains a central participant in policy and scholarly debates. William Julius Wilson matters.

REFERENCES


