



“Summary of article by William Julius Wilson: Racial Antagonisms and Race-Based Social Policy” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 5: The Political Economy of Inequality. Island Press: Washington DC, 2000. pp. 277-281

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

## **“Summary of article by William Julius Wilson: Racial Antagonisms and Race-Based Social Policy”**

Race in America is intricately tied up with social, political and economic processes which have made cities their most recent battleground. Poor African Americans are concentrated in deteriorating inner city neighborhoods from which whites and middle class blacks have fled, taking business and financial resources with them. Public services suffer as the urban tax base falls and cities lose clout in state and federal politics.

In this chapter Wilson examines policies that have exacerbated the poverty and isolation of inner city ghettos. He argues that race-based policies may ignite a conservative backlash rather than improving conditions for poor African Americans. Policies that apply to all low income people would be more politically acceptable while still helping disadvantaged African Americans who meet their need-based criteria.

### **RACIAL CONFLICT**

Race-related incidents receive a great deal of media attention which contributes to an atmosphere of fear and heightened racial tension in U.S. cities. In such an atmosphere it is easy to overlook the political, economic and social context of racial conflict. "In 1960, the nation's population was evenly divided between cities, suburbs, and rural areas. By 1990...suburbs contained nearly half of the nation's population....As cities lost population they became poorer and darker in their racial and ethnic composition." [184] The city of Chicago, for example was 63 % minority in 1990, while its suburbs were 83% white.

With declining population, cities also lost political influence. Suburbs represented 36% of the vote in the 1968 presidential election and a majority of the vote by the 1992 election. By 1980 the emerging policy agenda, New Federalism, favored suburban areas at the expense of the cities. Urban initiatives were cut back. On top of this, economic recession reduced tax revenues. Many cities faced fiscal crises which led to further service cutbacks. Taxes increased to alleviate budget deficits. As a result, cities became even less desirable places to live and the flight to the suburbs continued.

Job opportunities also moved out of the city and property values fell in older city neighborhoods. Working class whites could not sell their homes in these neighborhoods at a price that would allow them to buy new homes in the suburbs. Trapped in the cities, minorities and low income whites struggled for control of shrinking political and economic resources.

Mayoral elections in several cities have been notable for racial animosity, while battles over housing integration on Chicago's South Side and busing children to integrate public schools in Boston have become icons of America's racial malaise.

## **RACIAL-ETHNIC CONFLICTS**

Tensions between lacks African Americans and whites are complicated by large immigrant populations in many cities. Latinos, who may soon overtake African Americans as the largest minority group in the U.S., are competing with blacks in several cities over legislative redistricting, political power, and the distribution of, jobs, government contracts, and social services. Latinos interviewed in a large Chicago study expressed fear of and animosity toward African Americans, claiming that black neighborhoods are unsafe. One respondent made a clear distinction between working and non-working blacks: "The ones who work are very nice and respectable, but the ones who don't work, well, you have to hide yourselves from them." [188] Racial attitudes among Latinos are not a simple matter, however. In Miami, for example, black and white Latinos mingle freely and live in mixed neighborhoods with Haitians and other Caribbeans blacks, while native-born, English-speaking African Americans remain segregated "in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of joblessness and marred by pockets of poverty." [189]

Relationships between African Americans and Koreans are also strained. Facing poor employment prospects, many Korean immigrants opened small businesses, often in poverty-stricken black neighborhoods. Many Koreans have negative views of black people. Conflicts over quality or service and fears that Korean businesses threatened black economic prospects bred hostility. In New York boycotts of Korean businesses were the result. During the Los Angeles riots in 1992, Korean businesses suffered heavy damage.

These tensions emerged against the background of "declining real wages, increasing job displacement, and job insecurity in the highly integrated and highly technological global economy." [192] Economic insecurity encourages demagogic political leadership which incites people to blame each other rather than confront the roots of economic problems. The social consequences of joblessness are filtered through the lens of individual failure. An ideology that blames the victim justifies diminished support for programs to alleviate urban poverty and joblessness. Many white people have turned against programs they believe would benefit only minorities. Race-based strategies such as affirmative action benefit the more advantaged minority individuals without remedying the problems of disadvantaged inner-city blacks. New policies are needed which can attract a wider constituency and affect a broader population.

## **RISING INEQUALITY**

Until the early 1970s the effects of race far outweighed any effects of class among African Americans. With the success of the civil rights movement black presence increased dramatically in higher education, in professional, technical, managerial and administrative occupations and among home owners. Successful black people were finally able to pass the fruits of their success along to their children, constituting a new upwardly mobile black middle class. At the same time, the condition of disadvantaged black people deteriorated and "many dire problems - joblessness,

concentrated poverty, family breakup, and the receipt of welfare - were getting even worse between 1973 and 1980." [194] This pattern continued into the 1990s. Since the mid-1970s inequality in the U.S. has risen generally, however, income inequality increased among blacks even more dramatically than among whites. Average income for the lowest three quintiles of black families fell between 1975 and 1992 (-33% for the bottom fifth), while average income for the highest two quintiles rose (+23% for the top fifth.). Among blacks in 1992, the top fifth of families received 48.8% of family income; among whites the corresponding figure was 43.8%.

The dynamics of inequality within the black population must be understood if policies for alleviating ghetto poverty are to be effective. The civil rights movement focused on individual advancement through the elimination of discrimination and improvement of access to education, employment, voting, and public accommodations. However, "the most disadvantaged minority individuals, crippled by the cumulative effects of both race and class subjugation, disproportionately lack the resources to compete effectively in a free and open market." [196]

Black leaders began to advocate programs like affirmative action that would counteract the effects of the past. Here again, however, more-advantaged African Americans were better prepared for new opportunities - college, better jobs, promotions. Many affirmative action efforts were directed at blue collar jobs like law enforcement or craft and construction occupations; some low-income students were able to enter professional schools. But the masses of disadvantaged black people were unaffected by these initiatives. At the same time they were negatively affected by structural changes in the economy "such as the shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries, the increasing polarization of the labor market into low-wage and high-wage sectors, destabilizing innovations in technology and the relocation of manufacturing industries outside the central city." [198]

## **FEASIBLE POLICY OPTIONS**

Calls for an end to affirmative action have been met with efforts to develop affirmative action programs based on need. These efforts stem from a realization that disadvantages in income, education, family stability and the like are not solely the result of racial discrimination. "Minorities would benefit disproportionately from affirmative opportunity programs ...because they suffer disproportionately from the effects of such environments, but the problems of disadvantaged whites would be addressed as well." [198, italics in original]

Need-based affirmative action may miss some of the more subtle consequences of a history of discrimination. If need is the sole criteria for affirmative action, many middle class blacks will be excluded. They may suffer from accumulated effects of racial discrimination which operate irrespective of class, but these effects would not be addressed by a need-based affirmative action agenda. A more flexible approach, combining need and race would offer the most comprehensive set of remedies.

Reducing residential segregation is one race-based program that could improve the lives of poor African Americans. This would bring them closer to better job and educational opportunities. However, there are serious political and practical obstacles to large scale desegregation. When blacks move into a neighborhood, whites move out, with neighborhood composition often

changing quite rapidly. Restrictions on movement are undesirable in a democratic society; a more promising approach involves efforts to eliminate exclusionary zoning and to enforce the Fair Housing Act.

There is less support among white people for overtly discriminatory policies now than in the past. However, many white people associate a general disapproval of welfare recipients with a belief that blacks benefit more from state provided welfare than white people do. While whites tend to oppose programs designed to guarantee equal outcomes (e.g., preferential college admissions or employment quotas), survey research indicates that most white people support compensatory programs like targeted recruiting that improve opportunities for disadvantaged blacks. Racially neutral proposals like national health care or job training would have widespread benefits and could form the basis for a new social agenda with widespread support.