A Must Read

William Julius Wilson
More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City
(New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009)

by Alex Mikulich, Ph.D., JSRI Fellow

The demand that social science and public policy address both inner-city behavior and social structures is a key insight of William Julius Wilson’s scholarship. Too often, social scientific and policy debates create a dichotomy between culture—the beliefs, modes of decision-making, and meaning-making that pervade the inner city—and social structure—the ways larger institutions of the economy, polity, and education shape the life chances of groups and individuals. Wilson avoids this false dichotomy.

After the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, a new politics of poverty converged with a new politics of race that eventually led to the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. That law constituted the culmination of a historic shift away from the New Deal politics of the previous 50 years, which featured national policy initiatives designed to protect citizens against the harshest economic and social structural forces beyond their control.

During this period, conservatives advocated a narrow version of the “culture of poverty” thesis, the notion that urban crime, antisocial behavior, underachievement, and out-of-wedlock births are solely the failure of poor individuals themselves. Liberals rightly criticized this argument as “blaming the victim.” However, some liberals went further, claiming all examination of individual behavior amounts to blaming the victim.

Unlike his conservative and liberal critics, Wilson does not separate local culture from larger social structural forces. Rather, he unpacks complex relationships between individual agency, local culture, social structures, and globalization.

Wilson agrees that categorical forms of racism that assert the biogenetic inferiority of blacks have declined. However, against a naïve post-racialism, the idea that racism is no longer a significant fact of American life, he argues that racist assumptions remain embedded in institutional norms and practices. For example, school tracking tends to segregate African-American students, placing them in lower-level classes even though they may have the requisite skills for learning in higher courses.

Countering critics on the left, who claim he ignores the role of historic racism, Wilson does not minimize the enduring impact of slavery and Jim Crow institutions. He clearly states that, from an historical perspective, “it is hard to overstate the importance of racist structural factors.”

Wilson’s inclusive account details how urban neighborhoods were negatively impacted by:

- slavery;
- Jim Crow segregation;
- public school segregation;
- legalized discrimination;
- residential segregation;
- the Federal Housing Administration’s redlining of black neighborhoods in the 1940s and 1950s;
- the construction of public housing projects in poor black neighborhoods; and
- employer discrimination.

All of these factors contributed to the ways metropolises feature predominantly white, affluent suburbs separated from predominantly impoverished African-American and Latino central cities. These forces eviscerated institutions that were vital to previously healthy neighborhoods, including businesses, schools, churches, and social networks tied together through religious, voluntary, and civic organizations.

To whites who assert that these issues are all in the past—“get over it”—Wilson explains how past practices endure in the present. For example, Kathryn Neckerman’s Schools Betrayed demonstrates that a century ago, when African-American children in northern cities attended schools alongside white children, there were not problems of low achievement and high dropout rates. Neckerman documents a process of how school officials segregated black and white children and provided more and better resources for white immigrant children. Over the course of 60 years, generations of black children were denied opportunities afforded their white counterparts. This history provides critical insight into the reason so many black parents lose faith in public schools.

Wilson also details how indirect global economic forces have exacerbated the consequences of enduring racist social forces. These include how the computer revolution decreased relative demand for low-skilled labor, the decline of manufacturing in cities (previously the largest employer of African-Americans), as well as the shift to service industries that negatively impacts inner-city black males. Wilson illuminates how mistrust develops as a mode of survival in urban neighborhoods and, as this “code of the street” shapes negative individual behavior, individuals lack the social skills suited for consumer services.

The complexity of Wilson’s analysis is most critical for public policy. Policies and programs that only address inner-city behavior, without addressing the structural problems of joblessness and inadequate education, will not be able to connect individual aspirations for a better life with concrete opportunity. Conversely, policies designed to address structures, such as improving economic opportunity, will fail unless they are interconnected with an effective strategy to prepare individuals with the social skills requisite for economic mobility.

Wilson concludes with two key public policy recommendations.

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First, policy makers must confront the institutional entrenchment that perpetuates disproportionate benefits for relatively affluent whites and disproportionate burdens for people of color. For example, equity in public school funding and outcomes will not be achieved without significant changes in the established mechanisms for allocating resources and staffing, “which have become ‘normal’ and gained constituencies willing to fight to maintain their current privilege.”

Second, concerning how to produce public support for public policy, Wilson admits a change in his thinking. Previously, Wilson advocated universal programs that would appeal to all Americans, not only people of color. Now he advocates an open conversation about the relationships between race and poverty in order to convince the nation of the urgent need to address these issues directly.

Then-candidate Barack Obama’s speech on race (March 18, 2008), Wilson contends, is a model of the kind of discourse that is necessary to address the complexity of our current predicament. Obama interconnected cultural and social structural factors in a way that challenged both whites and people of color.

In that speech, Obama invited whites to acknowledge that what ails the African-American community “does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed, not just with words, but with deeds, by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations.”

Conversely, Obama also addressed negative responses to these inequalities, including challenging black men and communities to take full responsibility for their lives and to demand more from their fathers, in order to nurture future generations “so that they can write their own destiny.”

More Than Just Race is a must read for citizens and people of faith alike. If Americans are ready for the intellectual, moral, and political transformation this scholarship invites, we may yet create socially just and racially equitable cities worthy of a democracy.

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**White Privilege and Racism: 10 Must Reads**

**by Alex Mikulich, Ph.D., JSRI Fellow**


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**CST and Race**

**by Alex Mikulich, Ph.D., JSRI Fellow**


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**Wednesday, October 28**  
“Trouble the Water” Viewing and Discussion with Film Protagonists  
7:30 – 9:30 p.m.  
Nunemaker Auditorium,  
Monroe Hall

**Tuesday, November 3**  
Migration in the South: Emerging Trends and Critical Issues  
Dr. Manuel Vásquez  
7:30 p.m. – 9 p.m.  
St. Charles Room  
Manuel A. Vásquez, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Religion at the University of Florida and author of The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity (1998).

**Tuesday, November 17**  
Dr. Katrine Camilleri  
7:30 – 9 p.m.  
St. Charles Room  
Katrine Camilleri is the attorney director of the legal team of Jesuit Refugee Service Malta and recipient of the 2007 Nansen Award from the United Nations Refugee Agency.

All events at Loyola University New Orleans.