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In tackling the problem of urban poverty, William Julius Wilson calls for a revitalization of the liberal perspective in the ghetto underclass debate. He claims that liberals dominated the discussions with compelling and intelligent arguments until the advent of the controversial Moynihan report in 1965, which claimed that “at the heart of the deterioration of the Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family” (Moynihan). After that, liberals avoided any research that might result in stigmatization of particular racial minorities. During the 1970s, a period of liberal silence, the conservative argument emerged as the new dominant theory of the underclass debate. Thus, by the 1980s, the traditional liberal analysis of ghetto behavior as a symptom of structural inequality was replaced with the conservative view that ghetto-specific behavior is linked to ingrained cultural characteristics—“culture of poverty.” Based on this theory, conservatives claimed that federal programs guided by liberal policy only served to exacerbate the so-called cultural tendencies of the ghetto underclass, creating further problems. For example, they argued that welfare incentives encouraged demerriage and black unemployment. However, claims Wilson, Charles Murray’s scathing criticism of federal social-welfare programs in *Losing Ground* provoked a liberal revival in the underclass debate. He declares that liberals can no longer be shy about accurately describing the urban ghetto, which is necessary in order to identify causes and remedies. In this paper, I will not further discuss or address the inconsistencies in Wilson’s claims about the vicissitudinal nature of the dominant theory of the underclass debate in terms of liberal views vs. conservative views. Instead, I will focus on his definition of the underclass, what he believes to be causes of the

underclass, and how to remedy the situation. Then I will compare his empirical claims to the challenges presented by works of Elijah Anderson, Katherine Newman, and David Ellwood and Christopher Jencks. Finally I will present my own thoughts on the concept of the underclass. William Julius Wilson claims that the behavior of the underclass is a reaction to the lack of economic opportunities caused by isolation from mainstream society. He points to the rapid decline of the inner-city ghetto community during the 1970s, which suffered a black middle-and working-class exodus and a shift from a manufacturing economy to a services-based economy. In accordance to his rejection of a link between culture and ghetto behavior, Wilson proposes a solution that looks beyond race-specific issues to address the more fundamental problem of social dislocation caused by changes in the industrial society. Anderson, Newman, Ellwood and Jencks all agree that economic changes had much to do with the plight of the underclass. However, they disagree over the debate on culture vs. structure regarding causes of ghetto-specific behavior. They also focus on different aspects of ghetto behavior such as family structures vs. violence. I believe that the concept of the underclass is important insofar as to address the problem of urban poverty in terms of poor economic conditions (I believe most of these readings also focus on the black underclass). However, eventually, we must tackle the rest of impoverished America, which includes other minorities, whites and the rural poor, whose behaviors can be distinguished from that described by the concept of the underclass.

The underclass according to Wilson is the “heterogeneous” grouping of urban poor that is characterized by behavior that differs from that of mainstream society. These behaviors and characteristics are out-of-wedlock childbearing, teen pregnancy, single

parent families, joblessness, serious crime and drug use. By heterogeneous, Wilson means individuals who lack job skills and experience long-term unemployment or are not part of the labor force, individuals who engage in street crime and drug use, and families that experience long periods of poverty and/or welfare dependency (Wilson 8). He chronicles the changes in the social organization of inner-city communities, what he calls “social dislocation.” Prior to the 1960s, Wilson claims, violent crime was low, single-parent families constituted only a minority of black families and were headed by capable middle-aged women, a very small percentage of welfare recipients could be called welfare-dependent and joblessness was nowhere near the rates that have persisted since the ‘70s (Wilson 3). He links these conditions to the features of social organization, which include “sense of community, positive neighborhood identification, and explicit norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior” (Wilson 3). The 1960s liberal view was that economic and social situations created a life of racial isolation and chronic subordination, which produced adaptive behavior patterns that were self-perpetuating (Wilson 4). During the ‘70s, there was a large deterioration of behavior patterns in the inner city, which, Wilson claims, can be attributed to the sharp increase in social dislocations due to the black middle-class exodus accompanied by a growing working-class exodus from the ghetto. In the ‘40s and ‘50s, black middle class professionals lived in higher-income sections of the ghetto and were available to provide services to the black community. However, they no longer tend to live in ghetto neighborhoods today, having moved out of the black community to enter mainstream society. Working-class blacks have also moved out of the ghetto and into higher-income neighborhoods and the suburbs. These middle- and working-class families and individuals were an important

presence, serving to preserve mainstream norms and patterns of behavior in the ghetto (Wilson 7). When they left, the poor were left in social isolation with few links to economic opportunities, and the conditions of a community exclusively populated by the most disadvantaged urban blacks transformed the ghetto into long-term welfare families and street criminals with new norms and behaviors that are described as ghetto pathologies (Wilson 8).

Wilson is very careful to distinguish his argument (that jobless poverty causes ghetto pathology) from the conservative argument of a “culture of poverty” that links poverty to cultural traditions, family history and individual character (Wilson 13). He claims that the circular argument of conservatives builds on the premise of the culture of poverty to argue that liberal social policy only feeds into the negative cultural tendencies of the ghetto. Conservatives argue that liberal reform of the criminal justice system have weakened its deterrent effects against deviant behavior and allowed an increase in serious crime ; that affirmative action have decreased the demand for less qualified minorities; that social welfare programs decrease work incentive and increase single-parent families. Wilson cites Charles Murray’s book *Losing Ground* as the leader on the view that federal programs are ineffective. Murray claims that while spending on social programs increased, the poverty rate failed improve, indicating the failure of these programs. However, Wilson points out that “when unemployment increases, poverty also rises” (Wilson 19). He claims that the social programs benefited the many people who slipped into poverty because of the declining economy. While Murray claims that economic decline had nothing at all to do with the failure of the poverty rate to improve in the ‘70s,

Wilson claims that it was the major cause, and that without the welfare programs, the poverty rate would have been even worse.

Wilson's two main points about the causes of ghetto-specific behavior are that economic conditions are to blame, and that race should not be associated with economic problems of blacks. Structural economic changes—shift from goods to services, polarization into low-wage and high-wage sectors, technological innovations, deindustrialization and relocation of manufacturing industries out of central cities—and the black middle- and working-class exodus have resulted in a lack of economic opportunities for less skilled urban blacks. These conditions of restricted opportunity and bleak futures resulted in the behaviors that are now associated with the ghetto—teen pregnancy, serious crime, joblessness, etc. Wilson claims that “a racial division of labor has been created due to decades...of discrimination and prejudice; and that because those in the low-wage sector of the economy are more adversely affected by impersonal economic shifts in advanced industrial society, the racial division of labor is reinforced” (Wilson 12). For example, he says, blacks have been most affected by deindustrialization because of their heavy concentration in smokestack industries due to a history of racial division. His point is that these problems require solutions that deal with broader issues of economic organization and are not helped by associating them with racism (Wilson 12). The problem, Wilson concludes is joblessness reinforced by increasing social isolation in an impoverished neighborhood: lower socio-economic status, minimal education, lack of opportunities as well as lack of community safeguards, resources and role models. Therefore, Wilson calls for solutions that deal with the effect of joblessness on family structure, crime, teen pregnancy, welfare dependency and other social

dislocations. He suggests a policy agenda that looks beyond race-specific issues to face the problems that ensue from the deindustrialization of the economy. The goals of such policies should be generating full employment, developing urban economic growth, implementing effective welfare reform.

Elijah Anderson's study of violence in the ghetto is the most supportive of Wilson's claims. Wilson claims that structural inequality induces the problematic ghetto-specific behavior. Anderson focuses on inner-city youth violence caused by economic frustration as a factor in alienating the ghetto from mainstream society. He describes the behavior as guided by the "code of the street," which rises from thwarted ambitions. In accordance with Wilson, he claims that the behavior is due to failure to adjust to change from a manufacturing economy to a service/high-tech economy. Anderson also agrees with Wilson that it is "important to tell the truth so we can deal with these issues forthrightly." Neither Anderson nor Wilson have any use for the 1970s attitude of liberals—the reluctance to shed any light on the ghetto situation for fear of exposing what might be construed as stigmatizing to particular minorities. Anderson also believes that it is important to "give back to the community," and stresses the responsibility of successful blacks to aid and act as role models to the communities that have lost human capital due to the black middle-class exodus. This supports Wilson's claim that the loss of role models and links to mainstream norms and opportunities caused the deterioration of the ghetto neighborhood. Anderson's claim that the life of violence rises from frustration and hopeless future also agrees with Wilson's assessment of the causes of ghetto behavior. He claims that the inner city's "chronic problems stem from a lack of

legitimate opportunities for advancement” and that the remedy is to “rebuild human capital in the ghetto,” which is basically the goal of Wilson’s proposed solutions.

On the other hand, Katherine Newman completely disagrees with Wilson’s thesis on urban poverty. She rejects Wilson’s claim of social isolation of the ghetto and the idea that the defining characteristic of the inner city is absence of economic opportunities and societal supports. “The genesis of [Newman’s book] *No Shame* was a confrontation to the central tenets of underclass theory [proposed by Wilson]” (Newman 2). Paid work is a central activity of many ghetto residents, she claims—in Harlem, two-thirds of families have an earner (class notes). Newman also criticizes Wilson’s use of purely demographical survey data, which, she claims, cannot capture the reality of the social relations of families (class notes). She cites the Carol Stacks study, which reported that female-headed families create a support system to cope with poverty. Based on these findings, she rejects the claim that ghetto families are disorganized and unstable. Newman agrees that the shifting economy is to blame for unemployment, but that employment is not enough to alleviate the conditions of urban poverty and is not a viable replacement for welfare.

Ellwood and Jencks’s emphasis is in a slightly different direction: the differential effects on single parenthood based on education levels of women. However, their study is relevant to Wilson’s concept of the underclass because they focus on patterns of marriage and childbirth, assessing the standard economic model and other possible explanations of normative changes. Ellwood and Jencks’s goal was to explain temporal patterns of single parenthood and family structure among people of different backgrounds and the growing inequalities they create (Ellwood 70). They claim that changes in family

structure cause family income inequality, and set out to document how family structures changed across different sexes, levels of education and age. Based on their extensive data, they concluded that male earnings and sex ratios were somewhat influential, although they do not account for most of the recent changes in marriage patterns; female market opportunities resulted in more ambiguous effects; norms really did change, but whether they reflected changes in behavior or actually caused such changes was unclear; and external forces such as birth control technology increased incidence of premarital sex, which devalued marriage. The impact of Ellwood and Jencks's study on Wilson comes from their assertion that the standard economic model is unable to capture actual family patterns due to inconsideration of delay of marriage vs. permanent avoidance—supporting Newman's criticism of Wilson's heavy use of census data in his claims.

However, their report supports Wilson's claim that out-of-wedlock birth increases with decreasing economic opportunity. They found that both educated and uneducated women delayed marriage, but educated women also delayed childbirth while uneducated women did not. This resulted in much higher illegitimacy rates among children of uneducated women, who were less likely to hold jobs. While these findings do not explain why poor women had more children out of wedlock, they do support Wilson's descriptive claim.

Ellwood and Jencks also include a thorough explanation of the difference between attitudes/values and norms, and how they affect and are affected by behavior patterns.

They assert that changing conventions and mores across societies and time led to differential changes in family patterns (Ellwood 40). Norms, they say, are a collection of informal social rules that are self-preservative. Attitudes and values, on the other hand, are attributes of individuals colored by personal experience (Ellwood 45). They choose

to focus on how changing attitudes and values can affect behavior patterns because norms move much slower and are more traditionally used to explain how behavior patterns persist over time. However, they state that in practice, changes in norms can be measured by measuring changes of attitudes. Ellwood and Jencks identify two ways in which changes in attitudes can cause changes in family patterns: through exogenous forces, such as pill technology which destigmatizes premarital sexual activity, which devalues marriage; and through the buffer effect of norms: norms are slower to change, and once altered may be irreversible. For example, according to Murray, welfare incentives encouraged single-parent families and norms shifted to accept the appropriateness of such families. Even if incentives were reversed, norms and therefore behavior would be slow to follow, and it may be even impossible to return to the original norms. Based on these definitions, Ellwood and Jencks identify Wilson with what they call the cultural model (Ellwood 41), lumping his concept of the underclass together with Murray and the “culture of poverty,” which he clearly rejects. The cultural model, they state, recognizes norms and culture as determinants of family structure (Ellwood 44). When past norms result in failure norms shift, or new definitions of success and failure are created. Although Ellwood and Jencks realize that Wilson emphasizes external economic forces cause the normative changes which determine family structure, I believe they mistakenly focus on the normative changes to categorize his argument within the cultural model.

The concept of the underclass is useful in identifying the behavior and identity of the poor population living in the inner-city ghetto. Having a clear definition allows a move to the next steps, which are to determine the causes and then the remedies. However, the discussion of the underclass focuses on the urban poor and primarily blacks.

Eventually, the discussion and policy proposals must deal with all of America's poor, which includes the rural poor and other races.

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