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Book Review:
More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City by
William Julius Wilson. W.W. Norton & Company Inc., New York 2009

Although written with a lay readership in mind, William Julius Wilson's new book "More Than Just Race" sets out to make a major statement of interest to scholars, policy-makers and lay readers alike. Amid the usual barrage of statistical information, there is a notable intellectual development: Wilson seems to no longer understand race as declining in significance. Perhaps more importantly, he also rejects the pragmatically colorblind political discourse he once championed as a means broaden public discussion about issues of urban poverty. The evidence of this runs throughout the book but not until the last chapter is it divulged explicitly:

> In my previous writings I called for the framing of issues designed to appeal to broad segments of the population(…)I no longer hold to this view…now my positions has changed: in framing public policy we should not shy way from an explicit discussion of(…)race and poverty; on the contrary, we should highlight them in our attempt to convince the nation that these problems should be seriously confronted (...) [p. 141].

Consequently, although Wilson remains intent on revealing the influence of "impersonal economic forces", the book's title ultimately shares an uneasy chemistry with the thrust of it's central arguments, which ascribe fundamental significance to the impact of race on the concentrated poverty of the inner city.

A major objective of Wilson's book is to reopen meaningful debate around the cultural factors that contribute to urban poverty. To situate the discussion, Wilson relies heavily on sociologist Orlando Patterson who argues that outrage over the infamous "Moynihan Report" helped to ignite a 30+ year witch-hunt for "victim-blamers" within the social sciences, causing scholars to studiously avoid the cultural aspects of urban poverty overwhelmingly in favor of structural factors. Wilson attempts to redress this silence with the precaution of a man practiced in the traversal of minefields. After first prolonged discussion of how structural and cultural factors collude to produce "racial inequality", each of the remaining chapters (save the last) are organized as explorations of contentious issues within public debate, each with special subsections on structure and culture respectively. Ultimately, Wilson remains adamant that "culture matters, but…not…nearly as much as social structure"(p.152). Thus, with each of the issues that he explores, Wilson dedicates his efforts toward the task of grounding cultural factors firmly within a structural context, demonstrating his conviction that "…social scientist(s)…(have) an obligation

to highlight the powerful impact of structural forces because cultural explanations are more likely to resonate with the general public and policy makers" (p. 58).

This awareness of the political implications of social science research hovers watchfully over his every formulation.

In each chapter Wilson addresses two species of "structural forces"—racialist (direct) and nonracialist (indirect)—both of which contribute to racial inequality. Equal attention is given to the corresponding two species of "cultural forces", which include the "belief systems of the broader society" (p. 147), and "cultural traits that emerge from patterns of intra-group interaction in settings created by racial segregation and discrimination" (p. 147). The latter often seems more central to the book's objectives, and the way that Wilson approaches it has been given a make-over. No longer offering ruminations on the norms and values of urban black males, he instead now adopts the interpretive language of "cultural frames" and "cultural repertoires", and effectively refocuses attention to the collective processes of meaning-making within constraint. This innovation proves fruitful. For example, Wilson is able to investigate not only statistical disparities between black and Latino American marriage rates, but also the different meanings that each group tends to attach to marriage.

The topics selected for treatment include the "forces" shaping concentrated poverty, the economic plight of inner-city black males, and the fragmentation of the poor black family. Significantly, each of these issues are both materially and symbolically specific to urban black communities (e.g. "ghettoes"), and so already stand as what Wilson refers to as "racial group outcomes" (p. 21). It is clear that Wilson—taking these issues as starting points—is more concerned with revealing the interplay of intentional and unintentional processes in the reproduction of racial inequality than in considering "racial outcomes" as reflective of the properties of a given racialized social order. It might seem that Wilson's tendency toward structural analysis along with his new interest in racialized cultural experiences would lead to an encounter with the concept of "racism", but this fails to materialize chiefly because Wilson continues to consider intentionality a defining feature of structural and cultural processes that earn the term "racism".

Nevertheless, "'More The Just Race" seems to cover lost ground. In his measured exploration of racial subordination, he has taken earnest strides to avoid economic determinism. Yet even in advancing the cultural aspects of work, Wilson tends to treat culture and structure as though they each were reified variables. Even if he acknowledges the idea that "structure" and "culture" are enjoined, his main arguments depend on unrealistic analytical extrapolations of one without the other so that they are not treated as inseverable so much as they are placed side by side. A more fluid formulation would allow him to treat sociopolitical processes the same way as he treats the black inner city; that is, social, political and economic processes may be analyzed in terms of the racialized cultural frames that facilitate them. An example of the potential benefit is found when considering his treatment of the economic policies of the Reagan era as fundamentally structural. These policies were in fact initiatives which found political force principally through the employment of racialized cultural logics (e.g. "welfare queen" ect). Both culture and structure are at work in a way that Wilson's treatment fails to capture. Aside these small criticisms, this work stands as not only valuable contribution to the study of social problems, but also, in its clarity and wisdom alike, as an exemplar of the promise of public sociology.