

# On Race and Class in America

THE DECLINING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE. *By William Julius Wilson.*  
(University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978.)

Lurking somewhere in this book are the makings of a good article — or an agenda for a multi-volume study. But this book itself is an attempt at an economic-sociological-political history of American race relations, combined with a testing of Marxian hypotheses, and including a cursory treatment of such complexities as the racial impact of minimum wage laws and technological unemployment — *all in 154 pages of text.* It boggles the mind.

The important thesis of this book is that, within very recent times, the socio-economic prospects of blacks have come to depend more on class origins than on race itself. If this is true — and there is weightier evidence than this book that it is — then the implications for social policy are enormous. In a world in which class characteristics (low job skills, undisciplined life style, poor school work) are more of a handicap than color, the anti-discrimination thrust of government and civil rights organizations might be more productively redirected toward creating better skills, discipline, and general work orientation. Of course, that could mean writing off as obsolete equipment much of the political, legal, and rhetorical skills which have been built up during the long years of struggle to end racial discrimination. Economists say, “sunk costs are sunk,” when urging the writing off of obsolete equipment, but that is only one of many reasons that economists are unpopular.

Realistically, for both psychological and political reasons, the anti-discrimination crusade is going to continue — long after having reached diminishing returns, or even negative returns. Therefore, any writings which bring out the facts about the relative importance of racial versus social characteristics must be welcomed as an offsetting force toward reality and progress. Whether that is enough to make it worthwhile to slog through all the arbitrary and idiosyncratic statements in this particular book is another question.

Despite his refreshing thesis, Professor William Julius Wilson also perpetuates old canards. For example, he claims that 19th

century immigrants' "political mobility frequently translated into occupational and status mobility." This ignores the well-known fact that the Irish were politically the most successful of the European immigrant groups and economically one of the least successful, while Jews were economically upwardly mobile long before they made their first political gains, largely under the tutelage of Irish political bosses. Professor Wilson also perpetuates the unexamined assumption that black businesses were unable to get started or to be successful because they "could not obtain credit from white banks." It so happens that a black economist named Abram L. Harris shot down that theory more than 40 years ago, and a sociologist named Ivan H. Light demolished the same idea again more recently in an incisive study entitled, *Ethnic Enterprise in America*. First of all, most small businesses — of whatever race or ethnicity — usually do not get started with bank loans, so the policies of white banks have little relevance to that particular question. Moreover, both Harris and Light found that black financial institutions in an earlier era had *excessive* investment funds relative to the amount of entrepreneurship available and were themselves dragged down to financial disaster by the failure of risky ghetto business ventures that they financed. Today successful black banks are more likely to put their money into government bonds or General Motors.

Neither the Harris nor the Light studies are discussed in the text, nor even listed in the bibliography. They are in distinguished company. Professor Wilson also does not mention another study that gives far more factual support than he does to his central thesis that class characteristics are now more important than racial characteristics in the economic sphere. Harvard economist Richard Freeman's *Black Elite* shows that young adults with the same cultural exposure in childhood and the same formal education now earn the same incomes — whether they are black or white. This has been true only recently, but it is of enormous importance in understanding how far we have come and in understanding how to approach the still large, unfinished tasks in the racial area. Similar empirical results, showing the importance of individual behavioral characteristics, are found in inter-ethnic comparisons of entrepreneurship — including successful entrepreneurship by West Indians and Black Muslims — in Ivan Light's study which Wilson ignored. Also missing from the discussion and the

bibliography are such other landmark studies as Stephan Thernstrom's *The Other Bostonians* and Gary Becker's *The Economics of Discrimination*.

Instead, there are arbitrary assertions garnished with selected numbers and selected quotations. Some pages look like cut-and-paste jobs. Yet some of the conclusions are valid, courageous, and important. They are simply not adequately supported by either systematic analysis or empirical data — though both are available in the literature.

Many interesting facts are found in *The Declining Significance of Race* which are overlooked or even misstated elsewhere. For example, many readers will be surprised to learn that (1) there has been a high level of residential integration and voluntary removal of racial barriers by white electorates in northern cities in the last quarter of the 19th century, and (2) the black-white teenage unemployment rate differences that we now take for granted are of relatively recent vintage. Nothing much is done with either of these remarkable facts, however. What Professor Wilson calls "the brief period of fluid race relations in the North from 1870 to 1890" is nowhere examined in terms of its having occurred at a time and place of black political powerlessness, when restrictive covenants were legal, with an absence of "fair housing" laws, with federal governmental apathy, and with little or no judicial concern for black rights. In short, this period of general racial progress in northern cities — including greater residential integration than exists today — occurred in the absence of all the things which are regarded as prerequisites. *How* and *why* might throw some light on our presuppositions about race relations or even about social processes in general. But Wilson never gets into that.

Similarly, the rapid increase in black teenage unemployment over the past 30 years is given no systematic analysis. It is arbitrarily attributed to demographic trends in the text, and only in a footnote in the back of the book does the author even mention the alternative hypothesis that minimum wage escalations have priced black teenagers out of the job market. Walter Williams' *Youth and Minority Unemployment* is also missing from the discussion and the bibliography, and it might at least have clarified some of the issues.

The exposition is not helped out by such truisms which state that "slavery is severely restricted black vertical and

horizontal mobility,” that residential segregation “contributed to the growth of urban ghettos” or that the “increased voting power of urban blacks derives from changes in the racial composition of central cities.”

Despite the author’s willingness to take a fresh look and to challenge popular beliefs — often justifiably — the signs of haste and over-ambitious conclusions are pervasive.

*Thomas Sowell*

# On Consumer Choice in Education

BLACKBOARD TYRANNY. By Connaught Coyne Marshner. (Arlington House, New Rochelle, N.Y., 1978.)

FAMILY CHOICE IN EDUCATION: THE NEW IMPERATIVE. By Onalee McGraw. (The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., 1978.)

In *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), the Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional an Oregon law that required all parents to send their children to public schools. The Court declared that "The child is not the mere creature of the State." Nevertheless, the battle between the state and parents for authority over the nation's children has only intensified and become more desperate since that decision.

With Thomas Jefferson's oft-cited advocacy of public education as its justification, universal education has nowhere been advanced with as much determination (it might be said with as much vengeance) as in the United States. Students, teachers, and school administrators now compose 29 percent of the population. Nationwide education expenditures are at \$132 billion, running neck and neck with health as the most expensive enterprise jointly funded by government and the private sector. Education consumes 37 percent of the yearly budgets of state and local governments, by far their largest single outlay. In addition to preempting these vast resources, education has become, along with the activist judiciary, the prime instrument of social revolution. Long gone are the days when community education, existing in the context of customary values, concerned itself with literacy and the honing of the intellect.

Today, social projects such as racial and sexual engineering, busing, sex education, and values education have all but supplanted the three Rs as the major emphases of education. Under federal programs, the idea of education has become mixed with the idea of welfare. So it can hardly be surprising that SAT scores have declined steadily for fourteen consecutive years, although they appear to have leveled off this year.

In the midst of all this, the uniquely American notion of local control of schools has been, perhaps, fatally wounded. Control of schools and school policies is moving increasingly to the center. As the ideas of teachers have become more