

## **More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City**

*Response by David Eagle (September 1, 2009)*

Wilson draws upon his past research and the work of other urban sociologists and argues that a combination of structural obstacles and cultural hindrances have made it difficult for poor blacks to escape poverty. He contends that an honest discussion of both of these factors is necessary to implement workable policy solutions.

Theoretically, this work raises a number of questions. Throughout this book Wilson references “impersonal structural forces” standing in the way of black uplift (6) – in particular he is referring to the forces of economy and non-racist political structures. Yet it is hard to see how these forces are impersonal and untainted by the power of racial formation. For example, he avers the farming out of American factory jobs and the spatialization of jobs into the suburbs are impersonal (by which he means non-racial) forces; yet later in the book he demonstrates how the construction of freeways was driven by a racist agenda (29-30). He never provides criteria for distinguishing impersonal structural forces and racist structural forces. He fails to reckon with “the problem of the color line” – how racism has deeply structured the whole of American, and indeed global culture (Du Bois 2005). Also, his work suffers from an inadequate definition of culture – one that is place-based, ignores the broader macro social forces, and fails to account for the creative ways that individuals appropriate culture (Swidler 1986; c.f. Raley, Durden and Wildsmith 2004 for a more nuanced approach).

At times, he uses anecdotal evidence to support key arguments. For instance, in constructing his contention that “cool pose culture” is a pervasive aspect of black-male culture his main evidence comes from “anecdotal evidence collected several years ago by one of his [Patterson’s] former students” (80). Later in the book, what counts as ethnographic evidence for the previous valuation of marriage in the black community, he quotes a 27 year-old woman who recollects from her childhood about how marriage was more highly valued (123). And finally, when he attempts to show “street smarts” entail not making eye-contact, which thus makes it difficult for blacks to compete in the mainstream, again he does not reference any systematic studies demonstrating this causal chain (17).

Historically, there is one point that seems to require greater attention. Wilson makes a strong case for suburbanization as a major driving force behind the creation of impoverished neighborhoods. While certainly this is true, he does not discuss the re-gentrification of the urban cores and the destruction of large high-density projects and the relocation of the poor into suburban neighborhoods (Leinberger 2008), nor the fact that black neighborhoods tend to be more integrated (Pattillo-McCoy 1999).

In terms of policy implications, he advocates for a more honest discussion of “cultural factors” in the black community. This is a challenging approach, and seems a slippery slope. It is hard to imagine how, in a politicized environment, these discussions could remain constructive and free from racializing. Wilson also does not address the question of who gets to define these negative cultural factors. And most problematically, earlier in the book Wilson denies that a racial grouping of people have a definable culture, but rather in-group differences are

larger than inter-group differences (115)<sup>1</sup>. Positively, what Wilson's analysis does demonstrate is that policies that establish a "living wage" would have beneficial effects.

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<sup>1</sup> Although almost immediately after making this point he refers to "Mexican culture" (117).

## References

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Swidler, Ann. 1986. "Culture in action: symbols and strategies." *American Sociological Review* 51:273-286.



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