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## Being black and poor in the Ghetto.

### An interview with William Julius Wilson

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JSSJ: Professor William Julius Wilson, you are a distinguished professor of sociology in the University of Harvard. It is a great honor and pleasure for the journal *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice* to have this interview with you.

In your most recent book -in 2010- : *More than just Race*<sup>2</sup>, you explain how both institutional and systemic impediments, and cultural deficiencies keep poor blacks from escaping poverty and escaping the ghetto.

Could you tell us more of your analysis of the respective role of structure and culture in the Ghetto, please?

W.J. Wilson: Yes. If you ask me which is more important, I would say structure, and I feel that structure impediments, whether they be racial impediments, racial problems, such as discrimination, segregation, or non-racial impediments, associated with changes in the economy, or even some political actions, for example the new federalism of the Reagan administration, which sharply decreased support for urban areas where blacks were concentrated, these things were far more important than attitudes, beliefs, world views, things that we associate with culture. I maintain that a lot of the cultural responses to conditions and society - in this case, chronic racial and economic subordination - sometimes reinforce the marginal economic position of poor blacks, but poor blacks marginal economic position has not been driven mainly by these cultural responses. So you have culture responding to the structural impediments, cultural responses to blocked opportunities that we associate with structural factors, ranging from those that are racial to those that are non-racial. And sometimes these cultural responses reinforce the marginal economic position created by the structural impediments. For example: there is no way that you can appreciate the current position of so many poor blacks without considering the legacy of racial discrimination and segregation, and how problems created by racial segregation and discrimination have been reinforced by changes in the economy. For example, racism and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.u-paris10.fr/recherche/colloque-international-de-cloture-du-seminaire-the-wire-visages-du-ghetto-entre-fiction-et-sciences-sociales--420351.kjsp>

<sup>2</sup> William Julius Wilson, *More than just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City (Issues of Our Time)*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

discrimination, put a lot of poor blacks in their economic place, in structural problems, and stepped aside to watch changes and technology make that place even more permanent.

So basically, I would say that, in order to come up with a complete comprehensive understanding of racial inequality, you have to consider both structural problems ranging from those that are racial to those that are non-racial, and cultural responses to structural inequities. If you want the most comprehensive explanation, it's not either/or, but I would place far more emphasis on the structural impediments than on the cultural responses to these impediments.

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JSSJ: In your book, you were making the parallel with the situation of the Great Depression, with the possibility to have some sort of Roosevelt -Franklin Delano Roosevelt-, a sort of public intervention creating jobs by thousands -or millions actually...

W.J. Wilson: Well, if you look at current proposals to address problems in the inner city, not many of them represent a kind of comprehensive reform that you associate with the New Deal. And depending on who is pushing certain policy positions, you can soon determine whether they are liberal or conservative.

The conservatives will place far more emphasis, for example, on welfare reform, thinking that what you've got to do is change individual behavior, whereas more liberal politicians will focus far more on improving job opportunities, manpower training and education, these kinds of things, recognizing that many people in our society, particularly poor blacks, face limited opportunities, and we have to open up the opportunity structure, so people can help themselves. Conservatives, on the other hand, associate the marginal economic position of poor blacks with personal shortcomings. Therefore their purpose is on improving attitudes and making sure that people make commitments to work, and so on.

So, it depends on who's in position of power. If you ask me, I think that Barack Obama has placed far more emphasis on structural factors, even though he hasn't explicitly spelled out policies that benefit poor blacks, but he has placed far more emphasis on structural factors than on cultural factors. He does talk about some cultural factors; he does talk about fathers taking greater responsibility for their children, and so on... But he also says: let's give them the opportunity to improve themselves, let's provide jobs for them, let's provide training and education. Once we provide these things, which can expect them to live up to their responsibilities...

JSSJ: Economic dynamics: they put a lot of pressure on the ghetto, actually. The racial and social relationships are much under pressure because of the economic turndown, because of the financial crisis...

W.J. Wilson: Yes, people in the ghetto, the inner city ghetto, were in dire straits, difficult situation, before the economic downturn, and the economic downturn has aggravated the problems that they've experienced. Joblessness is much higher now than it was before the great Recession, and I'm not only speaking of unemployment, - because unemployment in the United States refers to those who are officially part of the labor force, they haven't been brought out of the labor force... So I'm not only speaking of unemployment -the unemployment rates increase-, but also... lots of people have just given up looking for work. So you have a sharp increase of what we call non-labor force participation. The measure that we use to capture non-labor force participation and unemployment is what we call the employment population ratio. The percentage of adults who are employed, and the percentage of the young men especially, who are employed in a lot of those inner-city neighborhoods, is extremely low, extremely low. And this creates problems in the long term, because a jobless neighborhood is much more dangerous than a neighborhood in which people are poor, but are working. And a lot of the inner-city neighborhoods now feature not only poverty, but what we call "jobless poverty". That's a terrible situation for residents of the neighborhood to confront.

JSSJ: To push a little further, these jobless neighborhoods, as we saw this morning, are submitted to the pressure of the drugs economics, especially in this context...

W.J. Wilson: Yes, one of the features of jobless neighborhoods of course is the lack of economic opportunity... We did a study in Chicago where we spent a lot of time interacting with the residents in the neighborhood, and I was struck by how often I ran across individuals who say: "Look. I don't want to be dealing drugs, it's very dangerous, but I can't find a job. What am I going to do? I have my family to support, you know."

And there is a drug trade there that's available, and the drug trade thrives in neighborhoods that feature high levels of joblessness because there are youngsters out there who are trying to find a way to find some kind of employment, so they are going to the drug industry. And one of the reasons why the drug industry is thriving in the kind of neighborhoods that captured HBO's *The Wire*, is because of the lack of economic opportunity that exist.

And I suspect that if we don't have a significant economic recovery in the near future, that a lot of these neighborhoods that are plagued by drug trafficking will experience even greater problems.

It's a vicious cycle: I'm very concerned about it.

You see, the Great Recession started just a few years ago, and we still don't have the concrete data -empirical data- on how people are coping, and what strategies they are using, and how this has affected their mental health, their physical health, and so on. But I think that once the data come out, the stories are going to be very depressing, indeed.

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JSSJ: You were one of the first, maybe you were the first, to elaborate the notion of “spatial mismatch”, in 1987, in *The truly disadvantaged*<sup>3</sup>. More broadly, could you tell us more, could you elaborate about the links between space and injustice in the Ghetto?

W.J. Wilson: Let me just first correct one thing: I wasn’t one of the first to talk about spatial mismatch, but *The truly disadvantaged* increased the discussion about the spatial mismatch. And I have a lot of scholars who had done research on the spatial mismatch, and they thank me for publishing *The truly disadvantaged* because “Now we are being cited...! You made it a topic that’s worth a serious discussion not only within the Academy, but outside of Academia.”

Yes, one of the problems inner-city ghettos face is the lack of jobs, not only within the neighborhood but even nearby. You see there has been a significant movement of jobs from the central city to suburban areas and this presents a special problem for the people in the inner-city, because our research reveals that only a small percentage really have access to automobiles.

I don’t know that much about Paris, but I bet the public transit system in Paris is much much better than the public transit system in many American cities. So it’s extremely difficult for people in the inner city to get to where the jobs are. The job growth areas, in recent decades, have not been in the central areas, they’ve been outside the city. And even entry-level jobs that poor people would have access to: far greater growth outside the central city than within the city. People have to travel long distances just to get to entry-level, opening unskilled jobs in many cases. And so, this presents a real problem, and there is this study: *Moving to opportunity*<sup>4</sup>, where they were sort of testing some of my ideas in *The truly disadvantaged*. And they were saying: well, if Wilson is saying that neighborhoods really matter, then let’s see what will happen when we move people from the housing projects, where you have real concentrated poverty, and give them vouchers, and let them move to areas of lower poverty.

Well, in this experiment, a lot of blacks who received vouchers -80% of them- moved to areas that were still predominantly black, even though a lower poverty rate. But even the black areas with the lower poverty rate did not have access to job growth areas, they were further away from job growth areas than comparable white neighborhoods.

So it’s a problem for black neighborhoods in general because of racial segregation, it’s a real problem for the inner city ghettos, because not only are they far removed from job growth areas, but they don’t have the means to get to them. That because they don’t have access to the automobile and sometimes -I recall the research that we were doing in Chicago - some of the inner city residents were complaining: it takes them two and a half hours to get to certain jobs. They spend more money on transportation than they do making. Well that’s an exaggeration! But they do spend a lot of money on transportation, trying to get to where the jobs are. So the spatial mismatch is a severe problem, and something has got to be done about that. Certainly, the lack of an adequate mass-transit system makes it extremely difficult for many inner-city ghetto residents.

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<sup>3</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The truly disadvantaged: the inner city, the underclass, and public policy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Moving to Opportunity (MTO) for Fair Housing Demonstration Program.  
<http://www.nber.org/mtopublic/>

JSSJ: Thank you so much for this interview!

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