BOOK NOTE

Stuck at the Bottom: Race, Work, and the American Dream


Reviewed by Jennifer M. Russell**

I. INTRODUCTION

Studs Terkel once observed that work is — by its nature — about violence to the spirit as well as to the body.¹ Whatever truth there is in that observation, it has yet to temper our celebration of work, which is at the heart of the American dream. Work, it has long been acknowledged, “is the source of all our wealth, of all our progress, of all our dignity and value.”² Imagine, then, the American future should work disappear. A spiritual havoc and bodily harm greater than that which absorbed Terkel’s attention would befall us all.

As the twentieth century comes to an end, Americans have been witnessing the permanent disappearance of blue and white collar workers at an alarming rate of approximately two to three million each decade.³ Predictions are that in the near future almost half of the American labor force of 124 million workers will be replaced by industrial innovations.

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¹ STUDS TERKEL, WORKING: PEOPLE TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY DO ALL DAY AND HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT WHAT THEY DO xi (1974).


and the hi-tech information revolution. Because of increasingly sophisticated automation and information technology, the twenty-first century will be an era of near worker-less factories and virtual offices.

This is the structural context within which sociologist William Julius Wilson understands the devastation of the African American community in urban areas. Wilson is relentless in his insistence on the centrality of work and the labor market to our social organization, including the organization of inequality. Inner-city blacks are positioned at the lowest echelons of the social political hierarchy not because of intellectual deficits or dysfunctional culture or even misguided government benevolence; but rather, because of a profound transformation in the American political economy.

II. WILSON'S STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

In *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, Wilson argues that “[m]any of today's problems in the inner-city ghetto neighborhoods — crime, family dissolution, welfare, low levels of social organizations, and so on — are fundamentally a consequence of the disappearance of work.” Joblessness is so pervasive that “[f]or the first time in the twentieth century most adults in many inner-city ghetto neighborhoods are not working in a typical week.” "High rates of job-

4. Id. at 5.
5. See, e.g., id. at 12 (“We are . . . entering into a new period in history — one in which machines increasingly replace human beings in the process of making and moving goods and providing services.”).
11. Id. at xiii.
12. Id. Wilson offers the following illustration:

[In 1990[,] only one in three adults ages 16 and over in the 12 Chicago community areas with ghetto poverty rates held a job in a typical week of the year. Each of these community areas, located on the South and West sides of the city, is overwhelmingly black. We can add to these twelve high-jobless areas three additional predominately black commu-
lessness," Wilson maintains, "trigger other neighborhood problems that undermine social organization, ranging from crime, gang violence, and drug trafficking to family breakups and problems in the organization of family life.\textsuperscript{13}

Using Chicago's South Side African American community as a laboratory, Wilson expertly synthesizes narrative and statistical data to analyze how an exodus of manufacturing plants to suburbs, exurbs and abroad, combined with a restructuring of industrial job opportunities has disadvantaged unskilled black workers, especially male black workers.\textsuperscript{14} He demonstrates that when work vanishes from black urban neighborhoods, community institutions are undermined, which in turn leads to a deterioration of formal and informal social control.\textsuperscript{15} Wilson then examines how persistent joblessness accompanied with social dislocation aff-

\textsuperscript{13} Wilson reports on one Chicago neighborhood as follows:

The rise in the proportion of jobless adults in the Bronzeville neighborhoods has been accompanied by an incredible depopulation — a decline of 66 percent in the three neighborhoods combined — that magnifies the problems of the new poverty neighborhoods. As the population drops and the proportion of non-working adults rises, basic neighborhood institutions are more difficult to maintain: stores, banks, credit institutions, restaurants, dry cleaners, gas stations, medical doctors, and so on lose regular and potential patrons. Churches experience dwindling numbers of parishioners and shrinking resources; recreational facilities, block clubs, community groups, and other informal organizations also suffer. As these organizations decline, the means of formal and informal social control in the neighborhood become weaker. Levels of crime and street violence increase as a result, leading to further deterioration of the neighborhood.

\textsuperscript{14} With the loss of manufacturing employment opportunities, black men turned to the low-wage service sector and unskilled laboring jobs for employment. Id. But, as Wilson points out, "most of the new jobs for workers with limited education and experience are in the service sector, which hires relatively more women." Id. at 27. In fact, jobs held by women in the period 1988 through 1993 increased by 1.3 million, while those held by men rose by roughly 100,000. Id.

\textsuperscript{15} According to Wilson, black male workers in Chicago's inner city experienced a precipitous drop in manufacturing employment opportunities:

Fifty-seven percent of Chicago's employed inner-city black fathers (aged 15 and over and without undergraduate degrees) who were born between 1950 and 1955 worked in manufacturing and construction industries in 1974. By 1987, industrial employment in this group had fallen to 31 percent. Of those born between 1956 and 1960, 52 percent worked in these industries as late as 1978. But again, by 1987 industrial employment in this group fell to 28 percent. No other male ethnic group in the inner city experienced such an overall precipitous drop in manufacturing employment.

\textsuperscript{15} Id. at 19.

Id. at 44.
fects the choices and options of blacks residing in inner-city neighborhoods.

The existence of choices and options is not a naked fact. Choices and options are rooted in a system of inter-locking social practices. They are elaborated, endowed, and exercised according to the exigencies of given situations. This is equally true for the choices and options of blacks residing in inner-city neighborhoods.

Wilson therefore warns against analyzing the social actions of black, inner-city residents as if such actions were unrelated to a broader structure that evolved over time. He observes that, too often, in the current public policy debates on welfare reform:

the discussion of behavior and social responsibility fails to mention the structural underpinnings of poverty and welfare. The focus is mainly on the shortcomings of individuals and families and not on the structural and social changes in the society at large that have made life so miserable for many inner-city ghetto residents or that have produced certain unique responses and behavior patterns over time.16

Wilson does not argue that "individuals and groups lack the freedom to make their own choices, engage in certain conduct, and develop certain styles and orientations."17 Rather, he alerts us to the reality that "these decisions and actions occur within a context of constraints and opportunities that are drastically different from those present in middle-class society."18

Unlike in middle-class society, in inner-city society joblessness is the structuring factor. Because regular employment is so absent from the adult experiences of many blacks residing in inner-city neighborhoods, there is no expectation for work to be a regular and regulating force of daily living.19 As a result, many inner-city blacks lose their feeling of connectedness to work.20 For Wilson this is not inconsequential. He regards work as particularly important because work is more than performance of a task that enables economic support of one's family. Work "constitutes a framework for daily behavior and patterns of interaction because it imposes disciplines and regularities."21 He states, "[r]egular employment provides the anchor for the spatial and temporal aspects of daily life. It determines where you are going to be and when you are going to be there.22 Conversely, when employment is irregular or non-

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16. Id. at 53.
17. Id. at 55.
18. Id.
19. Id. at 52.
20. Id. at 73.
21. Id.
22. Id.
existent, "a person lacks not only a place in which to work and the receipt of regular income[,] but also a coherent organization of the present — that is, a system of concrete expectations and goals."  

Unconnected to work, blacks segregated in inner-city neighborhoods "struggle against the odds at great individual sacrifice to live up to mainstream norms and ideas of acceptability." In economically integrated neighborhoods, Wilson explains, "people who are economically marginal and are struggling to make ends meet are . . . strongly constrained to act in mainstream ways." Not so for their counterparts in isolated neighborhoods where "problems of social organization and ghetto-related modes of adaptation" are invariable. 

The . . . [individuals residing in economically integrated neighborhoods] may be able to exercise a range of illegal or unacceptable solutions to their problems, but the widely held mores of the community, reinforced by economic and social resources that keep the community stable, strongly pressure them to refrain from such activity. However, individuals in the latter neighborhoods may be more likely to pursue such activity because it is more frequently manifested and tolerated in the overt behavior of their neighbors, who are also struggling to survive economically. In this case, ghetto-related culture "may be seen as at least to some extent adaptive, in that situationally suitable modes of action are not only made available as techniques but also tend to be given some measure of apparent legitimacy." 

Lacking attachments to a legitimate labor economy, life becomes disjointed, confused, and erratic. The incentives to enter a growing, illegal drug industry beckon. The traditional married couple, black family disintegrates. Out-of-wedlock births proliferate. And, single mothers seek financial assistance from the government. 

Some commentators are unconvinced that, as Wilson posits, there is a causal relationship between the structural transformation of the Ameri-
can political economy and the conditions of black, inner-city society.\textsuperscript{32} This credibility problem stems, in part, from the fact that Wilson’s practical commitment to economic justice for blacks in inner cities causes him to launch head first into his structural analysis without an explicit foundational discussion of the complex mediation between economic production at the end of the twentieth century and cultural and ideological representation of would-be economic agents. When, however, these complex connections are brought to the fore, Wilson’s structural focus is not only credible, it is persuasive.

Fredric Jameson theorizes that early forms of capitalism produced a concrete, material product and used information technology to facilitate its exchange and consumption. Late capitalism, on the other hand, makes information technology itself a commodity. In this emergent form of capitalism, information in the form of signs — representations, social images, styles (even “life-styles”) — has economic value. Production and capital accumulation then depend on the innovation of information technologies and their use to signify — to communicate — cultural meanings.\textsuperscript{33}

With the concept of racial formation, Michael Omi and Howard Winant demonstrate that signification is suffused with racialization. Racially-coded characteristics such as skin color signify, or communicate, our social identity and our relations to social institutions and organizations. Thus, to the extent that signs proliferate, race conditions all of our lives all the time. Political economy is one of several institutional or organizational forums within which racial signification is routinized and standardized, thereby acquiring a “common-sense” appeal.\textsuperscript{34}

The relevance of Jameson’s thesis for Wilson’s structural explanation of black, inner-city impoverishment is that it introduces the critical notion of signification into the analysis of contemporary capitalism, and derivatively into any analysis of blacks in the American political economy. As signs become a central focus and expression of a political economy, they transform the economic into the representational. They communicate

\textsuperscript{32} See Marvin Kosters, \textit{Looking for Jobs in all the Wrong Places}, \textsc{Pub. Interest}, Fall 1996, at 125 (arguing that Wilson’s analysis that crime, family dissolution, welfare, and low levels of social organization are consequences of the disappearance of work is not convincing); David Whitman, \textit{Unemployed Underclass}, \textsc{Wash. Monthly}, Nov. 1996, at 43 (arguing that Wilson cannot demonstrate a causal connection between structural change and the modern-day ghetto); Joe Klein, \textit{The True Disadvantage}, \textsc{New Republic}, Oct. 28, 1996, at 32 (arguing that it is entirely plausible that business began to flee inner cities as a consequence of higher crime, a declining pool of educated, or disciplined workers).

\textsuperscript{33} See generally Fredric Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism} (1991).

who may legitimately belong to, and participate in, an imagined community along with a justification for exclusion.

Inner-city blacks are positioned neither to innovate nor to exploit sophisticated technologies when newly automated plants relocate away from urban centers. Indeed, automated technologies displace inner-city blacks from the labor economy. This not only means that inner-city blacks experience real economic decline, it means also that inner-city blacks experience alienation from a central process that is responsible for the fabrication of public opinion about them.

People whom a system of labor cannot or will not use are marginals. Omi and Winant's insights regarding racialized signification help to explain why inner-city blacks more than any other racially marked group in America are marginalized by the twentieth-century restructuring of the political economy. Their marginalization results from an incessant production and commodification of images that represent them as lawbreakers, uneducated, unstable, uncooperative and dishonest. The proliferation of such culturally-grotesque images undermines just about every effort of blacks in the inner city to move out of poverty and into the American mainstream. As a matter of fact, these racialized images are used to signify the unsuitability of black inner-city residents as workers — as illegitimate economic agents, and thus to expel them almost completely from useful participation in social life. Although Wilson does not write about the abstract phases of capitalism or the comprehensive racialized structures within which late capitalism functions, these matters animate his study of the disadvantaging effects of the disappearance of work on blacks residing in the inner cities.

III.
WILSON'S REDISTRIBUTIVE PROPOSAL

The current public policy strategy is to emphasize personal responsibility and the notion that people should help themselves, and not turn to government for handouts. Wilson, however, is an iconoclast determined to resist current policy trends, and he emphatically rejects the tendency towards individual survivalism and rigid opposition to government intervention. He proposes long-term solutions that include the development of a system of national performance standards in public schools, family

36. WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS, supra note 10, at 208-209; See also id. at 149-82 (discussing the American belief system concerning poverty and welfare).
37. Id. at 212-14.
policies to reinforce the learning systems in the schools, a national system of school-to-work transition, and programs to promote city-suburban economic interdependence and cooperation. For the short-term, he proposes an expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, a WPA-style job plan, and the development of job information and placement centers and subsidized car pools to resolve a locational mismatch between inner-city workers and suburban jobs. The ultimate aim of Wilson's proposals is the redistribution of public and private resources to create employment opportunities in order to eradicate social inequality.

Wilson's willingness to oppose current policy trends is laudable. Therefore, it is unfortunate that his proposals will matter little from a structural point of view. A major weakness of Wilson's redistributive proposals is their universal aspirations. Wilson wants his proposals to "benefit everyone, not just the truly disadvantaged." Yet, he offers little evidence that everyone else shares with inner-city blacks the burdens attendant to the structural transformation of the American political economy in exactly the same way. Whites implicitly are affected, but nothing in When Work Disappears indicates they suffer a similar near-total displacement. The same seems to hold true for Latinos, whom, according to Wilson's data, face relatively positive employer perceptions about their qualifications and work ethic, which enable them to enjoy comparatively low levels of joblessness in urban neighborhoods. In urban neighborhoods, Asians, particularly Koreans, are self-employed entrepreneurs — a status which makes them somewhat less vulnerable to inner-city joblessness in a changing political economy. Thus, it is not acceptable to point out how a great transformation negatively impacts African Americans, and then deliberately neglect that fact as a policy matter. Under the circumstances, any policy recommendation must exclusively address the plight of blacks in the inner city.

Additionally, Wilson seeks to implement his redistributive proposals within the very sphere, the very political economy that causes the social inequities to which he objects. The American political economy is a

38. Id. at 215.
39. Id. at 216-18.
40. Id. at 218-20.
41. Id. at 221-23.
42. Id. at 225-35.
43. Id. at 223-24.
44. Id. at xxii.
45. Id. at 112-13.
46. Id. at 19. But see Carey Goldberg, Hispanic Households Struggle as Poorest of the Poor in U.S., OPPORTUNITY TIMES, Jan. 30, 1997, at A1, A12 (reporting that structural changes in the economy have drastically reduced well-paid, blue-collar jobs for the American Hispanic population, thus causing across-the-board impoverishment).
sphere within which deprivation and disparity are not only tolerated, they are defining characteristics.\textsuperscript{47} It is a sphere where Americans are least remorseful about the deleterious consequences of technological innovations, racialized signification, and of the structural features of contemporary capitalism. Instead, Americans readily embrace the idea that the ways of the political economy rightly reflect nothing more than differences among individual effort, character and morality. Thus, when it comes to the American political economy, there is built-in, systemic resistance to any notion of redistributive justice. This is especially so when redistribution would appear to benefit racial minorities.\textsuperscript{48} At that point of perception, Americans are unreceptive to any structural analysis of socio-economic constraints and disparities. Wilson himself recognizes this dynamic when he acknowledges an American ethos that favors individualistic — rather than structural — explanations of inequality.\textsuperscript{49}

Wilson writes about his redistributive proposals as programs to "provide more job opportunities,"\textsuperscript{50} to "increase employment opportunities."\textsuperscript{51} In doing so, Wilson seems to treat opportunity as a possession — something like separable goods that can be increased or decreased by being given out or withheld. The political philosopher Iris Marion Young points out, however, that opportunity is not an allocable thing. "Opportunity is a concept of enablement rather than possession; it refers to doing more than having."\textsuperscript{52} According to Young,

A person has opportunities if he or she is not constrained from doing things, and lives under the enabling conditions for doing them. Having opportunities in this sense certainly does often entail having material possessions, such as food, clothing, tools, land, or machines. Being enabled or constrained refers more directly, however, to the rules and practices that govern one's action, the way other people treat one in the context of specific social relations, and the broader structural possibilities produced by the confluence of a multitude of actions and practices. It makes no sense to speak of opportunities as themselves things possessed.\textsuperscript{53}

Wilson may be correct that the possession of education, occupational skills, and so on are prerequisites for the employment of blacks residing

\textsuperscript{47}. See Jennifer M. Russell, The Race/Class Conundrum and the Pursuit of Individualism in the Making of Social Policy, 46 Hastings L.J. 1353, 1384 (1995) (discussing economic disparity as a central feature of liberal democracies such as the United States).

\textsuperscript{48}. See When Work Disappears, supra note 10, at 193 (noting that "many white Americans have turned against a strategy that emphasizes programs they perceive as benefiting only racial minorities.").

\textsuperscript{49}. \textit{id}. at 158-61.

\textsuperscript{50}. \textit{id}. at 231 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{51}. \textit{id}. at 235 (emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{52}. See Young, supra note 35, at 26.

\textsuperscript{53}. \textit{id}.
in the inner cities. Education and skills are not, however, all there is to black employment opportunity. On the contrary, black employment opportunity is both a manifestation of, and is governed by, a complex amalgamation of economic, political and ideological relations in American society. The range of opportunity available to blacks in general and particularly to blacks residing in inner cities has more to do with the images and social meaning of blackness in America,\(^{54}\) than with mere possession of education and skills.\(^{55}\)

Wilson's own data suggests the limits of his redistribution proposals. A survey of employers revealed a pattern and practice of assuming that inner-city black workers generally are lazy procrastinators with bad attitudes, drug problems, perverted values, and poor language skills.\(^{56}\) Moreover, employment decisions were made on the basis of those assumptions regardless of an individual black applicant's qualifications. The net effect, as Wilson knows, was that many inner-city black applicants were routinely screened out of the labor recruitment process without a chance to prove their qualifications on an individual level.\(^{57}\) No educational- or skills-redistributive scheme is capable of eliminating that sort of systematically-applied racial animosity.

IV. CONCLUSION

*When Work Disappears* provides policy makers and concerned citizens with a cogent analysis of the systemic constraints faced by millions of African Americans isolated in urban neighborhoods. Its structural focus — which is characteristic of all of Wilson's work to date on the black urban poor — is a welcomed, radical departure from conventional analysis that focuses on individual pathologies. The shortcoming of *When Work Disappears* lies in its policy recommendations that insufficiently address the raciality of black poverty and the ethos governing the structural sphere within which they are to be implemented. Notwithstanding these criticisms *When Work Disappears* should be read — not just once, but again and again, or at least until we acknowledge that social and economic structure is the root cause of the impoverishment of blacks in our inner cities.

\(^{54}\) See Russell, *supra* note 47, at 1392-1407, 1440-54 (demonstrating how the practices of American individualism render "blackness" a referent to characteristics that are deviant, inferior, and un-American; and how "blackness" restricts the economic opportunities of African-Americans).

\(^{55}\) Denial of employment opportunity to credentialed blacks is a fact that requires no further elaboration here.

\(^{56}\) See *When Work Disappears*, *supra* note 10, at 111-46.

\(^{57}\) *Id.* at 137-38.