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Change, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Apr., 1979), pp. 54-56
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40163358

Accessed: 30/10/2012 15:29

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SOUL STRUGGLES

If We Won, Why Aren't We Smiling?

The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions by William Julius Wilson. University of Chicago, 204 pages, $12.50.

Protest, Politics, and Prosperity: Black Americans and White Institutions, 1940-75 by Dorothy K. Newman, *et al*. New York: Pantheon, 348 pages, $4.95 (paperback).

The near-ubiquity of white racism in America has long been an open secret, but not until relatively recent times has it been widely perceived as a social problem. Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney in his now notorious Dred Scott decision (1857) doubtless spoke for most white citizens of his day when without a trace of bad conscience he approvingly thumbnailed the history of American racism. "For more than a century before the Declaration of Independence," the Chief Justice noted, "the Negroes had been regarded as beings of an inferior order...so far inferior that they had no rights which a white man was bound to respect." In those times of moral certitude, and for generations to come, the notion of "Negro inferiority" was not so much an issue as it was an axiom. Journalists diligently reported it; commentators soberly confirmed it; scholars ponderously "proved" it. So embedded in the national psyche was white hubris that the pop historian Hendrik Van Loon, in a 1923 award-winning essay on "Tolerance," could casually observe that "a Zulu riding in a Rolls Royce is still a Zulu." (Uncle Remus back then professed a larger vision: "Niggers is niggers now, but de time wuz w'en we 'uz all niggers tergedder.")

Very likely it wasn't until the 1930s that people in any large numbers began to see something ugly in all that arrogance, and to suspect that the white emperor wore no clothes. For many, Gunnar Myrdal made the new consciousness official with his opening lines to *An American Dilemma* (1944): "There is a 'Negro problem' in the United States," he wrote, "and most Americans are aware of it.... Americans have to react to it, politically as citizens and...privately as neighbors." As Myrdal and his coauthors made clear in that large and seminal work, the "Negro problem" was really a white problem; for they demonstrated beyond cavil the extent to which we had institutionalized racial discrimination, weaving it tightly—perhaps inextricably—into the fabric of our national life. This we did in defiance of what Myrdal called "the American Creed," by which he meant that shared set of beliefs roughly embodied in the first phrases of the Declaration of Independence. It was his opinion that the resulting clash between the ideal of equality and the ideology of racism had made a battleground of our collective conscience. "America," he wrote, "is continuously struggling for its soul."

So—how now goes the struggle? From the two books at hand we get two different answers, as well as two different temperatures of scholarship. William Julius Wilson, a black sociologist at the University of Chicago, is cool, theoretical, and dispassionate in tone. Using history as his guide and various economic theories as his goad, Wilson attempts to persuade us that the very boundaries of the struggle have lately shifted, and that Myrdal's "Negro problem" is now largely extinct; what we have instead is a class problem, wherein a sizable and enduring black underclass finds itself the victim, not of racist tradition, but of technological progress. That this youthful army of the unemployed happens to be black, says Wilson, is "an accident of history" rather than a consequence of continuing white discrimination.

Dorothy K. Newman is also a sociologist, one who spent years plumbing the empirical depths of segregation as research director of the National Urban League. Compared with Wilson, Newman and her author-colleagues are hot, pragmatic, and compassionate. While their book, billed as a 35-year update of Myrdal, perfunctorily affirms the gains blacks have made since the early sixties, it concentrates more on the gains they have not made, citing time and again "the resistance of white Americans to accepting blacks as equals." The message is that white racism remains alive and well, and that the American soul struggle is still up for grabs.

Both these books have been out long enough now to have attracted their partisans and their reprovers; and if my periodical readings are a fair sample, it seems clear that in the war of reviews Wilson has won hands down. Even the *New York Times*, not the world's most roseate journal, considered Wilson's sophisticated optimism more convincing than Newman's straightforward gloom. Yet Newman, for all her old-fashioned, civil-rightser's biases, surely has a firmer grip on current racial realities than does Wilson. (Here I should mention a "conflict of interest": I was lucky enough to read an early draft of the Newman manuscript and to make some minor suggestions.)

If most reviewers have preferred Wilson's bright mirage to Newman's dark mirror, it may be because they, like the rest of us, are weary of domestic strife and of guilt-edged sermons. Many Americans these days are understandably

eager to accept glad racial tidings with no questions asked, especially when they come to us courtesy of a brilliant black scholar with a taste for abstractions. Pangloss, it turns out, is a master theoretician.

In *The Declining Significance of Race*, Wilson ranges freely and fascinatingly over the history of racial oppression in the United States—from pre-Civil War days, when the estates of white southern aristocrats were irrigated by the sweat of black slaves, to pre-New Deal days, when northern industrialists and their white workers frequently combined to shut blacks out of the job market. (Except during strikes: Wilson includes a startling table showing the extent to which corporations, between 1916 and 1934, relied on scab black labor to bust lily-white unions.)

His history is largely economic; although he says he does not subscribe to "the view that racial problems are necessarily derived from more fundamental class problems," he has nonetheless made a central issue of the constantly shifting job market, persuasively linking the course of racism to the aspirations of white capitalists and to the fears of white workers. No one has done this better or more tellingly. Wilson is able to establish, for example, that the late nineteenth century was for the North "an unprecedented period of racial unity and integration," distinguished by relatively equal employment opportunities and by the passage in several states of civil rights legislation. Only later, when southern blacks began to drift northward in large numbers, did frightened whites repeal the laws and lock the factory gates.

Old patterns of economic discrimination, says Wilson, began to break up with the New Deal, when the more liberal unions lowered the color bar a notch or two. The production demands of World War II, followed by two decades of nearly uninterrupted prosperity, further eroded Jim Crowism in the North. Finally, the protests and civil rights reforms of the sixties completed the progressive cycle begun almost half a century ago, and brought us, in Wilson's view, to our present nonracial impasse.

He devotes considerable space in support of his proposition that there are now two classes of black Americans—the uneducated poor and the educated affluent—where before there had been only one (all poor). Middle-class blacks, he argues, are doing just fine, thanks to the new, nondiscriminatory job market; lower-class blacks, meanwhile, suffer hardships that are largely unrelated to race. These ghetto dwellers, says Wilson, simply have had the ill luck to have come of age at the wrong moment—when the economy is slowing down, when factories are automating, and when corporations are moving outward from cities to suburbs. Therefore, "It would be nearly impossible to comprehend the economic plight of lower-class

blacks in the inner city by focusing solely on racial oppression; that is, [on] the overt and explicit effort of whites to keep blacks in a subjugated state...."

And: "It would also be difficult to explain the rapid economic improvement of the black elite by rigidly postulating the view that traditional patterns of discrimination are still salient in the labor-market practices of American industries." After which Wilson nails down his main plank: "Economic class is now a more important factor than race in determining job placement for blacks."

Wilson's news has been so cheerfully received because what he seems to be telling us is precisely what we've always longed to hear: that we have managed to slip through the horns of our American Dilemma and that the ancient battle for racial justice is nearly won. But, then, why aren't we dancing in the streets? Is it possible that the report of racism's death has been greatly exaggerated?

Newman's *Protest, Politics, and Prosperity* is helpful here. It pitilessly documents our sins and, by coincidence, spotlights some missing beams in Wilson's logical structure. Take the matter of employment, which Newman, like Wilson, thinks central to any discussion of race. In Newman's book, today's labor market for blacks is still no Promised Land; it remains a white-dominated wilderness, full of prickly prejudices and discriminatory practices. "The black struggle for jobs continues," Newman notes, "because inequality still prevails. Racial discrimination and acceptance of the resulting inequality remain embedded in the white-dominated job market, buttressed by many rationalizations." An accompanying chart bears her out. It compares the rise, from 1940-75, of black occupational positions with those of white workers. True, blacks rose faster than did whites, but as of 1975 blacks had not even reached the whites' 1940 level! Thus what Wilson would call progress Newman has labeled disaster.

The book is especially persuasive in two other areas—education and housing. Where Wilson treats these subjects mechanistically, citing inferior schools and neighborhoods as two more nonracial reasons blacks can't get jobs, Newman confronts them squarely as racial issues. She observes first that corporations often use such social ills as excuses for continuing racist employment policies, and second that segregated housing, far from being an economic accident, is part of a broad social intent on the part of white-controlled institutions, including the banks, the real estate industry, and some government agencies.

In a chapter on "Learning Without Earning," Newman points to industry's new, credential-ridden job standards, which compel prospective employees to seek college degrees in order to "learn" how to perform tasks that in the past have been adequately handled by persons who never finished high

school; and she suggests that such credentialism is really a smoke screen for racism—a respectable device allowing corporations to shun blacks without seeming to violate the tenets of affirmative action. Perhaps she carries the point too far; still, her approach is refreshingly tough-minded in contrast to Wilson's easy acceptance of corporate rationales.

Likewise, in a chapter called "But Not Next Door," Newman and her coauthors are able to demonstrate that housing is "one of the areas of greatest white resistance to integration," that since 1960 neighborhood segregation has grown worse, and that federal policy has been of little or no use in loosening the suburban white noose that chokes the black inner city. Newman correctly suggests that polite, white, suburban racism—pampered by zoning exclusions and financed by the taxes of newly located industries—comes very close to the heart of the employment problem. As Patricia Harris, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, has observed, "Communities that say we will take the benefit of a good tax base but will not let people who might benefit from that employment live in this community ought to be required to think about the injustice of that."

Ultimately, for all its strengths, the Wilson book works to postpone that elusive moment of truth for white Americans, while the Newman book tries to keep us struggling toward the light. It appears we have miles to go before our soul awakes.

—*Richard J. Margolis*

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FEDERAL SUBSIDIES

Doing Sums Is Some Doing

Scholars, Dollars & Bureaucrats by Chester E. Finn, Jr. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 238 pages, $11.95.

Chester Finn has examined federal aid to higher education and come to a conclusion parallel to that hoary description of group decision making: "A camel is a horse designed by a committee." In this case, however, Finn is not at all sure that a camel is the wrong beast to carry the nation's colleges and universities across the Washington badlands.

He has added up, as well as anyone can, the 400-plus federal programs that provide direct and indirect assistance to postsecondary education and come up with a $14 billion price tag. He has tried to find a single federal policy that covers all those programs and all that money, and has come up with a quotation from James Perkins: "With respect to higher education, the federal government has made no decision. It has made bits and pieces of decisions about specific and limited issues."

To illustrate the range of programs, Finn has provided a table of 22 categories of federal expenditures for higher education. Three of the four largest categories involve outlays from federal departments or agencies that have primary missions other than education of young people—assistance to military veterans, survivors' and dependents' assistance under Social Security, and the support of research and development. Almost half of the $14 billion falls under those three entries.

Finn has divided his examination of federal aid along the lines of the familiar argument about how it should be distributed. Nearly half of the book is about aid to students; most of the rest about aid to the schools. He offers a proposal to redesign the program of "basic" grants to students. It seeks to remedy what he sees as two flaws in the current arrangement: its failure to recognize "the true cost of attending private and out-of-state public institutions," and its dependencies on a single system of calculating student aid, regardless of the kind of school a student is attending.

Yes, Finn knows he is asking for a political battle. He recognizes the long-standing conflict between the public and private institutions in this area. He doesn't even try to sell his suggestion as the perfect solution, only as the outline of a plan that can help "people go to college who could not do so without assistance," give them a "reasonable choice" of schools, assist private colleges without ending competition among schools or "snaring Washington in a web of institutional subsidies," and, finally, make some sense out of the area of federal aid to students.

For reasons he outlines in some detail, including the potential rekindling of the old fire that flares every time someone in Washington or elsewhere talks about federal aid to church-related schools, Finn believes that in the area of assistance to institutions "none of the major alternatives to the present financing arrangements has advantages that outweigh its drawbacks."

And here he introduces something that illustrates the rightward shift of people in Finn's position in Washington. Twenty years ago, the senior legislative assistant to a Democratic senator from New York (Finn works for Daniel Patrick Moynihan) would have addressed himself to the dangers of federal regulation as the price of federal aid only to assure the prospective clients of such benefits that they had nothing to fear from Washington. Well, college administrators, not to speak of New York Democratic senators, have changed, and Finn opens his chapter on "Exploring the Regulatory Swamp" by declaring that Senator Barry Goldwater was right when he said in 1961 that reenactment of the National Defense Education Act would "mark the inception of aid, supervision, and ultimately control of education in this country by federal authorities."