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Wages of Despair

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WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS: The World of the New Urban Poor

By William Julius Wilson. Knopf. 352 pp. \$ 26

WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON is America's most celebrated black social scientist. Four months ago a laudatory profile in the New Yorker heralded the forthcoming publication of this book and emphasized that Wilson's work is of political as well as academic importance: President Clinton "often calls on Wilson for advice, inviting him to dinner and soliciting memorandums."

The New Yorker touted When Work Disappears as Wilson's "magnum opus," "more ambitious and accessible than anything he has published before." Expectations for this new work have indeed been high; Wilson's acknowledgments report that more than a dozen foundations and other funding sources have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in his research.

Nine years ago, reviewing Wilson's previous volume, The Truly Disadvantaged, for Book World, I called his work "sophisticated and persuasive," "insightful and tough-minded." Regrettably and surprisingly, When Work Disappears is none of those things. Instead, much to my dismay, it is an embarrassingly weak and uninteresting work, a book that recapitulates some of Wilson's previous arguments while adding almost nothing new. It will have none of the influence of The Truly Disadvantaged and indeed may stimulate journalistic curiosity into why such a mountain of financial support has brought forth such a molehill of analysis and conclusions.

When Work Disappears is sometimes careless and oftentimes unoriginal. Careful students of Wilson's work will recognize how large portions of chapters one, two and seven are drawn almost verbatim from essays he published as much as five years ago in such scholarly journals as Political Science Quarterly and the Michigan Quarterly Review. Far more seriously, an attentive reader of this book may notice how a large section of text that first appears on page 29 reappears on page 152. Republishing one's own earlier work is an all-too-common academic practice, but the republication of text more than once in the same book suggests that neither Wilson nor his editor read the final version of this volume with any substantive care.

Similarly, researchers may also wonder why an interview snippet on page 69 reveals in passing that Wilson's assistants paid their South Side Chicago respondents for giving interviews ("I explained I'd pay him with a money order because we don't carry cash"), while Wilson otherwise never discussed how his interviewers compensated their subjects. Anyone seeking to judge the content and context of the material upon which Wilson relies (most of it dates from 1987 and

1988) ought to be offered a full and accurate account of the circumstances under which the interviews were conducted.

Wilson's underlying argument will be totally familiar to anyone who knows his writings: "The disappearance of work and the consequences of that disappearance . . . are the central problems of the inner-city ghetto." A "precipitous drop in manufacturing employment" heralded a "nationwide decline in the fortunes of low skilled workers." To Wilson, "the joblessness of the poor . . . represents the more extreme form of economic marginality experienced by large segments of the population." But black America has suffered disproportionately from these "structural changes in the economy," in part because "the proportion of poor black Americans living in central cities rose from 38 percent in 1959 to 80 percent in 1991."

Since work "constitutes a framework for daily behavior and patterns of interaction because it imposes disciplines and regularities," this "concentrated and persistent joblessness" in America's inner cities has consequences that reach far beyond the economic. What Wilson calls "culturally destructive behavior and attitudes" -- everything from out-of-wedlock teenage pregnancies to the streetwise drug culture and rampant crime -- all have their roots in the disappearance of meaningful employment opportunities.

Nine years ago, Wilson spoke of the "underclass" without squeamishness; now -- without offering any explanation for his change of heart -- he dismisses the term as an "epithet." Far more than ever before, Wilson seems acutely defensive about those who have criticized him from the left, and he now wants to rebut "the myth that inner-city residents do not share the values and aspirations of mainstream society." However, he acknowledges that it is difficult to imagine that what he circumspectly calls "ghetto-related cultural adaptations . . . can change without meaningful and widespread transformation of the structure of opportunity in the ghetto."

To this end, Wilson in his final chapter tries to propound policies for the future. In another unacknowledged shift from his earlier work, he asserts that affirmative-action programs for college admissions and for work-force hirings and promotions ought to employ "a broad definition of disadvantage that incorporates notions of both need and race" as distinct from "purely race neutral" standards based upon "need rather than race."

ADDITIONALLY, Wilson voices support for both "a system of national performance standards for every public school in the United States" and "an effective public school choice program." Finally, as the centerpiece of his agenda, he advocates "public-sector employment of last resort" through "the creation of WPA style jobs" whereby the jobless could perform the sort of "useful public work that is currently not being done for financial reasons," such as "the cleaning of streets twice, not once, a day." Really now -- just which major American city is he imagining?

Wilson admits that such an initiative would "not be cheap" but asserts that since he wants "to galvanize and rally concerned Americans to fight back . . . I therefore do not advance proposals that seem acceptable or 'realistic' given the current political climate." But he acknowledges that this attitude makes his suggestions all but irrelevant: "The kinds of . . . solutions that I have proposed stand little chance of being adopted, not to mention seriously considered."

Looking ahead, Wilson claims in conclusion that "what might evolve in the future is a movement . . . toward a stronger social safety net in the United States." That of course was written well before his friend the president signed into law the new Republican-sponsored welfare reform package that radically weakens the "safety net," but it unfortunately highlights just how thoroughly unsatisfactory and disappointing a book *When Work Disappears* is.

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