

at the program in which he worked, wondering whether he might not be singing for his American supper. I have not met him, but I have known enough people who worked enthusiastically in the Soviet system and then turned on it with disgust to believe that his conversion was honest.

The Soviet Union was a world in which there was one employer, one avenue for self-fulfillment, one legal source of information, one sanctioned world view. A young man growing up in that world, especially a highly talented member of a minority in a remote corner of that world, would be flattered and overjoyed by a chance to enter the elite of his state. It meant not only privilege and power; it also meant a proud place in a state in which most people really were patriotic, and most, like Dr. Alibek and even Dr. Andrei Sakharov, the great physicist and dissident, earnestly believed that the United States was out to destroy the Soviet Union and had to be resisted with every means at hand. "We had been taught as schoolchildren and it was drummed into us as young military officers that the capitalist world was united in only one aim: to destroy the Soviet Union," writes Dr. Alibekov. "It was not difficult for me to believe that the United States would use any conceivable weapon against us, and that our own survival depended on matching their duplicity."

Like Dr. Sakharov, Dr. Alibekov came to the light gradually. So did many other people I knew. It was hard. To accept that the Soviet system was wrong was to reject a religion, to conclude that an entire preceding lifetime was misguided.

I dwell at some length on this aspect of the book because there are readers who will say that the United States and other countries also had top-secret biological weapons programs, along with all the chemical and nuclear means for mass destruction. Gruesome as the germs were that Dr. Alibekov describes, this was the name of the Cold War game in which neither side was clean.

Yet what Dr. Alibekov chronicles is something else, a system in which every resource, every skill was har-

nessed to the power of the state to an extraordinary degree. In every school across the vast nation, promising students were routinely recruited for the secret work of the state. When anthrax escapes into the air at Sverdlovsk, the overriding concern of the state is to conceal what happened. When the World Health Organization announces in 1980 that smallpox has been eradicated from the planet, the Kremlin recognizes a military opportunity: "A world no longer protected from smallpox was a world newly vulnerable to the disease." When a colleague begs to drop out of "The System" and return to his collective farm, the KGB reports with satisfaction that he went home and "accidentally" drowned.

For the Soviet Union, signing the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention in 1972 was the signal to create "the largest and most advanced biological warfare establishment in the world." When Dr. Alibekov is finally initiated into the knowledge that he would be making biological weapons and that this was in violation of an international treaty, he is told, "But the United States signed it too, and we believe that the Americans are lying."

"I told him, earnestly, that I believed it too," writes Dr. Alibekov, adding: "The five minutes I spent with him represented the first and last time any official would bring up a question of ethics for the rest of my career."

Dr. Alibekov's conviction, which he has argued before his debriefers and congressional committees, is that such habits linger long. The old Soviet secrecy has settled on the surviving centers of biological research, and the accumulated knowledge of his period remains available for quick revival. Though the state he served is dead, he is regarded by many in Russia as a traitor, and there have been threats on his life.

All this may sound unduly sinister, and Russia is certainly not the Soviet Union. Yet to me the real value of Dr. Alibekov's story is that it is not only an exposé of biological horrors, but also the revelation of a system that created a medium in which more than 60,000 people, a young Kazakh officer

among them, willingly dedicated their talents and lives to cultivating deadly germs.

SERGE SCHMEMANN, deputy foreign editor of The New York Times, was the Times' Moscow bureau chief from 1980-86 and '90-94.

Affirmative Reaction

By David J. Garrow

WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON HAS been one of America's best known scholars of race and poverty for over 20 years, but this short book has an expressly political rather than scholarly purpose: to advocate the creation of a national "multiracial political coalition with a mass-based economic agenda" that would combat the dramatic increase in economic inequality that has occurred in America during the 1980s and '90s. Wilson gives almost equal weight to a second avowedly political argument, namely how such a coalition could explicitly champion "race-based affirmative action programs" without such goals "becoming racially divisive." Wilson's first aim will surprise no one who is familiar with either of his two preceding books (*The Truly Disadvantaged*, 1987, and *When Work Disappears*, 1996), but his second contention illuminates with increased frankness just how significantly Wilson's attitude toward race-conscious policies has evolved over the past 12 years.

Wilson's *Bridge* is not this year's only small book with a large economic agenda—Richard B. Freeman's even tinier *The New Inequality: Creating Solutions for Poor America* (Beacon Press) briefly advances some plausible policy ideas—but Wilson's public notoriety as President Clinton's favorite sociologist insures that his proposals will draw more attention than if the same recommendations were propounded by a less renowned academic. The most substantive and original recent books on current American poverty—Paul A. Jargowsky's *Poverty and Place: Ghettos, Barrios, and the American City* (Russell Sage Foundation) and Dalton Con-

ley's *Being Black, Living in the Red* (University of California Press)—rarely if ever draw review attention from major newspapers and magazines, but the lack of originality in Wilson's analyses is not necessarily a strike against them.

What Wilson, like Freeman, terms "the rising inequality in American society" should come as no surprise to anyone who has examined income distribution statistics from the past two decades. While the top 20 percent of Americans, and especially the top 5 percent, have done very well indeed during the economic good times of the '80s and '90s, the vast majority of Americans have seen no real increase in their incomes despite the aura of prosperity. Much of the blame lies with depressed wages, especially those earned by the working poor. Anyone receiving the current federal minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour is unable to support a family, and if the minimum wage of thirty years ago were translated into today's dollars, it would be more than \$2 higher—approximately \$7.35—than it actually is. Nevertheless, a 1998 congressional effort to raise it to \$6.15 went nowhere, and the successes that local activist groups have had in persuading several dozen major cities to adopt "Living Wage" measures that require municipal contractors to pay higher minimum wages have received little attention in the national press.

Wilson acknowledges that recent income statistics show that our "rising inequality has slowed in the last two years ... and may enter a period of remission," but that nascent trend will do little to reverse a situation which Wilson insists we must address. Wilson voices no new economic policy suggestions here (a reader seeking those should turn to Freeman), and Wilson's predominant focus is the politics of race, not income inequality. "A detailed discussion of the structure of a national multiracial political coalition is beyond the scope and purpose of this short book," Wilson forewarns, and instead of detailing what

such a coalition might entail, Wilson devotes much of the book to a less than fully persuasive defense of race-based programs. Wilson wants to insist that "in the last decade, the nation seems to have become more divided on issues pertaining to race," and he similarly contends that if African-American citizens are going to support any economically progressive coalition, the coalition will have no choice but to embrace their special self-interest in

racially-conscious selection policies. These assertions are of course nowhere near as obvious as Wilson would like a reader to believe, but the most notable aspect of Wilson's advocacy of affirmative action is how much his tone and emphasis, if not his underlying substantive views, have changed in the 12 years since he wrote *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

Wilson's political orientation now

appears both a good deal more racist and explicitly more elitist. In 1987, Wilson willingly conceded that affirmative action programs predominantly benefit better-off minority group members rather than the really needy: "if policies of preferential treatment ... are conceived not in terms of the actual disadvantages suffered by individuals but rather in terms of race or ethnic group membership, then these policies will further enhance the opportunities of the more advantaged without addressing the problems of the truly disadvantaged." By 1997, however, Wilson's perspective had significantly changed, for he warned in a collection entitled *The New Majority* that "affirmative action based solely on need or economic class position could create a situation in which African-Americans who are admitted to Harvard represent the bottom half of the socioeconomic continuum in the black community." To Wilson such an outcome would be so unfair and/or undesirable that no further comment was required.

**THE BRIDGE OVER THE RACIAL DIVIDE:
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In *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson readily acknowledged that “contemporary racial problems in America, or issues perceived to be racial problems, are often part of a more general or complex set of problems whose origin and/or development may have little or no direct or indirect connection with race.” Indeed, Wilson in 1987 explicitly called for “a comprehensive program that combines employment policies with social welfare policies and that features universal as opposed to race- or group-specific strategies.” The second part of that stance has since been jettisoned, however, with Wilson now insisting (in the September/October issue of *The American Prospect*) that “an entirely race-neutral agenda would be a mistake.” He warns in *Bridge* that “an affirmative action program based solely on financial need or economic class would do little to sustain racial and ethnic diversity,” and there seems little doubt that William Julius Wilson in 1999 is more deeply committed to the advancement of that sort of diversity than to combatting economic inequality regardless of race. Indeed, some of Wilson’s arguments now sound more like those of a political consultant than a scholar, as when he recommends renaming “affirmative action” “affirmative opportunity.” “By changing the language we use when discussing such programs, we increase their potential for public support and make them acceptable,” Wilson revealingly observes.

“Something more than formal, legal equality is required to overcome the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow segregation,” Wilson now insists, citing “the enduring burdens—the social and psychological damage” that African-Americans bear regardless of their economic class. Irrespective of how a reader reacts to that claim, the William Julius Wilson of 1999 bears far less resemblance to the Wilson of 1987 than most readers—in the White House or elsewhere—are apt to realize.

DAVID J. GARROW, *Presidential Distinguished Professor at Emory University Law School, reviewed both The Truly Disadvantaged and When Work Disappears for The Washington Post.*

Grounds for Dissent

By Heather Bourbeau

SINCE THE FIRST BEANS WERE serendipitously discovered by the legendary goatherd Kaldi, in Ethiopia, coffee has been the muse and stimulus of imams, artists, writers, and radicals. Once the exclusive treat of nobility and religious men, coffee would go on to fuel the common man through the industrial age and into the information age. Now our collective fashions and addictions have made the bean ubiquitous and coffee snobbery *de rigueur*. And yet few coffee consumers know the path—geographical, political, even karmic—that their beloved bean has taken.

In his new book, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World*, Mark Pendergrast does his best to educate the drinker and provide some moral alternatives to conspicuous consumption. While underscoring the heady brew’s role in geopolitics and environmental devastation, the book’s strength lies in Pendergrast’s chronicle of quirky factoids and wanton capitalism as exemplified by the lust for the ambrosia of our times.

He credits coffee with the end of slavery in Brazil, the start of revolutions in Guatemala, and even hints that the French Revolution was spawned by the culture of coffee. A Renaissance Turkish woman could divorce her husband if he failed to provide her with her daily quota of coffee. Instead of banning the dreaded “Muslim drink,” Pope Clement VIII baptized coffee, making it a “truly Christian beverage.” A century later, Turkish troops fleeing Vienna would leave behind sacks of coffee, which were discovered by an innovative Franz George Kolschitzky, who launched the Viennese café tradition.

For all his painstaking research, Pendergrast’s skill as a non-academic historian shines best when he reaches the modern New World through his often-witty descriptions of an indus-

try dominated by imperialistic traditions, sexism, and blinded, arrogant leaders. Among the more engrossing tales is Pendergrast’s portrait of the fanatic creator of the successful coffee-alternative Postum and Grape-Nuts cereal, C.W. Post, and of the coffee men he left in his zealous anti-coffee wake. On the news that his archenemy, Post, had suffered a nervous breakdown after years of denouncing “coffee-slugged nerves,” *Tea & Coffee Trade Journal* editor William Ukers wrote with sardonic glee, “We would not appear to gloat over his misfortune.” Reveling, he continued, “Indeed, if his breakdown is in any measure due to his drinking Postum all these years, he has our deep sympathy.” In wishing Post a rapid

recovery, Ukers suggested a nurse “slip him a cup of coffee now and then during his convalescence.”

To add injury to irony, Post was soon after diagnosed with appendicitis. For years, he had claimed that his Grape-Nuts

cereal cured just such an ailment. For a health-nut who wrote that sickness was the creation of a feeble human mind, the humiliating need of an operation and recuperation plunged him deeper into a depression that led to his eventual suicide. He left the family business to his daughter Marjorie Merriweather Post, who would twist fate further by creating General Foods and purchasing Maxwell House Coffee.

Tucked in between profiles are world wars, cataclysmic frosts and droughts, and the rise and falls of coffee cartels, but all are personalized via dramatic characterization. Pendergrast provides a biased and bemused account of the men behind the rise of Starbucks (no glamorization of the chain here). And for those readers still fumbling with kitsch-hip, bad-brew percolators, Pendergrast has a special appendix on “How to Brew the Perfect Cup.”

With so much to offer it would be understandable to overlook the greatest downfall of the book—the misleading title. As Pendergrast rightly points out, coffee is a worldwide obsession, one that has affected global politics, economy and social values.

**UNCOMMON GROUNDS:
The History of Coffee
and How it Transformed
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By Mark Pendergrast

Basic Books, \$27.50