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To cite this article: Matthew Desmond (2015) Who speaks for the dispossessed?, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 38:8, 1258-1263, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2015.1016061](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1016061)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1016061>



Published online: 22 Apr 2015.



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Who speaks for the dispossessed?

Matthew Desmond

(Received 24 August 2014; accepted 27 November 2014)

This commentary articulates three perspectives on race in America: economic determinism, institutionalism and a field-theoretic approach. It argues that William Julius Wilson's masterwork, *The Declining Significance of Race*, was informed by the first and anticipated the latter two. Wilson's most profound and enduring legacy is his unwavering concern for the dispossessed.

Keywords: race; class; history; urban poverty; public policy; William Julius Wilson

A good many early critics of William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* acted like Nietzsche's ([1879] 2000, 155) 'worst readers', who 'proceed like plundering soldiers: they pick up a few things they can use, soil and confuse the rest, and blaspheme the whole'. Some seemed to have read only its title. They would have been better off had they moved on to the subtitle – *Blacks and Changing American Institutions* – because the central thrust of the book has to do with the fundamental ways large-scale transformations in economic and political institutions brought about the historic decoupling of race from class in the African-American experience. Wilson argues that, broadly speaking, 'the interaction between race and economic class only assumed real importance for blacks in the late part of the industrial era of race relations ... [because] throughout most of the preindustrial period to be black was to be severely deprived of both social and economic resources' ([1978] 2012, 144, 122). How it came to be that African Americans' economic standing no longer was determined entirely by their blackness is the story of *The Declining Significance of Race*.

The story goes like this. During slavery, a small group of elite white planters held all the power. They used that power to usher in a system of racial caste oppression that deprived not only blacks but also non-slave-holding whites of any meaningful political or economic influence. Because plantation slaves could be hired out to other businessmen when work was slow, slavery depressed the price of labour in agriculture and all other professions involving unskilled and semi-skilled work. 'The more frequent the contact between black slaves and white workers in the labour market, the more the wages of white workers were depressed to the level of the price required for the hire of slaves' (44). The situation aroused anti-black antagonism among white workers, who sought an opportunity to bar blacks from competing with them for jobs. That opportunity came with the fall of slavery and the coinciding advance of industrial capitalism, which allowed white workers, first in the North then gradually in the South, to gain labour power and political leverage through organizing. They used their

newfound political influence to promote a system of Jim Crow segregation. In the industrial era, just as in the antebellum and early post-bellum eras, the American racial order was a deliberate consequence of political influence, which in turn was an expression of whites' class interests. 'If the racial laws in the antebellum South protected the class interests of the planters and reflected their overwhelming power,' Wilson writes, 'the Jim Crow segregation laws of the late nineteenth century reflected the rising power of white laborers; and if the political power of the planters was grounded in the system of production in a plantation economy, the emerging political power of the workers grew out of the new division of labor that accompanied industrialization' (146).

America entered into a period of modern industrialization after the Second World War, and the tide began to shift. New Deal legislation in the wake of the Great Depression facilitated the formation of interracial trade unions, which thwarted the widespread practice of using blacks as strike-breakers, and in so doing eased racial tensions between white and black workers. The 1950s and 1960s then ushered in national equal employment legislation, which further hindered employers' ability to use cheap black labour to undercut white workers. 'These corporate industry employment patterns have all but eliminated the importance of race in labor-management strife' (98); hence 'the declining significance of race' *when it came to white-black job competition*. With racial tension reduced in the economic sector thanks to new legal protections and expanding employment opportunity, racism needed to find a new home. So it picked up and moved into schools, neighbourhoods, and the civil sphere. 'The traditional racial struggles for power and privilege are now concentrated in the socio-political order. The main actors are basically the same – blacks and the white working class – but the issues now have more to do with racial control of residential areas, schools, municipal political systems, and recreational areas than with the control of jobs' (121). Wilson never argued that race was declining in significance in American life; he argued that, for the first time in American history, the modern racial order was not inscribed directly on economic systems of production.

As racist economic, political and legal barriers were lifted, black Americans began to experience class cleavages that white Americans had long known, although to a different degree. Some African Americans made significant inroads in the fields of business, law, politics, education, art and science; others were left behind to sink deeper into poverty and despair. A singular 'African American experience' never had existed, but that became all the more true with the rise of the black middle class, facilitated in significant part by the expansion of the government sector, and the demise of the black lower class, facilitated in significant part by the inability and unwillingness of state actors to adjust to changing economic realities. Wilson put the point plainly: 'Liberal programs such as affirmative action, although effective in enhancing job opportunities for more privileged blacks, are not really designed to deal with barriers to desirable jobs that are the result of the use of increasing automation, the relocation of industries, the segmentation of the labor market, and the shift from goods-producing to service-producing industries' (179).

This argument aligns with and advances a long tradition of scholarship that sees class divisions as the wellspring of racial divisions. This tradition can be traced back

to W. E. B. Du Bois ([1935] 1969), who began *Black Reconstruction in America* with chapters on black and white workers. ‘The plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America,’ Du Bois wrote. ... ‘Slavery bred in the poor white a dislike of Negro toil of all sorts. ... To these Negroes he transferred all the dislike and hatred which he had for the whole slave system’ (30, 12). Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948, xxx, 345) also believed that racial antagonism was ‘part and parcel of [the] class struggle’ and that the American racial order could only be understood by viewing the position of blacks as workers. (Cox went so far as to believe it ‘probable that without capitalism ... the world might never have experienced race prejudice.’) Herbert Blumer (1958) extended this line of thought in an influential essay, ‘Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position’, which attributed racial antagonism to the degree to which members of one ethnic or racial group feel threatened by another, an insight that has been empirically tested and extended by Lawrence Bobo and others (e.g. Bobo and Hutchings 1996).

And yet *The Declining Significance of Race* also reaches beyond an *economic determinist perspective* by concluding that racial antagonism is no longer primarily a product of struggles over work and wages. In that way it anticipated the emergence of different institutions that would come to have profound influence on American race relations: the *prison* and its criminal justice system (Western 2006); the *neighbourhood* and its uneven distribution of violence and concentrated disadvantage (Sampson 2012); *city politics* that often split along race and class lines (Pattillo 2007); the *housing market* and its techniques of resource extraction (Desmond 2012); the *public sector* and its frayed safety net (Edin and Lein 1997); and the *school* and its role in the reproduction of racial inequality (Neckerman 2007). A comprehensive theory of race in America now must seek to understand how racial inequalities influence and are influenced by the structure and dynamics of multiple fields of life, running from more ‘macro’ systems of social relations (political and legal fields) to more ‘micro’ arenas (aesthetic sphere, intimate life). We might call this an *institutionalist perspective* on American race relations.

This perspective would also encompass economic life and therefore would return to Wilson’s original object of study: competition for jobs and financial stability. Today, the main actors are not only blacks and the white working class; they also include Latino workers and a sizeable immigrant labour force. Some have argued that blacks with little education are relatively immune to migration flows, since immigrants primarily compete with each other in immigrant-dominated labour sectors (Borjas and Tienda 1987). Others, however, have arrived at the opposite conclusion, claiming that African Americans lose out because of increased competition with immigrants, who are less likely to face employer discrimination and who drive down the price of labour (Adelman et al. 2005). What impact (if any) do immigrant workers have on the employment opportunities of working- and lower-class African Americans and more broadly, on racial tensions and the so-called ‘black–brown divide’? The question is difficult, contentious and unsettled – just like those Wilson sought to address at the outset of his critical undertaking.

Whatever its originating sources, race as an organizing principle in social life can over time become divorced from those sources and grow sentient. That is, American society not only sponsors several critical ‘race-making institutions’ (Wacquant 2005),

but race itself has come to function as its own institution, complete with its peculiar internal logic and partial autonomy from other spheres of life. The structure and dynamics of the racial field are guided by social, cultural and collective-emotional relations that are themselves the products of the historical struggle between domination and democracy in American life (Emirbayer and Desmond *forthcoming*). This means that racial dynamics can no longer be understood as ‘second-order’ phenomena completely reducible to conflict taking place in arenas thought to be ‘more fundamental’, such as the economic or political spheres. It also means that institutional change, however meaningful and sweeping – the election of an African-American president, diversifying police departments, recruiting talented underrepresented minority students to leading universities – often has limited immediate impact on race relations. We might call this a *field-theoretic perspective* on race in America.

There are several moments in *The Declining Significance of Race* where Wilson pauses and tells the reader: ‘This point requires amplification.’ I would like to amplify one aspect of this book: Wilson’s concern for the black poor. If the varying pitch of Wilson’s passages is any indication, the devastating and demoralizing impact widening class cleavages within black America were having on its poorest members was the moral impulse that motivated his research programme. The book’s strongest language is reserved for the plight of the ghetto poor. ‘I remain convinced,’ Wilson wrote, ‘that the recent developments associated with our modern industrial society are largely responsible for the creation of a semipermanent underclass in the ghettos, and that the predicament of the underclass cannot be satisfactorily addressed by the mere passage of civil rights laws or the introduction of special racial programs such as affirmative action.’ (166). His epilogue concludes with a call that ‘the needs and interests of the black poor (as well as those of the other minority poor and the white poor) will no longer be underrepresented in serious public discussions, policies, and programs’ (182).

In the afterword to the third edition, Wilson concedes that ‘in many respects the conditions of poor African Americans are worse now than they were when I published *The Declining Significance of Race*’ (183). Who can argue with this conclusion, what with stunning racial disparities among the incarcerated, the targeting of black communities by the sub-prime loan industry, the re-concentration of black poverty after the Great Recession, the persistence of extremely high rates of joblessness among working-age black men in some cities, the retrenchment of several forms of public assistance to the needy, and the fragile state of the family within the inner city (e.g. Jargowsky 2013; Pettit 2012; Rugh and Massey 2010)? And who can dispute that by and large black/white racial prejudice at the individual level has declined precipitously since *The Declining Significance of Race* was first published? In 1978, only a third of Americans approved of interracial marriage between blacks and whites; today, 87% do (Newport 2013).

Making sense of this paradox – progress at the level of racial attitudes and tolerance in conjunction with stagnation, even degeneration, at the level of structural opportunity and chronic poverty; both historically unparalleled in degree among developed democracies (Patterson 1997) – is the responsibility of the next generation of students of the American city and its problems. The continuing significance of *The Declining*

Significance of Race is that the book still after three decades is an exemplar of how to understand large-scale transformations in American racial and economic life. Wilson provided us with a theory of change. In the historic moment in which we currently find ourselves, a new theory is needed for a society at once brimming with hope and progress and beset by enduring racism and deep poverty.

Ours today is the language of ‘inequality’. The American people and its politicians have raised their voice about the growing economic gap separating the rich from the rest. While the country looks one way, focusing on the expanding influence of the very wealthy at the expense of the middle class, Wilson faces the opposite direction, his gaze remaining fixed on the plight of the poorest among us. This, I believe, is Wilson’s most profound and enduring legacy. It is a beautiful one. ‘There is a beauty in art, in literature, in science, and in every triumph of intelligence, all of which I covet for my country’, Du Bois ([1935] 1969, 592–593) once wrote. ‘But there is a higher beauty still – in relieving the poor, in elevating the downtrodden, and being a succor to the oppressed.’

Acknowledgements

I thank Bruce Western and Deborah De Laurell for feedback on earlier drafts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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