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New perspectives on the declining significance of race: a rejoinder

William Julius Wilson

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In sharp contrast to many earlier studies, the articles in this symposium encompass a careful discussion of the two major underlying themes of my book, *The Declining Significance of Race*: (1) the effect of fundamental economic and political shifts on the changing relative importance of race and class in black occupational mobility and job placement; and (2) the swing in the concentration of racial conflict from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order. In my rejoinder I reflect on their arguments, including those that relate these themes to more recent developments in American race and ethnic relations featuring other groups, including whites and Latinos.

Keywords: race; economic class; life chances; economic transformations; political shifts; sociopolitical order; sense of group position

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to these thoughtful reflections on *The Declining Significance of Race* thirty-six years after its initial publication. While reading these articles, I was reminded of a question put to me many times: why did I chose the title ‘The Declining Significance of Race’ instead of ‘The Increasing Significance of Class’? My answer was twofold: first, the book concentrated on the experiences of African Americans, not ethnic and racial groups in general, and the use of the term ‘race’ in the title, as opposed to ‘class’, was more appropriate to capture the dynamic structural changes in the black community. The succinct title ‘The Increasing Significance of Class’ would be more appropriate if I had also focused on other racial/ethnic groups and uncovered similar economic-class changes. Second, I chose not to use the more cumbersome title: ‘The Increasing Significance of Class among Blacks’ because it does not resonate with one of the major themes of book – the shift in racial conflict from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order, as my arguments below will make clear.

Nonetheless, the title ‘The Declining Significance of Race’ lends itself to misinterpretation among those who have either not read the book or not read it carefully. For such readers, as I pointed out in the third edition, the title conveys an optimistic view of American race relations and does not reflect the book’s pessimistic tone about the conditions and future of poor blacks. Indeed, as George Wilson notes in this symposium, many of the studies whose titles play off the phrase ‘the declining significance of race’ do not even acknowledge or attempt to address the two major underlying themes of the book: (1) the effect of fundamental economic and political

shifts on the changing relative importance of race and class in black occupational mobility and job placement; and (2) the swing in the concentration of racial conflict from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order.

In sharp contrast to many earlier studies, the articles in this symposium include a careful discussion of these two major themes. In the following sections I reflect on these arguments, including those that relate the two major themes to more recent developments in American race and ethnic relations featuring other groups, including whites and Latinos. But, first, let me focus on a specific point raised by Jennifer Hochschild and Vesla Weaver regarding the relationship between race and class as discussed in *The Declining Significance of Race*.

As Hochschild and Weaver point out, I talk about the relative importance of class versus race in two ways: (1) that class had become more important than race as a determinant of a black person's life trajectory; and (2) that for the first time in US history, class issues meaningfully compete with race issues in the development and maintenance of a sense of group position among African Americans. Although *The Declining Significance of Race* is devoted mainly to addressing the first theme, the fact that the second theme was discussed in the book, however minimally, motivated Hochschild and Weaver to also assess its validity based on national survey data. And, as we shall soon see, this afforded me the opportunity to discuss explicitly the relationship between economic class position and sense of group position among African Americans, a relationship that was implied, but not elaborated upon, in *The Declining Significance of Race*.

Economic well-being and the relative importance of class versus race

Several of the participants in this symposium highlight *The Declining Significance of Race*'s theoretical framework relating racial issues to the changing economic and political arrangements of society. As Matthew Desmond put it, 'the central thrust of the book has to do with the fundamental ways that large-scale transformations in economic and political institutions brought about the historic decoupling of race from class in the African American experience'. Moreover, Karyn Lacy highlights the book's historical analysis of the relationship between changing societal institutions and black social mobility. And, Arthur Sakamoto and Sharron Xuanren Wang indicate that *The Declining Significance of Race* identified emerging technological advances associated with communication and transportation, which have now become increasingly globalized and have an even more profound impact on low-skilled workers, including poor African American workers.

The focus on economic transformations provides a backdrop for my analysis of the changing role of race and class in determining black life chances. As George Wilson appropriately observes, in *The Declining Significance of Race* occupational mobility and job placement are most directly related to life chances. And beginning in the last few decades of the twentieth century, the economic and social conditions of the black poor deteriorated while those of the black middle class improved. Indeed, as Matthew Desmond emphasized, in many respects the conditions of poor African Americans are worse now than when the first edition of *The Declining Significance of Race* was published almost four decades ago.

Jennifer Hochschild and Vesla Weaver's comprehensive discussion of the widening gap between the haves and have-nots in the black community lends support to this pessimistic conclusion. First of all, their analysis of US census data, using the Gini ratio, demonstrates that income inequality is now greater among blacks than any other group. Second, their analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress reveals that the test score disparity between black and white students with well-educated parents versus those with poorly educated parents 'was greater in 2012 than it had been in 1978 (maths) or 1980 (reading)', leading to the conclusion that 'the educationally best off are becoming educationally better off at a faster rate than are the worst off, who are stagnating or even losing ground'. Third, analysing data provided by Kendra Bischoff and Sean Reardon (2014), Hochschild and Weaver point out that 'in 1970, African Americans in metropolitan areas lived in neighbourhoods with the least income segregation; by 2009, they lived in neighbourhoods with the most income segregation'. And when considering a person's life trajectory or life chances, the differences in the quality of one's daily life between residing in a predominantly affluent neighbourhood and a poor black neighbourhood are huge. They state:

To choose only one important indicator, in 1978 poor blacks aged twelve and over were only slightly more likely than comparable but better-off blacks to be victims of violent crime – about forty-five and thirty-eight per 1,000 people, respectively. By 2008, however, poor blacks were much *more* likely to be crime victims – about seventy-five per 1,000 – while affluent blacks were *less* likely to be crime victims – about twenty-three per 1,000.

Finally, Karyn Lacy provides another perspective in support of the pessimistic conclusion that the conditions of poor African Americans are worse now than when the first edition of *The Declining Significance of Race* was published. Reflecting on my arguments that 'The economic and political systems in the United States have demonstrated remarkable flexibility in allowing talented blacks to fill positions of prestige and influence at the same time these systems have shown persistent rigidity in handling the problems of lower-class blacks' (Wilson 1978, 22), she points out that actions by the Supreme Court and federal and local governments in recent years have made it more difficult for the poor – including, of course, poor blacks – to improve or even maintain their social/economic position. The power and negotiation position of labour unions have weakened; calls to substantially raise the minimum wage, whose real-dollar value has eroded during the past several decades, have been resisted; the criteria of welfare eligibility have toughened; employment opportunities in the public sector have waned; and penalties for financial instability, including interests rates for excessive credit card debt, have become more severe. 'While institutions punish the poor for their poverty status,' states Lacy, 'higher-income people are rewarded for their success', as revealed in the dramatic decline in their earned income tax rates and capital gains tax.

Hochschild and Weaver's analysis of data in the 1980s and again in 2012 from the American National Election Study (ANES) supports these conclusions. They found that well-educated African Americans in both periods were more likely than the

poorly educated to ‘reject assertions that officials do not care about people like them or that they have no control over the government’. Moreover, well-educated African Americans ‘were significantly less likely to agree that they have no say in their government in 2012 than in the 1980s, while poorly educated African Americans became more likely to agree’.

Thus, the data and arguments presented by the participants in this symposium firmly support one of the two major underlying themes of *The Declining Significance of Race*: namely, that economic class had become more important than race in determining a person’s life trajectory. However, this should not lead one to conclude that when comparisons move from intra-group differences to between-group differences race does not play an important role in American society. For example, a report from the Center for Economic and Policy Research reveals that before the Great Recession, there was only a 1.4 percentage point difference in the unemployment gap between recent black and white college graduates (aged twenty-two to twenty-seven). However, in 2013, shortly after the economic downturn, the gap had surged to a 7.5 percentage point difference (Jones and Schmitt 2014).

Race is obviously a factor at play because historically the periods during and immediately after downturns have adversely impacted blacks more than whites (Quane, Wilson, and Hwang 2013). However, the issues involving race in these inter-group comparisons are complex. For example, aside from the role of racial discrimination, whites with the same amount of schooling as blacks usually attend better high schools and colleges, and therefore have an edge when employers rely on such criteria, especially during slack labour markets. Nonetheless, despite the continuing interracial disparities, the social/economic gap between better-off blacks, including the college educated, and poor blacks is wide and growing, as the above discussion so clearly reveals.

But what about a proposition that was asserted in passing, but not developed, in *The Declining Significance of Race* – ‘for the first time in American history class issues can meaningfully compete with race issues in the way that blacks develop or maintain a sense of group position’ (Wilson 1978, 22)? Since I did not provide any evidence to support this statement, I was pleased to see Hochschild and Weaver’s attempt to shed some empirical light on the matter. Analyzing data from the ANES, they present evidence that contradicts my assertion about race/class and sense of group position.

Although they found statistically and substantively significant class differences among blacks in support of *general* government services, spending on the poor and spending on crime by 2012, when the survey questions focused specifically on blacks or minorities there were virtually no class differences among blacks. Reflecting on Chicago political scientist Michael Dawson’s (1994) concept of ‘black linked fate’, which is used to account for the puzzling lack of class variation among blacks on political choices, Hochschild and Weaver reported ‘that affluent or highly educated blacks retain just as strong a belief in linked fate as do the badly off’. Moreover, they found no class differences among blacks in support of government aid to blacks and minorities in either the 1980s or 2012. These findings do not necessarily refute my argument that among African Americans class issues can meaningfully compete with race issues in the way that blacks develop a sense of group position, because

obviously more research is needed on a wider range of items that capture perceptions of group identity. However, their findings on linked fate certainly do not lend support to this thesis.

The shift of racial tension/conflict from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order

As stated above, one of the two major underlying themes of *The Declining Significance of Race* is that the centre of racial conflict/tension has shifted from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order. I argued that neither the low-wage sector nor the corporate and government sectors provide the basis for the sort of interracial job competition and conflict that beset the economic order in previous years. Today, racial tensions and conflicts have more to do with competition for and access to residential areas, public schools and municipal political systems than with competition for jobs. Although racial antagonisms in the sociopolitical order also affect the ultimate life chances of black Americans, their respective impact on social mobility opportunities are not as great as racial antagonisms in the economic sector.

None of the authors in this symposium take issue with these basic arguments. As George Wilson points out, in *The Declining Significance of Race* I readily acknowledge the continuing white resistance to residential integration, and public school desegregation, 'as well as pronounced racial discrimination against blacks in public places'. Moreover, Karyn Lacy observed that as 'blacks secure coveted white-collar occupations, the competition over desirable neighbourhoods, high-quality schools and the specialized agendas of local governments has intensified'.

Finally, Matthew Desmond states:

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 a profound influence on American race relations.

And he cites studies that provide detailed discussions of these institutions and their impact on the African American community – including studies on the uneven distribution of concentrated disadvantage and violence in neighbourhoods, the reproduction of racial inequality in public schools, the criminal justice system and its prisons, race and class conflicts in municipal politics, techniques of resource extraction in housing markets, and the public sector's frayed safety net.

Thus, the arguments by the authors in this symposium make clear what is often ignored or overlooked in many of the studies that responded to *The Declining Significance of Race*. Namely, the book's original argument was not that race is no longer significant or that racial barriers between blacks and whites have been eliminated. Rather, in comparing the contemporary situation of African Americans to their situation in the past, the diverging experiences of blacks along class lines and the shifting concentration of racial tension from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order indicate that race, although still very salient, has a lesser effect today than economic class in determining blacks' life trajectories.

Broadening the thesis of the declining significance of race to other racial and ethnic groups

According to Sakamoto and Wang, ‘a careful reading of [*The Declining Significance of Race*] shows that it foretells the rapid rise in class inequality that is now generally recognized to have become a major political issue’. As Hochschild and Weaver put it, the ‘significance of class is increasing in the USA, in the sense that economic inequality is rising within the black and Latino populations as well as among whites’.

I would like to extend these arguments by briefly discussing two recent books by Robert Putnam (2015) and Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal (2015) that present and discuss data relating to aspects of the two major underlying themes of *The Declining Significance of Race*. Putnam’s book focuses on the changing relative importance of race and class in America, and Abrajano and Hajnal’s book highlights the growing racial/ethnic conflict in the political arena. I begin with a brief discussion of Putnam’s work.

According to Putnam, although racial barriers to success remain powerful, they represent less burdensome impediments than they did in the 1950s. By contrast, class barriers in America today loom much larger than they did back then. This is reflected not only in growing income inequality among all racial and ethnic groups, but increasing disparities in many other aspects of well-being – accumulated wealth, class segregations across neighbourhoods, quality of primary and secondary education, enrolment in highly selective colleges, and even life expectancy.

Abrajano and Hajnal’s book reveals that whereas in the past individual policy preferences in the USA have been shaped at least at some point by antagonism towards blacks, white Americans’ mounting concerns about immigration have exacerbated the racial divide. The movement of white Americans, especially those in the South, from the Democratic to the Republican Party in the last several decades in response to the civil rights movement, has recently accelerated due to concerns about immigration, especially Latino immigration.

In other words, whereas in the past racial tensions were typically driven by a black–white dynamic, Abrajano and Hajnal argue that this is less true today. The dynamics of race, they argue, have been fundamentally restructured by the increasing visibility of Latinos. Thus, whereas growing class inequality has become a characteristic feature of American life, the data presented by Abrajano and Hajnal suggest that race has unseated class as the main dividing line in US politics.

As I reflect on the powerful arguments in these two books, I conclude that the first underlying theme of *The Declining Significance of Race*, the changing relative significance of race and class on one’s life trajectory, has been extended to all US racial and ethnic groups in Putnam’s book. And Abrajano and Hajnal provide data on one increasingly important aspect of the second major underlying theme – the growing racial divide in US politics.

Conclusion

In their abstract, Sakamoto and Yang stated:

No other book in modern sociology is so well known yet so roundly dismissed as William [Julius] Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race*. Its major thesis, however, has been largely confirmed. Its historical analysis is notably prescient in predicting rising class inequality.

I agree with the last two sentences of this abstract, but strongly disagree that the book has been 'roundly dismissed'. A more appropriate phrase would be 'roundly criticized'. But even that substitute language is applicable to only the few years following the publication of the first edition in 1978. Rather, I feel it is now safe to say, and I think the authors of the thoughtful essays in this symposium, including Sakamoto and Yang, would agree, that the major arguments in *The Declining Significance of Race* are now generally considered conventional wisdom.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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