

# *The Declining Significance of Race:* Revisited & Revised

William Julius Wilson

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I published *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* thirty-two years ago, in 1978.<sup>1</sup> Given the furor and controversy over the book immediately following its publication, I did not anticipate that it would go on to become a classic. Indeed, the book's impact on the field of race and ethnic relations – its arguments have been discussed in nearly eight hundred empirical research articles, not to mention the nonempirical studies – lends credence to the idea of productive controversy and to George Bernard Shaw's famous dictum: "[I]t is better to be criticized and misunderstood than to be ignored." My motivation for this essay is to reflect on responses to the book that claim to provide an empirical test of my thesis. In the process, I indicate the extent to which important findings have influenced my thinking since the book's publication.

The theoretical framework in *The Declining Significance of Race* relates racial issues to the economic and political arrangements of society. I argued that changes in the system of production and in government policies have affected, over time, black/white access to rewards and privileges as well as racial antagonisms. I advanced this framework to accomplish two major objectives: (1) to explain historical developments in U.S. race relations and (2) to account for paradoxical changes in the black class structure whereby, beginning in the last few decades of the twentieth century, the social and eco-

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conomic conditions of the black poor deteriorated while those of the black middle class improved.

In an elaboration of this framework, I focused on three periods of American race relations: the preindustrial period of antebellum slavery and the early post-bellum era; the industrial period that began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and ended at roughly the New Deal era; and the modern industrial post-World War II era. I pointed out that whether one focuses on the way race relations were structured by the system of production, the polity, or both, racial oppression – ranging from the exploitation of black labor by the business class (including the plantation elite) to the elimination of black competition for economic, political, and social resources by the white masses – was characteristic of both the preindustrial and industrial periods of American race relations.

However, I noted that despite the prevalence of various forms of racial oppression, the change from a preindustrial to an industrial system of production enabled African Americans to increase their economic and political resources. The proliferation of jobs created by industrial expansion helped generate and sustain the continuous mass migration of blacks from the rural South to urban centers, especially the cities of the North and West. As the urban black population grew and became more segregated, institutions and organizations in the African American community also developed alongside a business and professional class affiliated with these institutions.

Nonetheless, it was not until after World War II (the modern industrial period) that black class structure began to take on some of the characteristics of white class structure and that economic class gradually became more important than race in determining the life chances

of individual African Americans. Several historical shifts accounted for these developments. In the preindustrial and industrial periods, the basis of racial inequality was primarily economic; in most situations, the state was merely an instrument to reinforce patterns of race relations that grew out of the social relations of production.<sup>2</sup> Except for the brief period of fluid race relations in the North from 1870 to 1890, the state was a major instrument of racial oppression.

State intervention designed to promote racial equality, together with the reciprocal relationship between the polity and the economy, has characterized the modern industrial period. Indeed, it is difficult to determine which factor has been more important in shaping race relations since World War II. Economic expansion facilitated black movement from the rural areas of the South to the industrial centers and created job opportunities leading to greater occupational differentiation in the African American community, as an increasing percentage of blacks moved into semiskilled and skilled blue-collar positions and white-collar positions. At the same time, government intervention (in response to the pressures of increased black political resources and the civil rights protest movements) removed many artificial discrimination barriers with municipal, state, and federal civil rights legislation. Moreover, state intervention contributed to the more liberal racial policies of the nation’s labor unions with protective union legislation. These combined economic and political changes created a pattern of black occupational upgrading that resulted, for example, in a substantial decline of African Americans in low-paying service jobs, unskilled labor, and farm jobs.

Given greater occupational differentiation, some aspects of structural economic change have resulted in a closer associa-

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tion between black occupational mobility and class affiliation. Access to higher-paying jobs is increasingly based on educational criteria – a situation that distinguishes the modern industrial period from earlier systems of production and that has made the position of the black poor more precarious. In other words, the rapid growth of the corporate and government sectors has created a segmented labor market that currently provides vastly different mobility opportunities for different segments of the African American population. On the one hand, poorly trained and educationally limited African Americans have seen their job prospects increasingly limited to low-wage sector jobs, they have faced rising rates of unemployment and non-labor-force participation, and they have endured slower movements out of poverty. On the other hand, trained and educated African Americans have experienced increased job opportunities in the corporate and government sectors as a result of the expansion of white-collar positions and the pressures of state affirmative action programs.

Accordingly, the mobility pattern of blacks is consistent with the view that in the modern industrial period, economic class has become more important than race in predetermining job placement and occupational mobility for African Americans. In the economic realm, the black experience has moved historically from economic racial oppression experienced by virtually all African Americans to the economic subordination of the black poor. As a result, a deepening economic schism has developed in the African American community, with the black poor falling further and further behind higher-income blacks.

Moreover, the center of racial conflict has shifted from the industrial sector to the sociopolitical order. Neither the

low-wage sector nor the corporate and government sectors provide the basis for the kind of interracial job competition and conflict that plagued the economic order in previous years. The absorption of blacks into industrial unions and the federal government's protective union legislation effectively negated management's ability to undercut the demands of white workers for higher wages by replacing them with black workers. The traditional racial struggles for power and privilege have largely shifted away from the economic sector and are now concentrated in the sociopolitical order, as racial tensions have more to do with racial competition for public schools, municipal political systems, and residential areas than with competition for jobs. Although these developments within the sociopolitical order also affect the ultimate life chances of African Americans, their respective impact on social mobility opportunities is not as great as racial competition and antagonisms in the economic sector.

Thus, the original argument, as outlined in *The Declining Significance of Race*, 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 indicate that race is no longer the primary determinant of life chances for blacks (in the way it had been historically).

In a paper reflecting on the critical reaction to *The Declining Significance of Race* immediately following publication of the book, the late sociologist Robin M. Williams, Jr., pointed out:

Despite the author's explicit qualifications and specifications, some critics seem to

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miss one of the author’s central points: that both racial discrimination and class position importantly affect life-chances and that it is the changing character of the *interaction* of the two structural conditions that is critical for understanding the present situation. The increasing differentials within the black population in income, education, occupational prestige, and power-authority seem clear beyond dispute. That past-institutionalized racism has powerfully shaped these differentials is equally plain, as is the fact that large average interracial differentials continue to exist. What Wilson argues is only that economic class has become *more* important than race in determining job placement and occupational mobility, as signaled by the growth of a black middle class concurrently with the crystallization of a disproportionately large black underclass.<sup>3</sup>

As Williams indicates, my basic argument, including its underlying thesis – regarding the effect of economic and political changes on the shifting relative importance of race and class in black occupational mobility and job placement – is largely unaddressed in the many hundreds of studies responding to *The Declining Significance of Race*. For example, many of the articles whose titles play on the phrase “the declining significance of race” focus on issues that do not relate to my specific arguments – issues such as environmental racial inequality, skin tone differentials, mate selection, America’s drug crisis, capital punishment, and psychological well-being and quality of life.<sup>4</sup> Others discuss residential segregation, school racial composition, and discrimination in public places without relating reported findings to my arguments regarding the shift in the concentration of racial antagonisms from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order.<sup>5</sup>

Of the universe of empirical studies that claim to respond to *The Declining Significance of Race*, I would like to highlight the high-quality publications that *correctly* address my thesis – including studies that fundamentally uphold or provide partial support for my arguments as well as those that challenge my basic claims. In the process, I will show how some of these studies have led me to revise or extend parts of my basic thesis, especially as it pertains to race and interracial relations today.

In her important book *Facing Up to the American Dream*, Harvard political scientist Jennifer Hochschild states, “One has not really succeeded in America unless one can pass on the chance for success to one’s children.”<sup>6</sup> She highlights research on the occupational attainments and mobility of blacks revealing that, as late as 1960, there was no evidence to suggest that the effect of economic class position could rival the effect of race in terms of blacks’ achievements in occupation and income. Race, or skin color, was such a powerful factor in life that it clearly trumped class. As Hochschild puts it, blacks “‘experienced a perverse sort of egalitarianism’ – neither the disadvantages of poverty nor the advantages of wealth made much difference in what they could achieve or pass on to their children. Discrimination swamped everything else.” However, beginning in the early 1960s, she argues, class began to affect career and generational mobility for blacks as it had done regularly for whites: “Well-off black men thus could begin for the first time in American history to expect their success to persist and accumulate. Since 1973 these trends have continued, although less dramatically.”<sup>7</sup>

The research that Hochschild cites includes an important study by sociolo-

gist Michael Hout of the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>8</sup> Analyzing data on intergenerational and intragenerational mobility of black men from the Occupational Changes in a Generation surveys of 1962 and 1973, Hout found support for arguments advanced in *The Declining Significance of Race*. More specifically, he revealed that between 1962 and 1973, class significantly affected intragenerational mobility for African Americans – a phenomenon similar to class effects among whites. As class differences in intergenerational mobility increased, African American men from the most advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds experienced the greatest upward mobility.<sup>9</sup>

Although Hout's findings are important, as sociologists Arthur Sakamoto and Jessie M. Tzeng explain, they "generally pertain to the period immediately before and after the civil rights movement"; therefore, they do not cover the wide temporal span of *The Declining Significance of Race*, "which is about changes across broad historical periods."<sup>10</sup> By analyzing the 1940 and 1990 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data sets (a large, nationally representative sample of the occupational attainment of black and white males in all sectors of the labor force), Sakamoto and Tzeng were able to test my thesis over a broader time span.<sup>11</sup> They found that whereas race was generally more important than class in determining occupational attainment among blacks during the industrial period of 1940, class was clearly more important than race in determining occupational attainment among black men during the modern industrial period of 1990. Indeed, their results "indicate that the net disadvantage of being black is substantially greater in the industrial period than in the modern industrial period."<sup>12</sup>

More specifically, after controlling for labor-force experience, schooling, and

region, Sakamoto and Tzeng found that the effect of race was smaller in 1990 than in 1940 for every level of education and sector attainment investigated. Furthermore, when comparing the impact of education with that of being black, they found that for the vast majority of black men in 1940, the racial disadvantage was greater in absolute value than the effect of education was; in 1990, however, the reverse was true: education was a much more significant factor than being black. Finally, class effects – in terms of relative educational attainment – substantially increased over this time span for black men. "These results," state Sakamoto and Tzeng, "support Wilson's thesis of the declining significance of race, and they are consistent with his claim that in the modern industrial period after the civil rights movement, 'economic class position [is] more important than race in determining black chances for occupational mobility.'"<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, this comparison over broad historical periods should not lead us to overlook changes in the relative importance of race and class within the current modern or postindustrial period. Here, I would include changes that narrow or increase the role that either race or class plays in black occupational advancement. On this connection, Michael Hout's significant 1984 findings revealed that public-sector employment "provided more high and middle-class occupations for black men than did the private sector employment" and therefore played "an important role in both occupational upgrading among blacks and the emergence of class cleavages within the black population."<sup>14</sup> In *The Declining Significance of Race*, I did not highlight the relative contribution of the government sector and the corporate sector to black occupational gains. Given Hout's findings (and his subsequent research on this is-

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sue, as discussed below), if I were writing *The Declining Significance of Race* today, I would not only place greater emphasis on black gains in the public sector and the major role of the polity in the crystallization of a black class structure, I would also underline the role and importance of affirmative action programs. In the process, I would discuss the impact of a possible contraction in government employment as well as waning public support for affirmative action on the occupational mobility of the more advantaged and educated African Americans, issues to which I now turn.

Using data from the Current Population Survey, sociologist Melvin E. Thomas demonstrated that “contrary to the assumption of the declining significance of race thesis, blacks with higher levels of education were found to be worse off than less educated, lower status blacks when compared to similar whites.”<sup>15</sup> I find two shortcomings with Thomas’s treatment of my thesis. First, Thomas failed to disaggregate the data to show comparisons between younger and older educated blacks. Second, he neglected to mention that in the second edition of *The Declining Significance of Race* (published in 1980), I referred to the significant income gap between all college-educated African Americans and all college-educated whites that still exists, noting that this finding was largely a consequence of the substantially lower incomes of older educated blacks.

Denied the opportunity to move into higher paying occupations when they graduated from college, or discouraged from pursuing such careers, older black college graduates tend to be concentrated in lower-paying fields such as teaching, social welfare, and segregated services; they were rarely employed as executives or professionals in large corporations

when they entered the labor market. By contrast, younger educated blacks are now entering, and are encouraged to enter, finance, accounting, management, chemistry, engineering, and computer science – fields from which they were deterred previously. I quoted a 1978 paper by Clifton Wharton, then chancellor of the State University of New York, who stated, “[I]n 1966, 45 percent of all black college graduates were majoring in education, today only 26 percent are. In 1966 only 5 percent of the Blacks were studying business, today 18 percent are.”<sup>16</sup>

I also stated that prior to the 1970s, African American men more often enrolled in education programs than in programs that prepare students for higher-paying corporate jobs, such as business or accounting. For all these reasons, the incomes of older educated black males lag significantly behind the incomes of comparable white males, whereas younger college-educated black males had approached income parity with their white counterparts.

Recognizing the need to focus on younger educated blacks in the post-civil rights period to provide “an appropriate test of the declining significance of race within the black middle class,” sociologists In Soo Son, Suzanne W. Model, and Gene A. Fisher examined “interracial differences in the net effect of higher education among young workers who entered the labor market after the mid-1960s.” Analyzing data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) from 1968 to 1981 on the occupational mobility and earnings attainment of young black and white males, the authors found “evidence of class polarization among blacks in the era following the 1960s’ antidiscrimination legislation.” In 1974, blacks lacking a high school diploma earned 57 percent of what black college graduates earned,

while the figure for comparable whites was 65 percent. By 1981, blacks without a high school diploma earned only 36.6 percent of what blacks with a college degree earned, while the analogous ratio for the two groups of whites declined only to 58.5 percent.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Son, Model, and Fisher found not only that African American men without a high school degree consistently earn the smallest proportion of comparably educated whites' incomes, but they were the only group that experienced a decline in their absolute real dollar earnings, bringing their 1981 earnings to only two-thirds that of their white counterparts. Black high school graduates' earnings were slightly better in both absolute and relative terms, with an earnings gap that increased 7 percent between 1974 and 1981. By contrast, the progress of black college graduates was substantially greater, with incomes that changed from fewer than 6 percent of comparable whites' incomes in 1974 to matching the income of their white counterparts in 1981. Even more spectacular, "[B]lack college graduates obtain more prestigious posts than their white counterparts."<sup>18</sup> These findings are consistent with the data I presented on the black/white income gap of younger college graduates in the second edition of *The Declining Significance of Race*.

Despite the progress of educated blacks, Son, Model, and Fisher warned: "[T]he racial parity achieved by young college-educated blacks in the 1970s will be maintained only if the government's commitment to affirmative action does not slacken. Ideological and economic pressures to reduce federal spending, coupled with a tighter business environment, could easily lead to fewer opportunities for blacks."<sup>19</sup> Sociologist Marshall I. Pomer reached a similar conclusion. In his 1986 article on intragenerational mobility

based on a subset of the data used by Hout, he stated: "Opportunities for blacks were best in the public sector where the observed rate of intrasector upward mobility was actually higher for blacks than for whites. . . . Since the public sector offers the most opportunity for black advancement, reductions in government employment are likely to be especially detrimental to blacks."<sup>20</sup>

A 1996 study by A. Silvia Cancio, T. David Evans, and David J. Maume presents data suggesting that these concerns were justified. The authors also appropriately pointed out that "aggregate black/white earnings are invalid because older Blacks presently earn less than whites because of past discrimination practices" and concluded that a comparison of the salaries of young workers would be the "most appropriate test of the significance of race in the modern industrial period." Using PSID data from 1976 and 1985, they found that the effect of race, after controlling for other variables, increased during this period, and that the proportion of the racial gap in hourly wages due to discrimination (that is, after racial differences in measured qualifications were taken into account) also increased during this time span. Thus, they argued, "[T]he government's retreat from anti-discrimination initiatives in the 1980s resulted in organizational discrimination against blacks and contributed to the reversal in the postwar trend toward racial parity in earnings."<sup>21</sup>

Cancio, Evans, and Maume observed that until 1980, my arguments of observable racial progress are essentially correct. However, they stated: "Wilson gave no indication that he expected the long run trend toward racial parity in earnings to reverse in the 1980s. But that is what has happened to young cohorts."<sup>22</sup> In the epilogue to my book's second edition, I acknowledged that vigorous affirmative

action programs may still be needed in the immediate future “because it is difficult to determine if the gains that younger educated blacks are experiencing in entry level positions will be reflected in promotions to higher level jobs in later years.” But I went on to say: “[A]t this point there is also reason to believe that trained and educated blacks, like trained and educated whites, will continue to enjoy the advantages and privileges of their class status. It appears that the powerful political and social movement against job discrimination will mitigate against any effective and systematic movement to exclude qualified blacks.”<sup>23</sup> I noted that the *real* issue is improving the plight of the black lower class, whose conditions have not been addressed by programs like affirmative action.

The research by Cancio and her colleagues suggests that my optimism concerning the movement against job discrimination was unfounded: “Events in the 1980s proved that African Americans cannot take for granted the political commitments to affirmative action and equal opportunity legislation. . . . Our results suggest that a waning devotion to these ideals negatively affected the earnings of Black workers.”<sup>24</sup> Their research clearly underscores the importance of the strength and direction of future government efforts to promote racial equality. They also point to the need for careful longitudinal studies to understand fully the racial differences in career dynamics:

Blacks and Whites are more likely to be paid equally at the *beginning* of their careers. Research that observes people at the beginning of their work and examines race differences as they move through the stages of a career . . . will shed needed light on the experiences of Blacks within organizations. Moreover, it is important to compare cohorts who started their careers in

different decades, as government policies on the labor market have changed over time. If these policies affect careers at their starting points, does their impact last into mid- and late-careers similarly for Whites and Blacks?<sup>25</sup>

For the present essay, in the absence of longitudinal studies, I examined cohorts of male workers ages twenty-five to twenty-nine at ten-year intervals, using figures from the Current Population Survey comparable to the 1977 figures originally reported in the second edition of *The Declining Significance of Race*. I found that the black/white earnings ratio for college graduates declined significantly from 1977 to 1987 (blacks who graduated from college earned 93 percent as much as their white counterparts in 1977, but by 1987, that ratio had dropped to 73.2 percent). The ratio increased by 9 percentage points between 1987 and 1997 (from 73.2 percent to 82.5), then decreased by 2.9 percent from 1997 to 2007 (from 82.5 percent to 79.6 percent). Thus, despite some improvements during the 1990s, by 2007, the income ratio of young black college-educated males was significantly below the ratio of 1977.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, in 1995, political scientist Theodore J. Davis presented findings on the consequences of race and class interaction for both upward and downward mobility. Using data from the 1972 to 1989 Cumulative General Social Survey, Davis found that although there is some evidence of a very gradual decline in the role of race in influencing occupational attainment in the 1980s, and although both black and white males experienced intergenerational occupational upward mobility in the 1980s, black males were also more likely than white males to experience downward occupational mobility.<sup>27</sup>



Given the research discussed in this section, I reiterate a point I made earlier: if I were writing *The Declining Significance of Race* today, I would place greater emphasis not only on the role of the public sector in accounting for black occupational mobility, but also on the importance of sustained public support for anti-discrimination programs, including affirmative action, to ensure that the gains continue or, at the least, are not reversed. However, I also need to address another aspect of “the declining significance of race” thesis – namely, class changes within the African American community.

One of the basic arguments of *The Declining Significance of Race* is that there has been a deepening economic schism as reflected in a widening gap between lower-income and higher-income black families. In light of more recent data, not only has the family income gap between poorer and better-off African Americans continued to widen, but the situation of the bottom fifth of black families has deteriorated since 1975 (see Table 1).

In 2007, 45.6 percent of all poor blacks had incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line.<sup>28</sup> Overall, poor black families fell below the poverty line by an average of \$9,266 in 2007, a depth of poverty exceeding that of all other racial/ethnic groups in the United States.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of the reversal of the relative income gains of younger educated blacks reported in the previous section, the gap between the haves and have-nots in the African American population continues to grow.

Research also indicates that “higher socioeconomic status Blacks have more White neighbors, fewer poor neighbors, and live in neighborhoods with higher housing values.”<sup>30</sup> This fact is important because one’s neighborhood controls ac-

cess to jobs and schools, and even exposure to violence. Using individual-level data from the geocoded version of the PSID for the years 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2001 to correspond with the decadal censuses, urban planner Lance Freeman found that higher socioeconomic status among African Americans is generally associated with greater integration and improved locational outcomes.

The strength of these relationships, however, did not increase between 1970 and 2000. “Class does matter,” Freeman states. “Higher status Blacks generally live in higher-status neighborhoods and those with more Whites. But the importance of class has not increased since 1970. The determinants of spatial outcomes for Blacks have been remarkably durable at the end of the twentieth century. . . . It appears that Blacks will have to achieve upward mobility in other domains, such as education, before achieving widespread access to higher-status and White neighborhoods.”<sup>31</sup> Reaching this goal may be more of a challenge for black males than for black females.

Indeed, what has also changed since I wrote *The Declining Significance of Race* is that the black class structure increasingly reflects gender differences, especially among younger blacks, as males have fallen behind females on a number of socioeconomic indicators: employment rates, high school completion rates, and average income, with some of the sharpest discrepancies at the lower end of the income hierarchy.<sup>32</sup> Black women have also far outpaced black men in college completion in recent years. Despite the fact that the gender gap in college degree attainment is increasing across all racial groups, with women generally exceeding men in rates of college completion, this discrepancy is particularly acute among African Americans. That gap has widened steadily over the past twenty-five

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Table 1  
Average Income of Black Families by Income Group

	1975	1985	1995	2005	2007	1975 – 2007 (changes in dollars)	1975 – 2007 (percent change)
Lowest Fifth	\$8,939	\$7,284	\$7,463	\$7,784	\$8,143	-\$796	-8.9%
Second Fifth	18,533	17,833	20,073	22,085	23,384	4,851	26.2
Middle Fifth	30,650	30,832	35,022	35,842	40,278	9,628	31.4
Fourth Fifth	46,095	49,396	55,408	61,407	64,573	18,478	40.1
Highest Fifth	78,031	90,902	111,767	129,002	132,565	54,534	69.9
Top 5 Percent	106,908	131,672	183,471	212,818	220,916	114,008	106.6

All figures reported in 2007 dollars. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2008 *Annual Social and Economic Supplements*, Table F-3, “Mean Income Received by Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent of Families.”

years. In 1979, for every 100 bachelor’s degrees earned by black men, 144 were earned by black women. In 2006 to 2007, for every 100 bachelor’s degrees conferred on black men, 196 were conferred on black women – nearly a two-to-one ratio. To put this gap into a larger context, for every 100 bachelor’s degrees earned by white men and every 100 earned by Hispanic men, white women earned 130 and Hispanic women earned 158, respectively (see Table 2). The gap widens higher up on the educational ladder. For every 100 master’s degrees and 100 doctorates earned by black men, black women earned 255 and 193, respectively. These ratios have huge implications for the social organization of the black community. If present trends continue, future discussion of the black class structure will have to include a gender component to show the increasing proportion of black women and de-

creasing proportion of black men in higher socioeconomic positions.

In the epilogue to the second edition of *The Declining Significance of Race*, I argued that a conclusion one could draw from my book was “that the sole concentration on policy programs dealing with racial bias makes it difficult for blacks to recognize how their fortune is inextricably connected with the structure and the functioning of the modern American economy.”<sup>33</sup> In concluding the epilogue, I wrote: “Supporters of basic economic reform can only hope that in the 1980s 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.”<sup>34</sup> These statements were influenced by my sense at the time that while race-specific programs like affirmative action had

Table 2  
Gender Imbalance in Higher Education: Number of Degrees Earned by Women for Every  
One Hundred Degrees Earned by Men, Academic Year 2006–2007

	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander
Associate's Degrees	158	225	171	141
Bachelor's Degrees	130	196	158	122
Master's Degrees	167	255	185	122
Doctoral Degrees	124	193	129	108

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Post-secondary Education Data System, Fall 2007, Completions component.

elevated and would continue to improve the employment prospects of trained and highly educated blacks, they had not enhanced the employment opportunities of the black poor. I felt therefore that the focus should shift to more class-based, race-neutral programs. I no longer support this view. Recognizing that a detailed discussion of policy options would require far more space than that allocated for this article, I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of why *both* race-specific and race-neutral – including class-based – programs must be strongly emphasized and pursued to combat racial inequality.

As I indicated earlier, many studies claim to address or challenge “the declining significance of race” thesis by presenting data on residential segregation, racial composition in schools, and discrimination in public places without relating the findings to my argument that the concentration of racial antagonisms has shifted from the economic sector to the sociopolitical order. One notable exception is Jonathan Rieder,

whose 1985 book, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism*, discusses the racial antagonisms of Jews and Italians against inner-city blacks in Brooklyn and relates the conflict to my central theme regarding the increasing centrality of racial conflict that originates “in the sphere of consumption rather than of production.” In other words, his field research supported the idea that “competition between blacks and whites has moved from the sphere of jobs to the enjoyment of public goods, like schools and entitlements.”<sup>35</sup>

The research discussed in the previous section suggests that the white backlash against racial entitlements such as affirmative action, which is so clearly described in Rieder’s book, contributed to the government’s retreat from antidiscrimination policies during the 1980s, a retreat that may have influenced hiring and promotion decisions in the corporate sector as well. It should come as no surprise that waning support for affirmative action programs would have an adverse effect on blacks, especially more advantaged

blacks. A number of empirical studies have revealed significant differences in the family and neighborhood environments of blacks and whites that are understated when standard measures of socioeconomic status are employed. Take, for example, the question of family background. Even when white parents and black parents report the same average income, white parents have substantially more assets than do black parents.

Whites with the same amount of schooling as blacks usually attend better high schools and colleges. Furthermore, children’s test scores are affected not only by the social and economic status of their parents but also by the social and economic status of their grandparents, meaning that it could take several generations before adjustments in socioeconomic inequality produce their full benefits. Thus, if we were to rely solely on the standard criteria for college admission, such as SAT scores, even many children from black middle-income families would be denied admission in favor of middle-income whites, who are not weighed down by the accumulation of disadvantages that stem from racial restrictions and who, therefore, tend to score higher on the SAT and similar conventional tests. For all these reasons, the success of younger educated blacks remains heavily dependent on affirmative action programs, whereby more flexible criteria of evaluation are used to gauge potential to succeed.

The policy implications are obvious. Race-specific policies like affirmative action will be required for the foreseeable future to ensure the continued mobility of educated blacks. But affirmative action programs are not designed to address the problems of poor blacks, which require greater emphasis on demand-side solutions, such as creating tight labor mar-

kets in which employers are looking for workers rather than workers looking for employers.

At the time of this writing, the nation is plagued with one of the highest unemployment rates since the Great Depression, affecting all racial and ethnic groups in the United States. For almost five decades, the black/white unemployment ratio was 2.0 or greater, which means that the black unemployment rate was at least twice that of the white unemployment rate in both good and bad economic times. What is unique about the current economic crisis is that the unemployment rate has surged for both blacks and whites. Since December 2009, the black/white unemployment ratio has fallen below 2.0. The ratio was 1.87 in October 2010 and 1.88 in November 2010.<sup>36</sup>

This scenario presents a dilemma for the Obama administration, which has publicly acknowledged the need to combat racial inequality. Given the upsurge in unemployment among all racial groups, including whites, it would be politically prudent for the president to advance programs that address nationwide joblessness. However, a strong case could be made for introducing programs that are designed to combat unemployment in the highest areas of joblessness, including a mix of private- and public-sector initiatives. For example, in black inner cities, where the number of very low-skilled individuals vastly exceeds the number of low-skill jobs, a healthy dose of public-sector job creation is needed. This approach would also apply, say, in white and Hispanic areas that feature high rates of joblessness.

The point is that a continuous struggle is needed to address the problems of racial inequality – some calling for race-based solutions, like affirmative action, others calling for class-based solutions,

such as programs to increase employment in areas with the highest rates of joblessness. Accordingly, if I were writing *The Declining Significance of Race* today, I would provide more balance in my policy recommendations by placing

much greater emphasis on the need to strongly and continuously embrace, as well as advance, both race- and class-based solutions to address life chances for people of color.

William  
Julius  
Wilson

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (1978; 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). I would like to thank Anmol Chaddha for his help in reviewing the literature on *The Declining Significance of Race* and for his thoughtful comments on a previous draft of this manuscript.
- <sup>2</sup> One notable exception was the pattern of black political subjection imposed by the urban political machines in the early twentieth century. However, although the racial developments in the municipal political system had little or no direct or indirect implications for racial interaction in the private industrial sector, one could argue that the systematic exclusion of African Americans from meaningful political participation was a response to the racial antagonisms generated from the social relations of production. Even if one is willing to concede this argument, it could hardly be said that race relations in the urban political system in turn influenced race relations in the private industrial sector.
- <sup>3</sup> Robin M. Williams, Jr., "Structure and Process in Ethnic Relations: Increased Knowledge and Unanswered Questions," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Boston, August 30, 1979.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Michael Hughes and Bradley Hertel, "The Significance of Color Remains: A Study of Life Chances, Mate Selection, and Ethnic Consciousness among Black Americans," *Social Forces* 68 (4) (1990): 1105–1120; Clarence Lusane, "In Perpetual Motion: The Continuing Significance of Race and America's Drug Crisis" (The University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1994); Michael Hughes and Melvin Thomas, "The Continuing Significance of Race Revisited: A Study of Race, Class, and Quality of Life in America, 1972 to 1996," *American Sociological Review* 63 (6) (1998): 785–795; Aaron Gullickson, "The Significance of Color Declines: A Re-Analysis of Skin Tone Differentials in Post-Civil Rights America," *Social Forces* 84 (1) (2005): 157–180; and James Unnever and Francis Cullen, "Reassessing the Racial Divide in Support for Capital Punishment: The Continuing Significance of Race," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 44 (1) (2007): 124–158.
- <sup>5</sup> See Joe T. Darden, "The Significance of Race and Class in Residential Segregation," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 8 (1) (1986): 49–56; Carl Grant, "The Persistent Significance of Race in Schooling," *The Elementary School Journal* 88 (5) (1988): 561–569; Joe Feagin, "The Continuing Significance of Race: Antiracial Discrimination in Public Places," *American Sociological Review* 56 (1) (1991): 101–116; and Marvin P. Dawkins and Jomills Henry Braddock, "The Continuing Significance of Desegregation: School Racial Composition and African American Inclusion in American Society," *The Journal of Negro Education* 63 (3) (1994): 394–405.
- <sup>6</sup> Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 44.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Michael Hout, "Occupational Mobility of Black Men: 1962 to 1973," *American Sociological Review* 49 (3) (1984): 308–322. See also Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York: John Wiley, 1967); and David Featherman and Robert

- Hauser, “Changes in the Socioeconomic Stratification of the Races, 1962 – 1973,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (3) (1976): 621 – 651.
- <sup>9</sup> A study by Lee Wolfle reached similar conclusions. Wolfle noted that previous research found that social background variables were more important determinants of educational attainment among whites than among African Americans. However, his study, using data from the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, controlled for estimated measurement error structures and found that “social background plays a similar role for whites and blacks. Increments in background social status variables lead to similar increases in educational attainment for whites and blacks. Moreover, the effects of personal characteristics variables (ability, curriculum, grades) of whites and blacks as they influence educational attainment are also similar for both groups”; Lee Wolfle, “Postsecondary Educational Attainment among Whites and Blacks,” *American Educational Research Journal* 22 (4) (1985): 501 – 525, quote at 501. Also, analyzing a subset of the data used by Michael Hout, Marshall Pomer reported that in contrast to higher-status black men, black men in low-paying occupations were significantly less likely than comparable white men to achieve upward mobility; Marshall I. Pomer, “Labor Market Structure, Intragenerational Mobility, and Discrimination: Black Male Advancement Out of Low-Paying Occupations, 1962 – 1973,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 650 – 659.
- <sup>10</sup> Arthur Sakamoto and Jessie M. Tzeng, “A Fifty-Year Perspective on the Declining Significance of Race in the Occupational Attainment of White and Black Men,” *Sociological Perspectives* 42 (1999): 160, 174.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 161. The authors state: “We restrict the analyses to native-born, noninstitutionalized white and black men aged 25 to 64 who were not enrolled in school and who participated in the labor force at the time of the census. Because most women did not work in the paid labor market in 1940 (Bianchi and Spain, 1986: 141 [Suzanne M. Bianchi and Daphne Spain, *American Women in Transition* (New York: Russell Sage, 1986)]) and because Wilson’s (1980) discussion of labor market trends focuses on men, we do not include women in our analyses. The 1940 PUMS provides systematic empirical evidence about the net racial disadvantage during the industrial period while the 1990 PUMS provides systematic empirical evidence about the net racial disadvantage during the modern industrial period.”
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 174 – 175.
- <sup>14</sup> Hout, “Occupational Mobility of Black Men,” 308.
- <sup>15</sup> Melvin E. Thomas, “Race, Class, and Personal Income: An Empirical Test of the Declining Significance of Race Thesis, 1968 – 1988,” *Social Problems* 40 (3) (1993): 328.
- <sup>16</sup> Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., “Education and Black Americans: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” paper presented at the New York State Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus, Inc., and New York State Conference of Branches, NAACP, February 19, 1978.
- <sup>17</sup> In Soo Son, Suzanne W. Model, and Gene A. Fisher, “Polarization and Progress in the Black Community: Earnings and Status Gains for Young Black Males in the Era of Affirmative Action,” *Sociological Forum* 4 (3) (1989): 309, 311, 324.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.
- <sup>20</sup> Pomer, “Labor Market Structure, Intragenerational Mobility, and Discrimination,” 657.
- <sup>21</sup> A. Silvia Cancio, T. David Evans, and David J. Maume, Jr., “Reconsidering the Declining Significance of Race: Racial Differences in Early Career Wages,” *American Sociological Review* 61 (4) (1996): 541, 543.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 554.
- <sup>23</sup> Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*, 2nd ed., 178.

- <sup>24</sup> Cancio, Evans, and Maume, "Reconsidering the Declining Significance of Race," 554.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> The income ratios reported here are based on an analysis of Current Population Survey microdata. To draw comparisons with the data I reported in the second edition of *The Declining Significance of Race*, I used the "white/black" designation, instead of "non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black" designation. There are only slight differences between the percentages for the two different designations; thus, the trends reported and conclusions reached would not have changed.
- <sup>27</sup> Theodore J. Davis, "The Occupational Mobility of Black Males Revisited: Does Race Matter?" *The Social Science Journal* 32 (2) (1995): 121 – 135.
- <sup>28</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2008 *Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, Table POV28, "Income and Deficit or Surplus of Families and Unrelated Individuals by Poverty Status: 2007."
- <sup>29</sup> By comparison, poor non-Hispanic white families fell below the poverty line by an average of \$7,957; poor Hispanic families by \$8,611; and poor Asian families by \$8,959; U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2007*, Current Population Reports P60-235, Table 4, "People with Income Below Specified Ratios of Their Poverty Thresholds by Selected Characteristics: 2007."
- <sup>30</sup> Lance Freeman, "Is Class Becoming a More Important Determinant of Neighborhood Attainment for African-Americans?" *Urban Affairs Review* 44 (1) (2008): 3.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>32</sup> William Julius Wilson, *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).
- <sup>33</sup> Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race*, 2nd ed., 179.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., 182.
- <sup>35</sup> Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 101.
- <sup>36</sup> Ratio calculations based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table A-2, "Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age," December 3, 2010.