

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

At 80, W.J. Wilson, Scholar of Race and Class, Looks Ahead

Wilson credited with 'inventing' urban sociology

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Sociologists rarely achieve fame beyond their peers, but William Julius Wilson's influence extends from the campus to the inner city to television to the White House — with Presidents Clinton and Obama, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and "The Wire" creator David Simon citing him as an influence.

"When President Clinton introduced me, he proceeded to talk about my book 'The Truly Disadvantaged,' and all these national scientists saw that the president not only read my book but could talk about it and had been influenced by it," he says. Clinton even mentioned Wilson, who turned 80 in December, spoke with The Associated Press about his decades of thinking and writing about race, class, education and poverty and about how his

cuts in government support.

Wilson's research continues. He is busy with one of his most ambitious studies, "Multidimensional Inequality in the 21st Century," a research project on poverty covering everything from the labor market to criminal justice.

"We not only hope to come up with comprehensive new findings that enhance our understanding of race and poverty, but to establish connections that will help us reach a broader audience, including policymakers," he says.

Wilson's initial stature, ironically, was based in part on a misunderstanding.

In his landmark "The Declining Significance of Race," published in 1978, he contended that advances in civil rights legislation and the expansion of the Black middle class meant that economic issues were surpassing racial ones as

"One of the things that the Harvard researchers who are involved in this project have in common is that we all want our research to have some impact outside academia," he says. "We don't want to simply engage other academics."

AP PHOTO/CHARLES DHARAPAK



In this Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2015, photo, American sociologist William Julius Wilson poses for a photograph in Bangkok, Thailand. Wilson, 80, spoke with The Associated Press about his decades of thinking and writing about race, class, education and poverty and about how his ideas echo through today's news stories, whether on income inequality or the Black Lives Matter movement.

“If poverty is a disease that infects an entire community in the form of unemployment and violence, failing schools and broken homes, then we can't just treat those symptoms in isolation. We have to heal that entire community

ideas run through today's news stories.

"We should be cognizant of the choices available to inner-city families and residents in high jobless inner-city Black neighborhoods," he says, "because they live under constraints and face challenges that most people in the larger society do not experience, or can't even imagine."

Some of Wilson's books have become standards, notably "The Declining Significance of Race," "The Truly Disadvantaged" and "When Works Disappears." Combining field work, historical research and ideas rooted in experience and scholarship, Wilson has shaped a clear narrative: Over the past 60 years, Black neighborhoods have been devastated by the departure of the middle class, the elimination of manufacturing jobs, declines in wages and

the greatest challenges for the Black community.

Though Wilson wrote that racism remained a critical problem, the book's title was read by some as a declaration that prejudice was in decline and on its way to irrelevance, a favorite contention among those who opposed affirmative action and related programs.

With Republicans holding majorities in Congress, Wilson said he has little hope that the lives of poor Blacks will improve in the near future, but he does not want to "wallow in pessimism." Asked what programs he would like to see implemented, regardless of their likelihood, Wilson says that he'd like to see a substantial expansion of Promise Neighborhoods funding and believes more solutions will arise from his Multidimensional Inequality project.

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