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Social Justice and Neoliberal Discourse

BOBBY M. WILSON

University of Alabama

In the era of neoliberalism, human beings are made accountable for their predicaments or circumstances according to the workings of the market as opposed to finding faults in larger structural and institutional forces like racism and economic inequality. The market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all of human action (Harvey 2005). In many ways, the discourse of neoliberalism represents a radical inversion of the notion of “human agency,” as conceived through the prophetic politics of Martin Luther King. As originally conceived, human agency focused on people’s capability of doing things that can make a difference, that is, to exercise some sort of power and self-reliance. As a central concern among many in the social sciences, this concept sought to expose the power of human beings. Reverend Martin Luther King’s prophetic politics were determinedly “this worldly” and social in their focus. He encouraged people to direct their attention to matters of social justice rather than concern for personal well-being or salvation. He believed in the power of people to make a difference.

But the concept of “justice” has been reconstructed to fit neoliberal political and economic objectives. This reconstruction is part of a larger discourse to reconstitute liberalism to include human conduct. The invisible hand of the market not only allocates resources but also the conduct of citi-

zens. Economic agency is no longer just about the market allocation of resources, but the allocation of people into cultural worlds. This represents a radical inversion of the economic agent as conceived by the liberalism of Adam Smith. As agents, humans are implicated as players and partners in the market game. The context in which individuals define themselves is privatized rather than publicized; the focus of concerns is on the self rather than the collective. Power operates internally, not externally, by inducing people to aim for “self-improvement.” The effect has been to negate the “social” in issues of “justice” or “injustice.” Individual subjects are rendered responsible, shifting the responsibility for social risk (unemployment, poverty, etc.) to the individual.

Black inner city spaces compete freely within a deregulated global market. Central cities of large metropolitan areas have become the epicenter of segregation. In 1988, approximately 55% of black students in the South attended schools that were 50% to 100% minorities. By 2000, almost 70% attended such schools. Only 15% of intensely segregated white schools are schools of concentrated poverty, whereas 88% of the intensely segregated racial minority schools are schools of concentrated poverty. Fifty years after the *Brown* decision, we continue to heap more disadvantages on children in poor communities. The community where a student re-

sides and goes to school is now the best predictor of whether that student will go to college and succeed after graduation. High school graduation rates in the South were lowest in the most isolated black-majority districts—those separated by both race and poverty. Across the South, we have created public and private systems that encourage the accumulation of wealth and privilege in mostly white and socially isolated communities separated by ever greater distances from the increasingly invisible working poor (Orfield and Mei 2004).

The most fundamental difference between today's segregated black communities and those of the past is the much higher level of joblessness (Wilson 1997). Black unemployment and poverty level consistently remains at twice the level of the total population. Access to jobs, already disproportionately tenuous for black workers, has become even more constricted in the current era of global capital. Without meaningful work, the impact of racially segregated communities is much more pervasive and devastating. The vast majority of intensely racial and ethnic segregated minority places face a growing surplus labor determined to survive by any means necessary. Two-thirds of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities. The proportion of young black males who are incarcerated, on parole, or on probation nationwide continues to reach record levels. Blacks represent 12.3% of the total population but make up 43.7% of the incarcerated population. The number of black men in prisons increased from 508,800 in 1990 to 899,000 in 2004, which is nine times the number incarcerated in 1954, the year of the *Brown* decision. There are 25% more black men in prison than are enrolled in institutions of

higher education. One out of every eight black males in the age cohort 25–29, which has an unemployment rate more than twice that of the total population, is incarcerated on any given day. The incarceration rate for black women is also increasing.

In the era of neoliberalism, these social problems are problems of “self care.” Neoliberal discourse frames social ills in a personal and private manner. Politics and government are considered to be a dangerous dead end. However, this does not mean a retreat of the state, but a prolongation of government, a transformation of politics. The goal is a new politics, a new social order that promises justice not by fighting against the injustice of larger structural and institutional forces, but against the unjust ways of governing oneself. Neoliberal discourse has been able to colonize the inner city with black youth of similar behavior and attitude, tying black bodies to this space (Wilson 2005). Thus, we were all somewhat surprised to see that the black bodies wading through the flood waters of New Orleans were not all bodies of dysfunctional black youths, but those of babies, mothers, grandmothers, the working poor who (literally) did not have boats to be lifted into. Poverty had made it impossible for them to respond in ways necessary to protect their interest in the face of the immediate and imminent danger.

Neoliberal discourse suppresses racism and economic inequality as causal factors in social justice issues. It claims not only the “end of history” but also the “end of racism.” Neoliberalism does not address the political question of what can be done to *change social conditions*. Instead, such discourse makes it possible to speak of a

welfare mentality and a culture of poverty. Those left behind in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina got what they deserve. Those left behind lack proper conduct—a “welfare state mentality” that erodes self-reliance, inducing them to wait for government help instead of saving themselves. It is this mental state and lack of self-reliance that provide the foundation for inequality. It is the market that determines the rules of the game, waiting for that rising tide of economic prosperity to lift all boats.

Today's black leadership is less prophetic than that of Martin Luther King, defining its successes or failures according to the logic of the marketplace. Elected the first Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia only five years after the death of Martin Luther King, the late Maynard Jackson boasted about the number of black millionaires he helped to create by increasing the number of the city's contracts going to minorities. With the assistance of the next three black Mayors of Atlanta, scores of additional black millionaires were created along with a thriving business and professional class. The “city too busy to hate” during the civil rights era became the “Black Mecca” in the era of neoliberalism.

But despite Atlanta having scores of black millionaires and home to more local black-owned companies per-capita than anywhere except Washington, DC, the city led the nation with almost half of the city's black children (48.1%) residing below the poverty level in 2004. Clearly, a rising tide of prosperity in this city did not lift all boats. Instead, this stark contrast exposes the moral and civic bankruptcy of black leadership not just in Atlanta, but throughout black America. A former corporate communications executive, the

black Mayor of New Orleans, Richard Nagin, was criticized long before the hurricane disaster by activists and some black residents for being too closely aligned with business interests, while ignoring the plight of the city's poor. The contrast between the prophetic leadership of Martin Luther King and the profit-oriented leadership of the black business class that came in the wake of the civil rights movement could not be clearer (Dixon 2005).

Corporate influence has reached unprecedented levels among members of the Congressional Black Caucus. It dominates the leadership selection process of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League, two premiere civil rights organizations (Ford and Gamble 2005). In 2005, the NAACP appointed a retired corporate executive as its new president. Community activists worry that a person more experienced with the corporate boardroom will stray from the notion that power operates externally, which underlay traditional protest and political pressure (Dao 2005). Politics need to be extended beyond the realm of action to the realm of language. A critical understanding of social justice needs to recognize the politics of language and create persuasive alternative truths about social justice.

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BOBBY WILSON is a Professor in the Department of Geography at University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487. Email: bmwilson@bama.ua.edu. His research interests include political economy and race, with a focus on the southern United States.