

The Limits of Determinism

Scholarship on Black Families, 1960-2000

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Since 1960, two vibrant and competing schools of thought have, taken together, thoroughly dominated scholarly discussion of the African American family. In this essay, I will call these regnant intellectual paradigms “economism” and “revisionism.” My main purpose is to understand, compare, and criticize them.

On the surface, particularly at the levels of cultural sensibility and immediate socio-political implication, these two frameworks have little in common. Yet beneath the surface, at the level of guiding epistemological assumptions, economism and revisionism are much more alike than different. The reason is that both of these ways of thinking are versions of what I will call determinism. Both of them assume a priori that family forms and structures fundamentally derive from (are “determined” by) extra-familial economic trends and political forces. I conclude by suggesting that, as a matter of scholarship, this assumption is deeply problematic and likely invalid.

Economism, Part 1 – The Clark-Frazier-Moynihan Proposition

...when one undertakes to envisage the probable course of development of the Negro family in the future, it appears that the travail of civilization is not yet ended. First, it appears that the family which evolved within the isolated world of the Negro folk will become increasingly disorganized...Of course, the ordeal of civilization will be less severe if there is a general improvement in the standard of living and racial barriers to employment are broken down.

E. Franklin Frazier, 1948¹

The main goal of the Moynihan Report was to make, as the document’s subtitle put it, “the case for national action,” primarily in the area of job creation and better employment opportunities for Black men.² Remember, in 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan worked for the Department of Labor. His assignment was to analyze and recommend policies that could lead to more and better jobs for U.S. workers. For obvious reasons, therefore, as Moynihan later recalled, he and his colleagues were eager in 1965 to shift the Johnson Administration’s anti-poverty strategies toward a clearer focus on “job creation and a national policy of full employment.” To pursue that goal, Moynihan began explicitly casting about for “new arguments” and specifically seeking “more evidence, something to make unemployment seem even more urgent.”

Soon enough, he found something he thought he could use: “we had come upon a remarkably strong correlation between unemployment and all manner of family dysfunction.” Encouraged, Moynihan thus began to examine “what for the Labor Department was a new set of issues, the various seeming influences of economic change on family change in the black population.”³ In November of 1964, he came up with a specific strategy for developing his thesis and promoting it within the government.

He decided, as he was to put it a few months after the fact, to “write a paper about the Negro family to explain to the fellows how there was a problem more difficult than they knew and also to explain some of the issues of housing and unemployment in terms that would be new and shocking enough that they would say, ‘Well, we can’t let this sort of thing go on. We’ve got to do something about it.’”⁴ Three months later, in early 1965, he discussed the issue at a conference on poverty held at the University of California at Berkeley: “We are beginning to see something of the relation of unemployment to family structure.. .It may be that this line of inquiry will enable us to redefine the problem of unemployment – so easily viewed as a problem of economic waste, and therefore of relatively marginal importance in an age of economic abundance – and cast it in terms of the problem of delinquency and crime and welfare dependence and such, which by and large are problems the nation knows it has and would like to see dealt with.”⁵

This basic “redefined” proposition – that a growing family crisis in Black America was closely linked to trends in unemployment and low wages – emerged as the intellectual foundation for Moynihan’s 1965 “paper,” *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Moynihan’s argument in this document draws heavily upon the work of both Kenneth B. Clark and, especially, E. Franklin Frazier of the University of Chicago.

Indeed, Moynihan’s 1965 depiction of the Black family as a “tangle of pathology” in fact differed little if any from Clark’s depiction, also published in 1965, of the Black ghetto as “a world of broken homes and illegitimacy” and “chronic, self-perpetuating pathology.”⁶ And more than a decade earlier, E. Franklin Frazier had written: “Since the widespread family disorganization among Negroes has resulted from the failure of the father to play the role in family life required by American society, the mitigation of this problem must await those changes in the Negro and American society which will enable the Negro father to play the role required of him.”⁷

In his paper, Moynihan argues that “the single most important social fact of the United States today” is that “the Negro social structure, in particular the Negro family, battered and harassed by discrimination, injustice, and uprooting, is in the deepest trouble.” Why is it the most important fact? Because the currently unfolding “Negro American revolution” – “the most important domestic event of the postwar period” – is unlikely actually to succeed in producing “equality of results” for Black America unless the U.S. federal government intervenes with large-scale, coordinated policies “designed to have the effect, directly or indirectly, of enhancing the stability and resources of the Negro American family.”

He presents his case. The white family “has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability.” But “the family structure of lower-class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown.” About 25 percent of ever-married Black women living in U.S. cities in 1960 were divorced or separated. About 24 percent of all Black babies born in 1963 were born to unmarried mothers, up from 17 percent in 1940 and compared to a white illegitimacy rate in 1963 of only about three percent. As of the early 1960s, fewer than half of all Black children would reach the age of 18 having lived all of their lives with both of their parents. Each of these trends is getting worse, fast; as a result, the racial divide on family structure is growing wider each year. Given these trends, the immediate barrier to greater “equality of results” for Black America seems clearly identifiable. Because the family is society’s “basic social unit,” the “fundamental source of weakness of the Negro community at the present time” is “the deterioration of the Negro family.”

Moynihan identifies five “roots” of the family structure crisis in Black America: the legacy of slavery, racism, the great migration of Blacks from the rural South to Northern and Western cities, unemployment and poverty, and low wages. The report pays particular attention to “the economic roots of the problem.” Black unemployment by the early 1960s had grown to twice the level of white unemployment. Moreover, for both whites and Blacks, at least through the late 1950s, trends in unemployment closely correlated with trends in family breakdown: “The conclusion...is difficult to avoid: During times when jobs were reasonably plentiful...the Negro family became stronger and more stable. As jobs became more and more difficult to find, the stability of the family became more and more difficult to maintain.”

Some reports of this type don’t have much influence. This one did. Indeed, it was no secret, as Christopher Jencks wrote in October of 1965 in *The New York Review of Books*, that what everyone was now calling the Moynihan Report, “while not an official statement of federal policy, has influenced recent thinking at every level of government.”⁸

The report went to the White House on May 4, 1965. One month later, on June 4, President Johnson publicly endorsed the report’s main thesis in one of the most important speeches of his presidency, “To Fulfill These Rights,” delivered at Howard University. In the speech, using language borrowed directly from the Moynihan Report, Johnson essentially declared that the momentum of the Black civil rights movement was logically and necessarily shifting from “liberty” to “equality.” (The speech’s title, “To Fulfill These Rights,” was meant not only to echo the Declaration of Independence, but also to suggest a shift from an earlier presidential call, “To Secure These Rights,” issued by President Harry S. Truman’s Commission on Civil Rights in 1947.⁹ To “secure” suggested the right to liberty. To “fulfill” was intended to embrace the demand for equality.) As President Johnson put it:

“This is the next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity – not just legal equality but human ability – not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result.”

And what did the president view as the causes of racial inequality? What are the barriers that could prevent the nation from moving rapidly toward “equality as a result”? One of them is poverty. Another is racism, both as current practice and historical legacy. Another is the concentration of many poor Blacks in urban ghettos. But “perhaps the most important,” said the president, is “the breakdown of Negro family structure.” This family breakdown, in turn, is closely connected to the “persecution of the Negro man” – an oppression that has “attacked his dignity and assaulted his ability to provide for his family.” The resulting crisis of the Black family is therefore a tragedy requiring national action:

“Only a minority – less than half – of all Negro children reach the age of eighteen having lived all of their lives with both of their parents. At this moment a little less than two-thirds are living with both of their parents.. .When the family collapses it is the children who are usually damaged. When it happens on a massive scale the community itself is crippled. So unless we work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together – all the rest: schools and playgrounds, public assistance and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation.”

What did the president propose as the solutions? First and foremost, jobs. Then: decent housing, improved health care, and necessary welfare assistance. Besides these obvious steps, he said, there were almost certainly other “answers still to be found.” Indeed, at least some of these new answers for strengthening the Black family would be sought immediately, announced the president, in a White House conference, also to be called “To Fulfill These Rights” and to be held in the near future.¹⁰

In retrospect, it seems clear that President’s Johnson’s Howard University speech of June 4, 1965, was the shining moment – the intellectual and political high tide – of the Clark-Frazier-Moynihan proposition that the United States should pursue a coordinated economic and employment strategy aimed largely at reversing the trend toward father absence in the Black family. But then, almost overnight, the moment ended. Although the president’s speech itself was generally well received, the scholarly thesis upon which it was based, especially as articulated in the Moynihan Report, quickly became the subject of intense national controversy.

Just how heated this controversy became –and how quickly, as a result, the entire issue of family structure essentially vanished from political discourse, almost as if it had never existed – can be seen from the fate of the immediate follow-up to the Howard speech, a White House conference of scholars and leaders. As promised by the president at Howard, the conference was held in the late spring of 1966 at the Sheraton-Park Hotel in Washington. The result of several months of work led by a 28-member Presidential Council, the conference involved over 2,000 participants.

Many topics were debated at this conference, but, amazingly, the issue of family structure was not among them. As Rainwater and Yancey report, by the time the conference

planning sessions got under way in November of 1965, the Moynihan Report, even though it had “stimulated the White House to call the conference” in the first place, “had acquired such a history of controversy that it was far more an embarrassment to all concerned than anything else.”¹¹ As a result, as Benjamin Muse put it in 1968, the entire subject of family structure was “eliminated from the Conference’s agenda.”¹² Asked how this could have happened, the White House Chief of Staff, Clifford L. Alexander, Jr., explained: “The family is not an action topic for a can-do conference.”¹³

As it turned out, of course, the conference was far from “can-do.” In the years since 1966, the conference as a public event has been little noted and not long remembered, except insofar as it illustrates the rare phenomenon of a high-level public gathering being successfully pressured to remove from its agenda, before it could even convene, the very topic that had precipitated the call for the gathering and that had originally been designated by the president of the United States as the gathering’s main intellectual focus.

For the next few months, Moynihan continued to make his case, partly as a way of responding to the continuing public denunciations of his Report. What is most interesting about these efforts is Moynihan’s continued insistence that Black family problems appear to be primarily economic problems requiring economic solutions.

In a paper published in 1966, for example, he insists again that “the most pressing question for American social policy is whether the essential first step for resolving the problem of the Negro American is to provide such a measure of full employment of Negro workers that the impact of unemployment on family structure is removed.” Obviously, for Moynihan, the answer to this “most pressing question” is “yes”: There “would seem to be no question that opportunities for a large mass of Negro workers in the lower ranges of training and education have not been improving, that in many ways the circumstances of these workers relative to the white work force have grown worse. It would appear that this in turn has led to, or been accompanied by, a serious weakening of the Negro social structure, specifically of the Negro family.”

In short: “Inevitably, the underemployment of the Negro father has led to the break-up of the Negro family.” For Black America, therefore, “the principal measure of progress toward equality will be that of employment. It is the primary source of individual or group identity ... For the Negro American, it is already, and will continue to be, the master problem.” In another 1966 essay, Moynihan’s economism was even blunter: “In itself,¹⁴ a national family policy need not be any more complex than were the provisions of the Employment Act of 1946.”¹⁵

At least as regards this assumption of economic foundationalism, Moynihan in 1966 was being anything but idiosyncratic. Indeed, Moynihan’s basic economism – which, to be fair, he at times conceded to be empirically problematic and therefore speculative and perhaps ultimately inadequate¹⁶ – directly echo and draw upon the work of numerous scholars working in this field, especially E. Franklin Frazier and Kenneth B. Clark. Here, for example, is Clark in 1965: One of the inevitable results of the unemployment and menial job status of urban Negroes is family instability.” And again: “The roots of the

pathology of ghetto communities lie in the menial, low-income jobs held by most ghetto residents. If the occupational level of the community could be raised, one would expect a corresponding decrease in social pathology, in dependency, disease, and crime.”¹⁷

Here is Lee Rainwater, wondering how best to approach the problems affecting Black Americans: “It is tempting to see the family as the main villain of the piece, and to seek to develop programs which attack directly this family pathology. Should we not have extensive programs of family therapy, family counseling, family-life education, and the like?” Rainwater’s answer is “no.” Would not such family service efforts be “pale” and therefore ultimately futile “without massive changes in the social and economic situations of the families with whom [such efforts] are to deal?” Yes, Rainwater concludes, they would be. Therefore: “A program whose sole effect would be to employ at reasonable wages slum men for work using the skills they now have would do more than any other program to stabilize slum family life. But the wages must be high enough to enable the man to maintain his self-respect as a provider...”¹⁸

The author and socialist leader Michael Harrington probably did more than any other scholar-intellectual in the early to mid 1960s to put the issue of urban poverty on the public and political agenda, in particular through his highly influential book, *The Other America*, first published in 1962.¹⁹ On the one hand, Harrington in his own writings on poverty paid scant attention to the issues of fatherhood and family structure.²⁰ On the other hand, he was a friend of Moynihan’s, and so he read the Moynihan Report with considerably more sympathy than did most of its critics. In 1965-1966, Harrington seems at least tentatively to have agreed with the basic family analysis contained in the Moynihan Report, while at the same time emphasizing much more strongly his agreement with Moynihan’s essentially economic view of the processes of family change, and insisting repeatedly that the Report’s explicit and implicit economic prescriptions, especially the goal of full employment, was the key to reducing urban poverty. “As the Moynihan Report itself makes plain,” Harrington wrote in late 1965, “unemployment and under-employment are fundamental to the problems of the Negro family.”²¹ Indeed, some 20 months earlier, in February of 1964, when Harrington was serving temporarily on President Lyndon Johnson’s Task Force in the War Against Poverty, Harrington was a co-author of a Task Force memo arguing that “if there is any single dominant problem of poverty in the U.S., it is that of unemployment.” One of Harrington’s two co-authors of the memo, and a fellow Task Force member, was Daniel Patrick Moynihan.²² In 1969, Harrington similarly proposed “either a living income or a good job” for every citizen as the core of any effective anti-poverty strategy.²³

In *Tally’s Corner*, a remarkable study of “Negro streetcorner men” published in 1967, Elliot Liebow places failure at marriage and the related estrangement from children – Liebow calls many of these men “fathers without children” – at the very center of the crisis of Black ghetto life in the United States. Yet Liebow, an anthropologist, also repeatedly insists, when looking for solutions, on the primacy of economics: “Taking this viewpoint [that background economic and social conditions are more important than cultural values and preferences as determinants of family behavior in the ghetto] does not reduce the magnitude of the problem but does serve to place it in the more tractable

context of economics, politics and social welfare. It suggests that poverty is, indeed, a proper target in the attempt to bring lower-class Negroes ‘into the mainstream of American life,’ and it supports the long line of social scientists, from E. Franklin Frazier and Gunnar Myrdal down through Kenneth Clark and Richard Cloward, in seeing the inability of the Negro man to earn a living and support his family as the central fact of lower-class Negro life.”²⁴

This is an important intellectual tradition, with much still to teach us. Above all, perhaps, this “long line of social scientists” conveyed in their work an impressive social and moral realism regarding the harmful consequences of family disintegration for children and for society. Yet by the end of the 1960s, and for reasons I will explore later in this essay, what I am calling the Clark-Frazier-Moynihan proposition on the Black family was no longer viable in U.S. political and intellectual life. Indeed, for the next 20 years – until William Julius Wilson published *The Truly Disadvantaged* in 1987 – this school of thought was essentially leaderless and almost wholly without influence in the U.S. public debate.

Economism, Part 2: The Wilson Proposition

In 1987, William Julius Wilson of the University of Chicago²⁵ published *The Truly Disadvantaged*, a study of urban poverty which, almost by itself, changed the scholarly and public debate on the Black family and, as Mitchell Duneier put it, “set the agenda for poverty research” in the U.S. for at least the next decade.²⁶ In the book, Wilson explicitly declares his goal of helping what he calls “the liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass” to “regain the influence it has lost since the 1960s,” largely by reestablishing intellectually “the relationships between joblessness and family structure.”

To begin to do so, Wilson minces no words in dismissing the currently regnant revisionist interpretation of Black family structure – an interpretation that, by 1987, had dominated U.S. academic and public discourse on this issue for at least 15 years. Quoting Kenneth Clark’s *Dark Ghetto*, Wilson openly seeks to rehabilitate the term “pathology,” the single most intensely criticized word from the Moynihan Report, by insisting that the predominant economic and social structures in U.S. inner cities in fact “produce modes of adaptation and create norms and patterns of behavior that take the form of a ‘self-perpetuating pathology.’”²⁷ In an even more direct reference to, and affirmation of, one of the core arguments of the Moynihan Report, one of Wilson’s chapter subheadings is “The Tangle of Pathology in the Inner City.”²⁸

As Wilson saw it, beginning in the mid 1960s, “the controversy surrounding the Moynihan report had the effect of curtailing serious research on minority problems in the inner city,” insofar as it generated an intellectual milieu in which liberal scholars “shied away from researching behavior construed as unflattering or stigmatizing to particular racial minorities.” As a result, “by 1970 it was clear to any sensitive observer that if there was to be research on the ghetto underclass that would not be subjected to ideological

criticism, it would be research conducted by minority scholars on the strengths, not the weaknesses, of inner-city families and communities.”

The results of this academic-intellectual phenomenon, in Wilson’s view, were largely tragic. While family and community life in U.S. inner cities continued to deteriorate, liberal scholars and policy makers responded with either defensiveness or, more commonly, stone-cold silence. Consequently, the policy debate on these issues in the 1980s came to be dominated by “conservative arguments” that, in Wilson’s view, emphasized only “individual characteristics” of the poor while ignoring the economic and other social-structural determinants of those characteristics.²⁹

Wilson’s core scholarly proposition is that joblessness is *the* – or at least *a* – primary cause of Black marital instability, unwed child bearing, and welfare dependency in U.S. inner cities. He rejects the thesis that inner-city family dysfunction stems in any significant way from “changing social and cultural trends,” insisting instead that Black “marital instability and the incidence of female-headed families” are directly traceable to growing unemployment and other structural economic trends. In short: “despite the complex nature of the problem, the weight of existing evidence suggests that the problems of male joblessness could be the single most important factor underlying the rise in unwed mothers among poor black women.”³⁰

Wilson restates and further develops this argument in his 1996 book, *When Work Disappears*. In this widely influential book, Wilson not only continues to reject virtually out of hand the entire body of revisionist scholarship emphasizing the strengths, rather than weaknesses, of inner city Black families – one of his chapters is called “The Fading Inner City Family” – but also adds considerable ethnographic detail on the extreme fragility of marriage and, more generally, on “antagonistic” male-female relationships in the inner city, drawn largely from extensive interviews with residents of several low-income Chicago neighborhoods. Wilson writes: “Inner city black women routinely say that they distrust men and feel strongly that black men lack dedication to their families. They argue that black males are hopeless as either husbands or fathers and that more of their time is spent on the streets than at home.” These women “tend to believe that black men get involved with women mainly to obtain sex or money, and that once these goals are achieved women are usually discarded.” For the men, Wilson concludes, “the birth of a child does not create a sense of obligation to marry, and.. .most young fathers feel little pressure, from either their family or their partner’s family, to marry. Having children and getting married are not usually connected.” His interview data “reveal especially weak support for the institution of marriage in the inner-city ghetto among black men.”³¹

Moreover, compared to *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson goes some distance in *When Work Disappears* to incorporate some consideration of values, attitudes, and norms into his overall explanatory model. At several points he directly suggests that family fragmentation in the inner city stems from a “complex interaction” between structures and norms, or more precisely, between the effects on family life of larger structural trends in the economy and the effects on family life of changing values regarding sexuality, procreation, and marriage.³²

Yet in some respects, *When Work Disappears* is effectively two books, not one. One book, consisting mainly of the middle chapters, contains rich ethnographic research and strives for a multi-dimensional explanatory model of family and social change. The second and by far the most influential book, consisting of both the initial chapters, which frame the inquiry, as well as the concluding chapters, which summarize his argument and outline his recommendations, reflects a one-dimensional explanatory model of social change that is emphatically economic, frequently to the point of dogmatism.

In this second book, nuance fades away. “Family dissolution” in the inner city is “fundamentally a consequence of the disappearance of work.” Problems connected to joblessness are “the central problems” of the inner city – problems which in turn “trigger a whole series of other problems” such as marital instability and family dissolution. Wilson’s numerous recommendations to policy makers, centering around a national WPA-style public jobs program, all focus on the goals of reducing joblessness and increasing wages in inner city neighborhoods. “Increasing the employment base” in these communities, Wilson concludes, would effectively reverse the trends of family and community deterioration; problems such as family breakdown, “no longer sustained and nourished by persistent joblessness,” would “gradually fade.”³³

Wilson’s achievements are impressive. Almost single-handedly, he publicly revived and intellectually strengthened an argument about the economic foundations of problems affecting the African American family – an argument with a distinguished intellectual pedigree, including names such as E. Franklin Frazier, Gunnar Myrdal, Kenneth B. Clark, Thomas F. Pettigrew, Lee Rainwater, Michael Harrington, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, but which had become intellectually unfashionable and had therefore lapsed into almost complete disuse until Wilson picked up the mantle again in the late 1980s.³⁴ In turn, Wilson’s basic liberal and economic proposition, combined with his blunt rejection of revisionism, especially as regards the importance of fathers, has clearly influenced, and has helped decisively to create the academic and public space for, a significant number of fatherhood leaders and “post-revisionist” scholars of the Black family in the 1990s, including Jeffrey Johnson, Wornie L. Reed, William A. Darity, Jr., Samuel L. Myers, Jr., and Ronald B. Mincy.³⁵

At the same time, as Glenn C. Loury observes, Wilson’s primary theoretical orientation is that structural (primarily economic) arrangements are determinative, while individual behaviors are derivative.³⁶ As I have tried to show, Wilson is hardly alone in this view. Indeed, the great majority of those who have written about the African American family in the last four decades, from conservatives to liberals,³⁷ from Moynihan to his harshest critics, seems clearly to have accepted as all but self-evident this basic understanding of causation.³⁸

Revisionism

In the magazine *Commonweal* in October of 1965, five months after Moynihan had delivered his “paper” on the Negro family to the White House and four months after President Johnson’s had delivered his “To Fulfill These Rights” speech at Howard University, Herbert J. Gans, a prominent writer and academic authority on urban issues, offered his “Reflections on the Moynihan report.” These reflections, particularly regarding Moynihan’s analysis of the Black family, were not complimentary. “At present,” Gans insists, “we do not even know whether the lower class Negro family structure is actually as pathological as the Moynihan report suggests.” For example, the “preliminary findings” of one study with which Gans is familiar “show no relationship between school performance and broken families,” thus showing that “the matriarchal family structure and the absence of a father have not yet been proven pathological, even for the boys who grow up in it.”

Moreover, because unwed childbearing has “a different meaning in this population than in the middle class one,” children in Black mother-headed homes “may not suffer the pathological consequences that accompany illegitimacy in the middle class.” As a result, especially among urban Blacks, a “family headed by a capable if unmarried mother may thus be healthier than a two-parent family in which the father is a marginal appendage.”

Regarding the presumed primacy of economics, however, Gans and Moynihan are in full agreement: “The fundamental economic causes of the present structure of the Negro family indicate that programs to change it must deal with these causes, principally in the areas of employment, income, and the provision of housing and other basic services. The history of the Negro family since the time of slavery suggests that the most important single program is the elimination of unemployment.” As a result, Gans is “confident” that, if genuine economic opportunity for African Americans is achieved, “a healthy Negro family structure will develop as a result.”³⁹

Several weeks after the Gans essay appeared, William Ryan, a psychologist on the faculty of the Harvard Medical School, offered his, even less complimentary, reflections on the Moynihan Report, first in *The Nation* (“Savage Discovery”⁴⁰), then in *The Crisis*, a publication of the NAACP (“The New Genteel Racism”⁴¹). Ryan later expanded his argument into a book whose title, *Blaming the Victim*,⁴² quickly entered into the popular lexicon and is probably the single most repeated and influential slogan to emerge from the entire debate surrounding the Moynihan Report, an angry riposte to Moynihan’s deeply resented phrase, “tangle of pathology.”

For his subject, Ryan embraces a style that combines intellectual condescension with white-hot moral outrage. Indeed, probably more than the output of any other single author, Ryan’s analyses prefigure and help to establish the basic academic response to the Moynihan Report and also, therefore, lay down some of the essential intellectual and moral markers for revisionism as a newly influential school of thought about the Black family.

In *The Nation*, Ryan writes that Moynihan's arguments amount to a "subtly irrational presentation" that ends up "in the manner of a propaganda document." The report is "inexpert," "highly sophomoric," "smug," "stupefying," filled with "fantastic" factual errors, "narrow," "portentous," "damnably inaccurate," based on "tiny scraps of evidence," "oversimplified," "inept," "careless," and "vague": "No sophisticated social scientist would rest a broad concept on such crude and simplistic measures."

In *The Crisis*, Ryan describes Moynihan's analysis as "inadequate and naive," deriving "dangerously inexact conclusions from weak and insufficient data." The report is "filled with errors of methodology and interpretation that reveal its authors as completely unequipped with the necessary skills to undertake the tasks that they assume." In particular, the report's treatment of data on out-of-wedlock births is "extraordinarily sophomoric." The report asserts that rates of unwed childbearing are higher among Blacks than whites. Not so fast, replies Ryan. Racial differences in illegitimacy rates are probably more apparent than real, telling us "nothing at all about differences in family structure" and nothing about differences in family norms. Why? Because, Ryan reports, white women are less likely than Black women to report unwed births, more likely to have access to contraceptives, more likely to have abortions and to put their babies up for adoption, and more likely to marry the father after an illegitimate conception.

These counter-punches about what were still, in 1965, called illegitimacy rates are quite revealing. Ryan may have had a valid point, albeit a small one, about rates of reporting versus rates of occurrence. But all of his other points – about contraception, abortion, adoption, and shotgun weddings – are almost wholly irrelevant to the basic empirical issue under dispute, which is the differences in the respective proportions of white and African American children who are born into, and grow up residing in, two-parent, married-couple homes.

These points are also entirely tangential to the question of whether growing up in a fatherless home is harmful to children – a question for which Ryan literally has nothing but contempt, since he declines to address it directly in either of his articles. Both as an academic matter, and also as a reflection of a particular cultural moment, it is remarkable that the Moynihan Report's first and seemingly most self-evident set of factual claims, heretofore almost universally accepted by scholars and the general public as uncontroversial – namely, that unwed child bearing is both problematic and more common among Blacks than among whites – is so fiercely contested by Ryan and also by others, but at the same time, contested primarily by indignantly waving the question away and demanding that we change the subject.

In the later, book-length version of this argument, *Blaming the Victim*, first published in 1971, Ryan requires only a few sentences to dispose of the subject of whether African American children need fathers. His basic answer is, not really. What about the importance of the father as a male role model? Ryan's answer is remarkably glib: "the Negro child being raised without a father is not really deprived of the basic information that boys play baseball and girls jump rope." True, growing up in a fatherless home does not represent "the best of all possible worlds." At the same time, citing exactly one study

(showing that “there is very little effect [on the children] if the home is broken after the age of six”) and quoting exactly one other scholar (Hylan Lewis), Ryan concludes that “the absence of a father is really not quite the disaster it is sometimes made out to be.” End of subject.⁴³

It’s worth remembering that arguably the central, and in retrospect probably the most provocative, assertion in the Moynihan Report, of which *Blaming the Victim* is intended to be a comprehensive refutation, is that widespread father absence is harmful to children and society. Yet somehow, despite all of his detailed argumentation, Ryan all but ignores the very question that, more than any other, gave rise to the Moynihan Report and thus the entire ensuing controversy in the first place, and that is at the center of the split between what I am calling the Clark-Frazier-Moynihan proposition and the school of thought that would soon be called revisionism.

The ultimate explanations for this curious lacuna, as well as for Ryan’s consistent tone of contempt and anger, are clearly moral and, broadly speaking, political. The fundamental issue for him is racism. In *The Crisis*, Ryan writes that the “main point” about this entire debate is that “we are in danger of being seduced into de-emphasizing discrimination as the overriding cause of the Negro’s current status of inequality.” For this reason, Moynihan’s report perfectly embodies “the new racism.”

Similarly, in *The Nation*, Ryan warns that the Moynihan Report “seduces the reader into believing that it is not racism and discrimination but the weaknesses and defects of the Negro himself that account for the present status of inequality between Negro and white.” The report’s “explanations almost always focus on supposed defects of the Negro victim as if those – and not the racist structure of American society – were the cause of all the woes that Negroes suffer.” The report “singles out the ‘unstable Negro family’ as the cause of Negro inequality,” whereas in fact the current conditions of the African American family “reflect current effects of contemporaneous discrimination. They are results, not causes.”⁴⁴

William Ryan’s 1965 attacks on the Moynihan Report adumbrated some of the main principles of what I am calling revisionism.⁴⁵

As a school of thought, revisionism is animated by five basic ideas:

- First, the current reality of Black family structure, characterized by high rates of divorce and (especially) non-marital childbearing, does not represent deviation or decline, but rather resourcefulness and resilience.
- Second, the mother-headed African American family, linked to extended-family networks and other community supports, is viable and in many ways beneficial.
- Third, renewing marriage as an institution is not a realistic or desirable strategy for improving the well being of Black children. Fourth, pointing to fatherlessness as a

core problem in African American families reveals an uninformed perspective that reinforces racism.

- And finally, and arguably most fundamentally, problems facing the Black family stem essentially from outside structures and forces, especially racism and the absence of good jobs.

Beginning in about 1965, this body of thought emerged more or less formally, with increasing numbers of scholars consciously viewing themselves as participating in revisionism and in being part of a new and insurgent school of thought. Intellectually, revisionism developed quite robustly during the years 1965-1975, regularly adding to (and frequently radicalizing) its intellectual foundations as well as steadily expanding the number of its prominent spokespersons and its influence in higher education and in the larger public debate.

Paula Giddings' Foreword to Andrew Billingsley's influential 1992 study, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, recalls and embodies this intellectual and generational development. She remembers "feeling my mind expand in the late 1960s and 1970s" when she discovered "the new generation of black sociologists" studying the family. Giddings recalls: "Where a previous generation of scholars saw deviation and weakness, the new scholars saw resourcefulness and resilience." Moreover: "If black families were in difficulty, it was not some inherent, cultural condition which was at 'the heart of the deterioration' but socioeconomic factors pressing in from the outside."

Regarding family structure and the role of fathers, Giddings continues, the new scholarship strongly emphasized viewing "non-nuclear families in terms of their own integrity..." Moreover, "less attention should be paid to the configuration of the family and more to empowering the mother with adequate child care so that she might remain in school and adequate health care for her and her children." Along these lines, policy makers and community leaders should clearly resist the idea of "encouraging women to shift their dependence from the welfare rolls to that of a male breadwinner – as if the real problem is a lack of patriarchal dominance."⁴⁶

Giddings nicely captures the main tenets of this new intellectual paradigm as it developed from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s.⁴⁷ Current African American family structures represent resilience more than deviance.⁴⁸ Mother-headed African American families, linked to extended families and other community supports, are viable and in many ways beneficial, and therefore should be viewed primarily "in terms of their own integrity." Strengthening marriage is unrealistic and undesirable as a major strategy for Black advancement and for improving outcomes for Black children. Focusing attention on unwed child bearing, divorce, and father absence as problems in the Black community tends to worsen the central problem, which is white racism. And finally, problems facing Black families stem not primarily from intra-family dynamics or Black sexual and family norms, but instead from oppressive, white-generated external forces and structures.

A number of influential books on the African American family published during this period forcefully articulated these revisionist themes. These include: *Black Families in White America*, by Andrew Billingsley (1968),⁴⁹ the first and probably most important comprehensive scholarly evaluation of the African American family from an essentially revisionist perspective; *The Strengths of Black Families*, by Robert Hill (1971),⁵⁰ which builds on some of Billingsley's major themes, developing more explicitly what Elmer P. and Joanne Mitchell Martin call the "strength-resiliency perspective" on African American families⁵¹; *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman*, by Joyce A. Ladner (1971);⁵² *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*, by Carol B. Stack (1974),⁵³ an ethnographic portrait emphasizing the viability and adaptability of extended kinship and family-support networks in a low-income Black community (and in many ways a revisionist reinterpretation of issues addressed by Elliot Liebow in his 1967 book, *Tally's Corner*, which was clearly indebted to the older Clark-Frazier-Moynihan school of thought); *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, by Eugene Genovese (1974),⁵⁴ emphasizing the strength and resistance of Black families during slavery; and *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925*, by Herbert Gutman (1976),⁵⁵ also emphasizing the strength of Black families, and a book that, according to the author, originated in part as a specific rebuttal to the Moynihan Report.

Billingsley's *Black Families in White America* has been particularly influential, both in the larger public debate and especially among what Paula Giddings terms "the new generation of black sociologists" beginning their careers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this book, two themes stand out. First, Billingsley takes an important and clearly valid proposition – namely, that families do not exist in a vacuum, but are influenced by the surrounding society – and comes very close to absolutizing it. Consequently, after denouncing as simplistic the idea that what he calls "processes of causation"⁵⁶ flow only or at least mainly in one direction, from the family to the larger society, Billingsley anchors much of his argument in the equally simplistic idea that processes of causation flow only or at least mainly in one direction, from the larger society to the family.

For example, by way of criticizing the Moynihan Report for "singling out instability in the Negro family as the causal factor for the difficulties Negroes face in the white society," Billingsley insists bluntly that: "It is quite the other way around." That is, for Billingsley, white society is the causal factor for the difficulties that Negro families face. Billingsley reiterates this thesis of causation throughout the book, even suggesting in the Preface that it constitutes the book's "major theme." For example: "whatever ails the Negro family is a reflection of ailments in the society at large." At another point, with only a slight hint of qualification, Billingsley concedes that the family and society are "interdependent," but again insists that "the greater force for defining, enhancing, or obstructing, comes from the wider society to the family, and not the other way around."⁵⁷

For this reason, in the book's two concluding chapters, in which Billingsley details his proposals for strengthening Black families, he calls forcefully for a variety of economic, political, and normative changes in the wider (white) society, while saying *nothing at all* about the Black family itself – not a word in favor of seeking any changes in any of the

“inner” areas of Black family life, such as family structure, gender roles, marital roles and expectations, sexual behavior, or child rearing practices. Why this lacuna? Because for Billingsley, all of these dimensions of intra-family life are essentially *dependent* variables, overwhelmingly passive or derivative aspects of social reality that are, for both the scholar and the reformer, only “reflections” of “the society at large.”

Second, although Billingsley writes carefully and in mostly measured tones, and although he does offer occasional gestures of respect for the older paradigm,⁵⁸ his key arguments about fathers and family structure are clearly revisionist. Like William Ryan, Billingsley handles the overall question of fatherhood – the nature of fatherhood as social role for men, the meaning of the father-child bond, and the consequences of fatherlessness for children and society – primarily by ignoring it. Most of his views on the subject are stated tersely and indirectly, typically without mentioning the word “father.”

For example, he describes the Black family overall as “an absorbing, adaptive, and amazingly resilient mechanism for the socialization of its children and the civilization of its society.” He insists that all contemporary “family structures” in the Black community “can sustain strong and viable family life” and that current scholarship on father absence in Black families typically “distorts and exaggerates the prevalence and consequences of the ‘matriarchy’ among Negro families.” Accordingly, he disagrees with any type of “direct intervention” by government “to effect types of family structure” and argues instead that “society would help Negro families meet their functions much better” if society “placed more emphasis on the values of freedom,” including “freedom of choice in family form.”⁵⁹

This clear suggestion that Black fathers ultimately do not matter – or that they matter comparatively little (at least not enough to spend much time discussing them), or that a far bigger problem than father absence is people who worry about father absence, or that in any event, nothing can or should be done directly to seek to bring the fathers back – is a major tenet of revisionism as a school of thought about the Black family.

Consider the prominent anthropologist David M. Schneider, whose 1984 book, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, constitutes a landmark in revisionist family scholarship. A few years earlier, in 1968, he had a few things to say in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* about the Moynihan Report. None of them were very kind.

Throughout his article, Schneider pointedly uses scare-quotes to single out those words or phrases from the Moynihan Report which he, Schneider, finds objectionable. These objectionable terms include “breakdown,” “instability,” “disintegration,” and “matriarchal structure.” Schneider rhetorically asks: “Is the ‘matriarchal structure’ of the family really pathological?” Well, maybe not. Probably not! For it turns out that father-absent homes in Black communities may, as Schneider puts it, be “culturally valued forms.” Overall, Schneider insists that the Moynihan Report is “bad social science” because “it reads too much like a white, urban, middle-class Protestant of almost Victorian vintage vigorously reaffirming his middle class values and deploring the

degeneracy of the Lower Orders, bound to undertake some uplifting missionary activity among them, for their own good.”⁶⁰

Here is the sociologist Albert Murray in 1973: If Moynihan’s “sophomoric theories about father figures were not being applied to black people, they would no doubt be laughed out of any snap course in undergraduate psychology.”⁶¹

Here is the sociologist Robert Staples in 1971: “Children have a value independent of the legitimacy of their conception. In essence there is no such thing as an illegitimate child in the black community. All children are legitimate and have a value to their families and community. There are only children without fathers, and these children may incur special problems because of the national oppression of women in this society.” As ethnographic description, Staples’ observation that “there is no such thing as an illegitimate child in the black community” is unexceptional and is consistent with the findings of numerous other scholars.⁶² But note that, prescriptively and philosophically for Staples, the only problematic aspects of fatherlessness in Black America are due to “the national oppression of women in this society.”⁶³

In *All Our Kin*, a study of domestic life in a poor Black community, Carol Stack is outraged about poverty and white racism, but completely accepting of the estrangement of Black fathers from their children and from their children’s mothers. Other scholars, she reports, have viewed the spread of fatherlessness as a sign of the “deterioration of the “Negro family” and therefore as a “social pathology.” She wants to “challenge” these flawed “assumptions.”⁶⁴

Traditionally, anthropologists have viewed the mother-father couple as the basis or nucleus of the child-rearing family unit. But for Stack, this view is “clearly inadequate,” since grandparents, distant relatives, “fictive” kin, and others (including mothers’ boyfriends, who may act for periods of time as “play daddies”) can and do perform the roles that fathers have played. “Parental role behavior,” Stack reports, “is a composite of many behavior patterns and these rights and duties can be shared or transferred to other individuals.” The biological father is not really necessary. In the community Stack studied, mothers “generally regard their children’s fathers as friends of the family” and “expect little from the father; they just hope he will help out.” But not to worry, at least too much. There are play daddies, grandparents, and fictive kin. And besides: “In principal, the dropping of a father from a network affects the shape of the network in the same way as if other more distant relatives on either side were to drop out.”⁶⁵

Stack’s analysis is conceptually one-dimensional and stridently ideological; a much more sophisticated treatment of Black kinship networks can be found in *The Black Extended Family* (1978), by Elmer P. and Joanne Mitchell Martin. (Reading the Martins’ ethnography, I frequently recognized in their careful descriptions the characteristics of my own extended family (especially on my father’s side) at the time of my childhood and youth in Mississippi and Alabama in the 1960s and 1970s – traits which, in turn, closely resemble the traits of other working class and lower-income Southern extended families, both white and Black, that I knew during this period.) Unlike Stack, for example, the

Martins examine some of the weaknesses as well as the strengths of extended family, as opposed to nuclear family, norms and structures. And unlike Stack, the Martins explore the ways in which a family form whose origins are largely rural and Southern can thrive, and fail to thrive, in the urban North and, more generally, within a larger society that increasingly embraces the values of individualism, materialism, and secularism.”⁶⁶

At the same time, the Martins, as well, largely ignore the fundamental question of whether children need fathers. Describing their concept of the “sub-extended family” (a family household that is closely linked to a larger, extended family), they write: “A sub-extended family household with the father absent appears [to the outsider] to be a broken home, but it may really be a vital part of a strong and flexible extended family.. .An uncle, a male cousin, an older brother, a boyfriend, or even a grandmother or aunt could be a father figure to the children.” Of children who never even know their fathers, the Martins report that, “that child is usually told at a very early age who his father is, and is given some details, good or bad, about his father’s life. Hence, few children grow up feeling that they are without fathers.”⁶⁷

Scholars, particularly ethnographers, face a difficult challenge. The best of them properly seek to be as objective as possible, focusing largely on careful description, and striving to understand the people they study primarily as those people understand themselves; they therefore must frequently seek to jettison the distorting prism of their own, or any other, external moral perspective.⁶⁸ At the same time, any social scientist, especially one concerned with a subject as intimate and complex as the family, necessarily communicates an “ought” as well as an “is”; prescription is literally impossible to separate fully from description, if for no other reason than the very questions we choose to ask indicate a set of values and intellectual traditions and a guiding epistemology.⁶⁹

Accordingly, when students of family life matter-of-factly report that a “boyfriend” or an “aunt” can be a “father figure” to a child – or that a mother or grandmother telling a young fatherless child “some details” about “who his father is” will help the child to “feel” that she or he has a father – we know that we are encountering more than pure description. We know it partly because such a description begs numerous fundamental questions, none of which are asked. More generally, regarding not just this book, but revisionism as an overall school of thought, whenever family scholars show little or no awareness of the fundamental dimensions – physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and others – of the father-child bond in human societies; whenever they fail to inquire in any systematic way about the role of fatherhood in the socialization of both the adult male and his offspring; and whenever they demonstrate little or no curiosity about the consequences of father absence for children, mothers, the surrounding community, or the larger society; we know that we are encountering these scholars’ values as well as their findings, assertions of philosophy as well as presentations of data. Time and again in the revisionist academic literature on the Black family (and on the white family as well) we find an appreciation of the role of fathers that is either weak and anemic, sometimes to the point of caricature, or absent altogether.

Overall, from the mid 1960s to the present, in the on-going revisionist interpretation of current trends in the Black family, the view that Black fathers are essentially unnecessary has become what amounts to a basic principle, an intellectual key to the overall point of view. A recent description of revisionism's emergence and influence as a school of thought, as well as a friendly summary of its main themes, can be found in the 1995 volume. *The Decline of Marriage Among African Americans*, edited by M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan. The Moynihan Report, according to these scholars, "was indeed a turning point for both scholarly and political assessment of the African American family" and became "the single most important stimulus" for a "new direction of inquiry" among scholars concerned with the Black family. Much of this "new direction" in scholarship "sought to challenge Moynihan's supposition (and Frazier's before him) that a family without a husband-father is by definition problematic."⁷⁰

Drawing upon the work of Walter Allen, Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan identify three basic "perspectives" that have influenced recent and current scholarship on the African American family. The "cultural equivalence" perspective, by de-emphasizing the importance of racial differences, implicitly suggests that "white middle-class family organization and function constitute the norm that blacks must approximate to be viewed as legitimate." The "cultural deviance" perspective "explicitly views the nuclear family with a male provider and head" as "normative." The "cultural variation" perspective, by contrast, "views black distinctiveness not in negative terms, but as a positive outgrowth of distinctive sociocultural contexts." The authors' own assessment of these three "perspectives" is quite similar to that of most of their colleagues in this field: strongly critical of both the "equivalence" model and (especially) the "deviance" model, and strongly supportive of the "variation" model, which is part of what they and others term revisionism. In particular, if, as we should, "we view marital change as a function of a conflux of situational constraints, then social policy must confront those constraints, rather than moralize."⁷¹

A volume of scholarly essays published in 1995, *African American Single Mothers*, is entirely devoted to exposing as a "myth" and a "stereotype" the idea that the "mother-centered" Black family is problematic. Bette J. Dickerson, for example, urges scholars to distinguish between father absence and male absence, since the presence of a "male" can compensate for the absence of the "father." In some analyses, Dickerson complains, "Father-absent single mother families are erroneously assumed to be male-absent, meaning that there are no supportive males present." Yet in fact, "other males" frequently "serve father/husband roles in the family."⁷² In a chapter examining Black child well-being in father-absent homes, Suzanne M. Randolph highlights the "adaptive strengths of African American single-mother families in fostering development in young children." One of these "strengths" includes the presence of "play daddies." Randolph concludes: "The presumptions about the lack of male presence or father involvement in African American children's lives have been overstated and thus perpetuate the Moynihan-like, mother-blaming answers as to why children in these families fare less well when the evidence points that way."⁷³

The political scientist Andrew Hacker, in his best-selling 1992 study, *Two Nations*, skirts the issue of African American fatherhood with hardly as much as a nod or a backward glance. Announcing initially, in his chapter on “Parents and Children,” that this “is not the place to debate whether optimal family life requires the presence of two parents,” Hacker then answers his own question by approvingly quoting Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University, who “notes it has yet to be shown that ‘absence of a father was directly responsible for any of the supposed deficiencies of broken homes.’” And then several paragraphs later, in summary: “The real issue, Professor Cherlin points out, ‘is not the lack of a male presence but the lack of a male income.’” The “real” issue is money, not fathers. End of discussion of fathers.⁷⁴

Here is Donna L. Franklin in her 1997 study. *Ensuring Inequality*: “Policymakers will have more of an impact on the lives of poor African American children when they accept the irreversibility of the high levels of nonmarriage of their mothers as a starting point in thinking about changes in public policy. If the mother is drug-free, motivated to be a good mother, and considered to be fit to rear her child, resources should be directed at fortifying the mother-child dyad by strengthening her parenting skills.”⁷⁵ Here is the family scholar Lena Wright Myers in 1996: “The matriarchal family structure with respect to the absence of a father figure has not yet been proven to be pathological...Moreover, many matriarchally structured families raise Black males who adapt successfully and have stable relationships with others, while performing societal roles expected of them.”⁷⁶

In her 1998 essay on “The Absent Black Father,” Dorothy Roberts of Rutgers University explicitly declines to evaluate whether or not Black fathers are important to their children. Why? Because to do so would encourage racist beliefs about Black males, which would in turn be used by racists and others to advance the fraudulent idea that fatherlessness is a harmful social trend. (Roberts denounces the idea as fraudulent while at the same time declining to present or evaluate any evidence.) Here is how she puts it: “Even when race is not mentioned, powerful images of promiscuous Black mothers and their shiftless partners shape the debate about fatherlessness. Race influences the reasons people think fatherlessness is a problem and the solutions proposed to address it.” Thus, for Roberts, absent Black fathers ominously illustrate “the critical role that Black fathers play in the [misguided] promotion of marital fatherhood as the panacea for children’s needs.”⁷⁷

As I have tried to suggest, there are several problems with revisionism as a school of thought about Black families. First, revisionism typically either downplays or ignores altogether the importance of fatherhood as a social role for men and the contributions of fathers to their children. Second, is a school of thought born of a particular political-cultural debate occurring in the 1960s, and responsive to a particular set of demographic conditions, that are well behind us now, and not especially relevant to the challenges of the new century. A school of thought that emerged 35 years ago largely to rebut notions of *Black* family inferiority – to insist that society not single out the *Black* family as a cause of social problems – has continued to exercise great influence during a time in which the family can no longer be viewed primarily as a *racial* issue at all, since the trend

of family fragmentation now clearly and strongly affects all major racial groups in the society.

Finally, like economism, revisionism is arbitrarily and harmfully *deterministic*. Revisionist scholarship is typically based on a theory of causation that is one-dimensional and simplistic. Like economism – and here we find the only major trait that is common to both economism and revisionism – revisionism consistently relegates family structure and family functioning to dependent variables, simply *assuming* that causation is a one-way street, from the larger (primarily economic) structures of society to the family. As a result, especially when it comes to prescriptions, analyses which are putatively about the family actually end up having much to say about economics and politics, but very little to say about the family as such. Curiously, then, the subject itself, the family, eventually ceases to be the subject, and ultimately becomes viewed, wrongly, as essentially epiphenomenal.⁷⁸

For a New Revisionism

The most consistent failure of scholarship on the Black family since 1960 has been the largely unexamined methodological assumption that the family is epiphenomenal, essentially a creature of external forces, usually assumed to be structural, and usually further assumed to be economic.

A primary task of a new revisionism would be to test this assumption empirically. To the best of my knowledge, despite its enormous influence on social science methodology and practice, especially in the area of Black family studies, this cluster of ideas about the sources of family change have rarely if ever been systematically tested by scholars.

I doubt that they will bear the weight of scrutiny. To the degree that they do not, another and even more important task of a new revisionism would be developing and testing an alternative set of assumptions in which “the family as such” is viewed as a partly autonomous generator of human and social capital and therefore a crucial topic of inquiry, both for scholars who want to understand family and social change, as well as for policy makers seeking to improve child and societal well being.

Such an intellectual project – amounting potentially to a broader, more complex, and one hopes more *accurate* way of thinking about the family in society – would require a significant refocusing in the academy. Currently, for example, much of the nation’s academic thinking about the current state of Black families comes from two fields, sociology and economics; in addition, much of this thinking comes from scholars whose main area of expertise is not the family, but instead poverty and ways to reduce poverty.

A framework focusing on poverty is certainly valuable, but ultimately insufficient, if our goal is to understand *the family*. A topic of inquiry in which the family is a corollary concern – relevant, but ultimately tangential to the main topic – strongly increases the

likelihood that the family as a subject will be viewed epiphenomenally, as a derivative of something else, rather than as a subject in and of itself.

A new revisionism would therefore insist first and foremost that the focus of inquiry is *the family*, not some other, related topic. And because a new revisionism would insist on a complex, multivariate model of causation, it would also insist upon a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach, including history, psychiatry and psychology, anthropology, philosophy, theology and other fields in the humanities and human sciences, as well as sociology and economics.

Much of the debate about determinism concerns when to study, and to evaluate the role of, cultural values. The ultimate defense of what I am calling determinism in family studies is that explanations invoking values are essentially circular, virtually tautological – that is, they don't really explain anything at all. Here is the alleged tautology: People with apparently different values behave differently because... their values are different. As William Julius Wilson puts it, such arguments are “circular in the sense that cultural values were inferred from the behavior of the underclass to be explained, and then these values were used as the explanation of the behavior.”

But this formulation itself is deeply revealing. Wilson views “cultural” explanations – that is, those focusing on intra-family values and behavioral norms – as merely “circular” precisely because he can detect in them little or no causal importance. Ultimately, “culture” does not cause anything to happen because, as Wilson puts it, “cultural values emerge from specific circumstances and life chances and reflect an individual's position in the class structure.” As a result, “changes in the economic and social situations of the ghetto underclass will lead to changes in cultural norms and behavior patterns.”⁷⁹

What is the philosophy, and the epistemology, underlying this set of claims? Ideas derive from material circumstances. Economic status is the father of values, attitudes, and behavioral norms, including those about sexuality, procreation, and marriage. Ideals and aspirations have little or no autonomy; instead, they flow directly from one's “position in the class structure.” This way of thinking about causation is one-dimensional to the point of dogmatism – an articulation of economic determinism that hardly differs at all from Marx's classic claims about the economic “base” and the moral-cultural “superstructure” of society. This is an old and contentious debate, to be sure, but suffice it to say that there are powerful reasons to doubt the validity of this way of interpreting social reality, *especially* in the areas of marriage and family life.

For example, a number of research findings have cast serious doubt on Wilson's basic thesis regarding Black inner city family structure, which is that economic variables, especially job opportunities, ultimately determine fatherhood and marital outcomes for inner city men. Both Robert Lerman and Christopher Jencks have shown that marriage rates have dropped almost as much for what Wilson calls “marriageable” Black men – those who are steadily employed and those who are better educated – as they have for Black men who are poorer and less employable.⁸⁰

No one argues that changing patterns of economic opportunity have no impact on changing patterns of family formation. Clearly, they do. But the venerable thesis that economic variables, particularly those related to the availability of jobs, are the primary determinants of family structure trends among Black Americans, or among any group of Americans, is simply no longer empirically viable. Something else quite important must be going on.

What exactly is going on? I don't know. My own hypothesis, following Jencks and others, would be that changing *societal* (not Black or subcultural) values regarding sexuality, procreation, and marriage are the most important determinants of changes in family structure since the 1960s, including changes in Black family structure.⁸¹ With respect specifically to Black families, I would also hypothesize, following Orlando Patterson and others, that comparatively conflictual male-female relationships, stemming in part from the historic and current marginalization of Black males, have also contributed importantly to Black father absence and to the weakness of Black family structure⁸² – particularly in recent decades, as the society *as a whole* shifted from a marriage culture to a culture that tolerates and times even celebrates nonmarital sexuality, divorce, and unwed child bearing.

But these are only guesses. Regarding the necessity and possibility of a new revisionism in studies of the Black family, what matters is not the validity of these particular guesses, but instead the three core concepts through which these and other hypotheses can be developed and empirically tested – namely, that Black children, no less than other children, need fathers; that marriage is a primary guarantor of child well being and typically a precondition for effective fatherhood; and perhaps most fundamentally, that the family as an institution is a cause as well as a result of social change.

Much of this essay is an insistence on both the ubiquity and the limitations of determinism in scholarly treatments of the Black family since 1960. I've tried to suggest that the family should no longer be viewed by scholars as a passive entity. As an institution, and as a set of relationships, the family *acts*, both in and upon society. It *does* things. This reality helps to explain, for example, why getting married in and of itself, according to Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, appears to cause men to work harder and earn more money, and appears to cause married persons, as compared to unmarried persons, to be healthier, to live longer, and to be personally more happy.⁸³ Conversely, as Steven L. Nock has shown, this reality also helps to explain why, even after controlling for income and other variables, having children outside of marriage appears to worsen educational and economic outcomes for men.⁸⁴ In both cases, it's "the family as such" – especially the in-close nature and destiny of the man-woman and parent-child bonds – that appears to be causing social change and generating, or failing to generate, human, social, and economic capital.

Ultimately, however, the case against determinism in family studies may go beyond any particular understanding, or lack thereof, of the family as an institution. Fundamentally, this question forces us to confront our understanding of the human person. The political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain, in her wonderfully titled essay on "Methodological

Sophistication and Conceptual Confusion,” suggests that all scholars must either directly or indirectly answer the question, “What kind of being does your analysis presuppose?” The answer to this foundational question “sets the boundaries of the phenomena to be investigated.”⁸⁵

So what kind of person do scholars of the Black family typically presuppose? More broadly, what kind of person do the modern social sciences tend to presuppose? To me, the answer is clear: *A person who is the expression of social forces*. A person whose decisions and behaviors can almost always be *explained*, and thus objectified, by making them the logical products of external pressures and contingencies.

In general, since the 19th century, when the behavioral sciences became finally severed from their earlier roots in theology and philosophy and first emerged as modern academic disciplines, this methodological determinism has clearly yielded many enormously valuable results. It obviously captures much of the truth of human affairs. It can organize a great deal of information intelligibly. It frequently produces elegant (often mathematically based) explanatory models with impressive predictive power. There is much to praise, in short, about this way of seeing the world.

But ultimately, for me anyway, it is a false way of seeing the human person. For methodological determinism in the social sciences, whatever its other virtues, does not accurately recognize the phenomenology of human motivation and action. It recognizes structure and process, but not drama. It can seldom grant independent agency to human creativity. In the final analysis, it simply cannot account for the existence of the acting person. As Lawrence Mead observes: “A person who is only an expression of social pressures is not a person at all.”⁸⁶

This is an old debate. In a 1958 philosophical symposium on “Determinism and Freedom,” Sidney Hook put it this way: “Sickness, accident, or incapacity aside, one feels lessened as a human being if one’s actions are always excused or explained away on the ground that despite appearances one is really not responsible for them. It means being treated like an object, an infant, or someone out of his mind.” He insists: “In spite of the alleged inevitabilities in personal life and history, human effort can redetermine the direction of events, even though it cannot determine the conditions that make human effort possible.” Ultimately, Hook concludes, “we can make different what we are responsible for.”⁸⁷

Vaclav Havel once wrote of the “essential aims of life” that are “naturally present in every person.” Thus: “In everyone there is some longing for humanity’s rightful dignity, for moral integrity, for free expression of being and a sense of transcendence over the world of existence.”⁸⁸ These “essential aims of life” sometimes seem to rise up, against all odds, to shape history directly. I am thinking here, for example, of the Black freedom movement in the U.S. South in the 1960s, and the civic and religious movements to overturn communism in eastern Europe which culminated in the late 1980s. More commonly, however, they are simply ... present.

But these foundational attributes of the acting person are routinely and intentionally made to disappear – downplayed, denied, methodologically alleged to be something else – by the modern social sciences, in particular with respect to the family, and, I believe, most egregiously with respect to Black families. Confronting and seeking to redress this problem is the great challenge for a new revisionism. As Havel’s formulation about “transcendence” suggests, this question of determinism and autonomy, in the social sciences and elsewhere, is probably ultimately a theological question, having to do with whether we do, or do not, believe that in every human person is a spark of divine creativity.

-end-

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Endnotes

¹ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 367-368. This book was originally published in 1939 and Frazier revised it for republication in 1948.

² Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, March 1965), also published in Lee Rainwater and William T. Yancey (eds.), *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), 39-124.

³ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Family and Nation* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 18, 21-21, 24.

⁴ Rainwater and Yancey, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pps. 20-21.

⁶ Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 81.

⁷ E. Franklin Frazier, "Problems and Needs of Negro Children and Youth Resulting from Family Disorganization," *Journal of Negro Education* (Summer 1950): 276-277. Regarding the negative consequences of father absence, particularly within urban Black communities, Frazier was blunt and unequivocal: "The widespread disorganization of family life among Negroes has affected practically every phase of their community life...With a fourth to a third of Negro families in cities without a male head, many Negro children suffer the initial handicap of not having the discipline and authority of the father in the home. Negro mothers who have the responsibility for the support of the family are forced to neglect their children who pick up all forms of socially disapproved behavior in the disorganized areas in which these families are concentrated." See Frazier, *The Negro Family in The United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1957), 636-637.

⁸ Christopher Jencks, "The Moynihan Report," *The New York Review of Books*, October 14, 1965.

⁹ Stephen R. Graubard, Preface to the issue "An American Dilemma Revisited," *Daedalus* 124, no. 1 (Winter 1995): xix-xxi; David S. McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 587-589.

¹⁰ "To Fulfill These Rights," Remarks of President Lyndon B. Johnson at Howard University, Washington, D.C., June 4, 1965.

¹¹ Rainwater and Yancey, p. 246.

¹² Benjamin Muse, *The American Negro Revolution: From Nonviolence to Black Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 257.

¹³ Moynihan, *Family and Nation*, p. 35.

¹⁴ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family," in Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark (eds.), *The Negro American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), 153, 136, 150, 135. Most of the essays in this book, including Moynihan's, were originally published in the Fall 1965 and Winter 1966 issues of *Daedalus*. In April of 1964, Moynihan had participated in the planning conference for these volumes.

¹⁵ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “A Family Policy for the Nation,” *America*, September 18, 1966, reprinted in Rainwater and Yancey, pps. 385-395.

Here is Moynihan in 1970: “First, the single most powerful determinant of behavior and well-being in society is the level and security of an individual’s income. It is as simple as that, and much as a certain folk tradition may resist the truth of the statement, it is without question the single most powerful finding that social science or common sense has ever come up with.” See Moynihan, “One Step We Must Take,” *Saturday Review*, May 23, 1970, p. 21.

¹⁶ Speaking specifically of what I am calling his economic assumption, Moynihan in 1965 bluntly says:

“No one knows whether it is justified or not. The relationship between economic phenomena, such as unemployment, and social phenomena, such as family structure, has hardly begun to be traced in the United States.” There is more. Moynihan takes pains to compare, as best the data permit, trend lines in Black unemployment since about 1950 with trend lines in Black marital dissolution and welfare dependency. Throughout the 1950s, these indicators rose and fell together, thus suggesting a causal relationship between changes in economic conditions and changes in family structure. But beginning in the early 1960s, the economic and family indicators separate and even begin, it would appear, to go in opposite directions, such that, for example, a sharp drop in Black unemployment after 1962 correlates with an *increase* in Black marital dissolutions. What does this mean? Moynihan does not know. But: “It would be troubling indeed to learn that until several years ago employment opportunity made a great deal of difference in the rate of Negro dependency and family disorganization, but that the situation has so deteriorated that the problem is now feeding on itself – that measures that once would have worked will henceforth not work so well, or work at all.” (See Moynihan, “Employment, Income, and the Ordeal of the Negro Family,” in Parsons and Clark, *The Negro American*, pps. 154-155, 157.)

Several years later, in 1968, Moynihan recalls that these data had indeed implied “the apparent weakening influence of aggregate economic movements on social conditions” such as family structure, and then complains that: “One would imagine that a hypothesis of this kind would arouse interest and bring about serious efforts either to confirm or disprove it. Nothing of the sort occurred. A storm of controversy arose over the [Moynihan] report, but I have seen but one citation, by a sociologist, of the changing employment-welfare relationship hypothesis...” (See Moynihan, “The Crisis in Welfare,” *The Public Interest* (Winter 1968), reprinted in Moynihan, *Coping: On the Practice of Government* (New York: Random House, 1973), 150.) By the late 1960s, Moynihan’s views were shifting toward the idea that the nation’s expanding public welfare system itself – a program that, inadvertently, had become “perfectly adapted to providing support for the female-headed, lower-class family” – was a significant causal factor in the continuing disintegration of Black (and lower-income white) family structure. For this reason, Moynihan during this period became increasingly supportive of direct and broadly based income-redistribution schemes, such as family allowances or even guaranteed minimum incomes – what he called a strategy of “income equalization,” as opposed to policies to promote full employment – as the most desirable and potentially effective policy tools for improving family stability among the poor. As his views

evolved, however, Moynihan never departed from his strongly economic assumptions regarding the processes of family change. In 1970 he declared emphatically: “The preeminent arbiter of family stability is income. If social science has taught us anything, it is that.” Two years later, lamenting the “failure of inquiry” – “...causality eludes us. Why is this tragedy happening?” – regarding the continuing spread of father-absent homes, he reiterates: “I persist in the belief that its explanation will be found in changing relationships between employment and income, and especially in the presence of welfare income as an alternative to earnings.”

See Moynihan, “The Crisis in Welfare” in Moynihan, *Coping*, pps. 146, 149; Moynihan, “Policy vs. Program in the 1970s,” *The Public Interest* (Summer 1970), reprinted in Moynihan, *Coping*, pps. 282-283; and Moynihan, “The Schism in Black America,” *The Public Interest* (Spring 1972), reprinted in Moynihan, *Coping*, p. 360.)

¹⁷ Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, pps. 47, 34.

¹⁸ Lee Rainwater, “Crucible of Identity: The Negro Lower-Class Family,” in Parsons and Clark, *The Negro American*, p. 195-196. See also Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Family Life in a Federal Slum* (Chicago, Aldine Publishing, 1970).

¹⁹ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1962).

²⁰ In *The Other America*, Harrington does not address the subjects of fatherhood and family structure at all. However, several years earlier, in the second of two important articles on U.S. poverty that he wrote for *Commentary* in 1959-1960, Harrington did contrast the “family patterns” of the urban poor in the late 1950s – much more “female based” and oriented largely to “serial monogamy” – with the more “stable family life” of the urban poor in earlier generations. Harrington attributes this shift in large part to misguided public policies. In particular, Harrington argues, both the underfinancing and the flawed conceptualization and implementation of new public housing projects in the 1950s had the effect of “institutionalizing” a “culture of poverty” and a “psychology of hopelessness” by further segregating the poorest of the poor from other, more stable, poor families and from the working class. (See Michael Harrington, “Slums, Old and New,” *Commentary* (August 1960): 121, 118, 124.) Harrington’s argument here is a fascinating and quite clear journalistic precursor to William Julius Wilson’s more academically elaborate arguments a quarter-century later about “social isolation” and “concentration effects” in intensifying the problems of inner city neighborhoods. (See William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, pps. 58-62.)

Interestingly, Harrington repeatedly uses the phrase “culture of poverty” in his writings, and in doing so, helped to give the phrase much public exposure and currency. Maurice Isserman, Harrington’s biographer, suggests that Harrington was using the term loosely and probably in an uninformed manner, since in fact Harrington ultimately disagreed with the thesis that cultural norms, such as those related to sexuality, procreation, and marriage, constituted in and of themselves direct causes of poverty in U.S. inner cities. With respect to *The Other America*, Isserman’s assessment seems valid. But in Harrington’s 1960 *Commentary* essay, on the basis of which, in part, *The Other America* was conceived and commissioned, Harrington clearly views community “value systems” as major determinants of the quality of life, and dwells at some length on the existence and harmful effects of what he calls “slum psychology,” characterized by

“listlessness, passivity, acceptance,” and ultimately by “the absence of aspiration.” To be sure, Harrington, like both Moynihan and (later) William Julius Wilson, immediately traces this “psychology” to larger, external structures and forces – in this case, primarily to the financing and structure of public housing. But at many points Harrington seems keenly aware of the complex, two-way (at least) relationship between structures and values. For example: “the decline of aspiration among slum dwellers partly reflects a sophisticated analysis of society: for the colored minorities there *is* less opportunity today than there existed for the white population of the older ethnic slums, and the new slum people know this. The poverty of their myths reflects the poverty of their reality.” And: “Ideals and aspiration arise with the greatest difficulty from an environment of violence and ugliness; but the lack of aspiration and ideals only perpetuates the violence and ugliness.” Harrington sums up the crisis of housing in the cities in 1960 with this remarkable sentence: “The basic issue is not new buildings, but the eradication of the whole cultural and spiritual inheritance of the slum past.” In short, there can be little doubt that, in 1960 at least, Harrington said what he meant, and meant what he said, about the “culture of poverty.” See Michael Harrington, “Slums, Old and New,” pps. 120-123; and Maurice Isserman, *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 214-217.

²¹ Michael Harrington, “Yes, \$100 Billion,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 28, 1965, cited in Isserman, *The Other American*, p. 280.

²² Isserman, *The Other American*, pps. 212-213.

²³ Harrington, *The Other American* (1969 edition), xxix.

²⁴ Elliot Liebow, *Tally’s Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), 223-224.

²⁵ The faculty and graduate students of the Department of Sociology of the University of Chicago have exercised an extraordinary influence on the practice of urban sociology and, in particular, the field of Black family and community studies in the U.S. in the 20~century. Prominent names associated with the “Chicago School” of sociology include Robert E. Park, E. Franklin Frazier, St. Clair Drake, Horace R. Cayton, Gerald Suttles, Elijah Anderson, and William Julius Wilson. See Martin Bulmer, *The Chicago School of Sociology: Institutionalization, Diversity, and the Rise of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

²⁶ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Mitchell Duneier, *Slim’s Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 125.

²⁷ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, pps. 18, 4.

²⁸ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, p. 21.

²⁹ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, pps. 4, 14-15, 6.

³⁰ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, pps. 77, 82, 73.

³¹ William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 99-100,102.

³² William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, pps. 97, 106.

³³ William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, pps. xiii, xix, xvi, 208, 225-226,238.

³⁴ There are obviously some exceptions and necessary qualifications regarding both this overall generalization and, especially, this periodization. For example, in 1981 and 1982, about 30 Black scholars met together on a number of occasions to examine economic, educational, and family issues in Black America. Their joint statement, *A Policy Framework for Racial Justice*, was published in 1983. Regarding the Black family, these scholars essentially reaffirmed the Clark-Frazier-Moynihan-Wilson proposition. Indeed, Kenneth B. Clark (along with John Hope Franklin) wrote the foreword for the statement, and the group of scholars who wrote the statement include Clark, Hylan Lewis, and William Julius Wilson.

The statement declares that the “present black family crisis” is “characterized chiefly by the precipitous growth of poor female-headed households.” (In 1980, about 48 of all Black families with children were female-headed; by 1997, according to the Census Bureau, the figure was 58 percent) This trend, the scholars insist, “can and must be reversed.” At several points, the statement also seems to recognize that the family is partly autonomous, a generator of human and social capital that can create facts as well as absorb and reflect them. For example, the Black family is described as “the natural transmitter of the care, values, and opportunities necessary for black men, women, and children to reach their full potential as individuals.” The scholars also state that “policies and strategies that focus on the black family as a vehicle for providing and transmitting opportunities are in their infancy and urgently need development.” But virtually every other statement in the document regarding the Black family reflects a strong acceptance of determinism, a way of seeing and a theory of causation in which the family becomes largely epiphenomenal, almost entirely product of external political and economic forces. For example, the statement says that the crisis of Black family structure “can be traced almost directly to American racism.” Later in the document, the scholars attribute the Black family crisis to “racism and economic and social disadvantage.” The group’s recommendations for reversing the trend toward father-absence are overwhelmingly economic and focus much more on the larger society than on the family itself. These recommendations include: more broadly based and more generous family income supports, such as family allowances; replacing the current welfare system with job training, education and other supports that will “equip single mothers to work,”; more employment, “entrepreneurial,” and educational opportunities for lower-income workers; more family planning and sex education programs for young people; and more child care programs and other community supports for single mothers. One can agree with most or even all of these recommendations while still recognizing that they address only *indirectly* what ought to be the core issues, which are family formation, family functioning, male-female relationships, and marital stability. In the document, Black churches and other Black community organizations are urged to “help restore black families to their historic strength” and to “focus” on the Black family “in whatever form it is found,” but nothing specific is suggested. Other than describing the current trend toward father-absent homes as a crisis and stating that Black economic progress will halt and reverse the trend, the document has nothing at all to say about the importance of fathers, fatherhood as social role for men, or the role of marriage as a social institution. See *A Policy Framework for Racial Justice* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1983): 7, 10-13.

³⁵ See Jeffrey Johnson, “Factors Associated with the Deteriorating Condition of African American Men and a Plan for Change,” *Challenge* 6, no. 2 (December 1995): 51-63; William A. Darity, Jr. and Samuel L. Myers, Jr. “Family Structure and the Marginalization of Black Men: Policy Implications,” in Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (eds.), *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans*, pps. 263-291; Darity and Myers, “Sex Ratios, Marriageability, and the Marginalization of Black Males,” *Challenge* 3, no. 1 (October 1992): 5-13; Wornie L. Reed, “Black Men and Their Families: Issues and Options,” *Challenge* 3, no. 1 (October 1992): 28-38; and Ronald B. Mincy and Hillard Pouncy, “There Must Be 50 Ways to Start a Family,” in Horn, Blankenhorn, and Pearlstein (eds.), *The Fatherhood Movement*, pps. 83-104.

³⁶ See Glenn C. Loury’s chapter in this volume; and also Loury, “Are Jobs the Solution?,” *Wilson Quarterly* (Autumn 1996): 92.

³⁷ “Conservative” arguments, for example, frequently point to the marriage disincentives contained in many welfare programs as the primary causal factors in Black family disintegration, whereas “liberal” arguments, as I’ve tried to show in this essay, frequently point to the harmful effects of joblessness and economic marginalization. But it’s important to note that *both* of these arguments are versions of determinism, specifically economic determinism. *Both* argue that external economic structures decisively shape internal family structure and functioning. For an example of “conservative” economism, see Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy: 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). *Losing Ground* is arguably the most influential book on poverty and public policy written during the 1980s. It is almost certainly the most important “conservative” book on the subject, and as such, articulates the proposition which Wilson, in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, is most clearly seeking to rebut. But Wilson is challenging one economic theory with another, apparently without questioning the validity of the structural determinism underlying both his and Murray’s explanatory models of trends in Black family structure and functioning. Interestingly, a few years later, Murray, exploring a similar set of issues, would advance what, in my view, amounts to yet another species of determinism – this time, biological or genetic determinism. See Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

³⁸ There are important scholars who have themselves noted this prevailing intellectual paradigm by way of forcefully arguing against it, or at least seeking to qualify it in important ways. Arguably the two most influential scholars in this regard are Glenn C. Loury and Orlando Patterson. See, for example, Glenn C. Loury, “The moral quandary of the black community,” *The Public Interest* (Spring 1985): 9-22; Glenn C. Loury, *One by One from the Inside Out: Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); and Glenn C. and Linda Datcher Loury, “Not by Bread Alone,” *Brookings Review* (Winter 1997): 10-13. See also Orlando Patterson, “The moral crisis of the black American,” *The Public Interest* (Summer 1973): 43-69; and Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery Over Two American Centuries* (New York: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1999).

³⁹ Herbert J. Cans, “The Negro Family: Reflections on the Moynihan Report,” *Commonweal*, October 15, 1965, pps. 49-50.

⁴⁰ William Ryan, "Savage Discovery: The Moynihan Report," *The Nation*, November 22, 1995, pps. 380-385.

⁴¹ William Ryan, "The New Genteel Racism," *The Crisis*, December 1965, pps. 623-631, 644.

⁴² William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

⁴³ Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, pps. 77-79. In the index to *Blaming the Victim*, there is no entry for "fathers"; the only mention of fathers or fatherhood is under "Negro children" and it reads, "myths about effects of fatherless homes on" (p. 346).

⁴⁴ Despite his strong emphasis on racism as the master cause of contemporary African American suffering, Ryan also, with respect to the family, frequently endorses economism, or more specifically, the view that any Black family pathologies that may exist stem largely from economic stress and deprivation. For example, how should scholars interpret statistical correlations linking poverty, mother-headed homes, and various problems affecting family members? Here is Ryan's answer: "analysis of the causal directions – what causes what – shows rather convincingly that economic stress – and for the Negro and other minorities, discrimination – is the basic cause; social pathology and broken homes are twin results." See Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, p. 81.

⁴⁵ For usages and definitions of the term "revisionism," see, for example, William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), xvii; M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (eds.), *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995), 5, 27-38; and Steven Ruggles, "The origins of African-American family structure," *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 1 (February 1994): 136-137.

⁴⁶ Paula Giddings, Forward, in Andrew Billingsley, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacy of African-American Families* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 11, 14-15.

⁴⁷ A remarkably rapid and far-reaching intellectual shift among intellectuals, leading in many fields to an almost complete inversion of previously held ideas, took place (roughly speaking) from 1965 to 1975 – not only regarding the Black family, but regarding the white family and many other issues as well, and not only in the United States, but also in many other affluent societies. In the fields of political science and modern U.S. history, for example, revisionists during these years forcefully challenged every tenet of the anti-communist and Cold War consensus that had prevailed in the U.S. since the end of the Second World War. Indeed, in some respects, the anti-anti-communist revisionism that emerged so strongly during this period, including allegations of moral equivalence between communism and western capitalist democracy, is analogous to the family structure revisionism that also emerged so strongly during these years. In both cases, what formerly was the worst thing – communism, broken families – became either a not-as-bad-as-they-say thing, or a benign thing, or in some cases even a good thing. In both cases, *criticism* of yesterday's worst thing came quickly to be seen as...the worst thing.

⁴⁸ Here is the sociologist Robert Staples in 1971: E. Franklin Frazier's "successors" – such as Kenneth Clark, Lee Rainwater, and Moynihan – have wrongly failed to recognize "the peculiar role of women in the family as a sign of the strength and resilience of the black family...Much research on black family patterns seems to have been based on preconceived notions about the pathological character and malfunctioning of the black

family – notions that frequently derive from the use of white, middle-class models as an evaluative measure for families subject to an entirely different set of social forces...The result has been that the black family continues to be defined as a pathological unit whose unique way of functioning sustains the conditions of its oppression...[W]e cannot develop a viable sociology of the black family that is based on the myths and stereotypes that pervade the research of past years.” See Robert Staples, ‘Toward a Sociology of the Black Family: A Theoretical and Methodological Assessment,’ *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (February 1971): 119-135, reprinted in Arlene S. Skolnick and Jerome S. Skolnick, *Family in Transition* (Boston: Little Brown, 1977), 493, 498-499, 501.

⁴⁹ Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968).

⁵⁰ Robert Hill, *The Strengths of Black Families* (New York: Emerson Hall, 1971).

⁵¹ Elmer P. Martin and Joanne Mitchell Martin, *The Black Extended Family* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 110.

⁵² Joyce A. Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

⁵³ Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁵⁴ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1974).

⁵⁵ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

⁵⁶ Billingsley, *Black Families in White America*, p. 201.

⁵⁷ Billingsley, *Black Families in White America*, pps. 199, 32, 150. Here is Billingsley again (p. 32): “Thus, both the variety and dynamic quality of family structures, and the extent to which families are able to function adequately in meeting the needs of their members and the demands of society are heavily influenced by – and may be viewed as adaptations to and reflections of – forces in this wider social network.” Here is Billingsley in 1970: The Moynihan Report “was an incorrect analysis of the relationship between black families and white society. It reverses the true nature of the influence process at work. It is not weakness in the family which causes poverty and racism.. it is quite the other way around. The family is a creature of the society.” See Billingsley, “Black Families and White Social Science,” *Journal of Social Issues* 26 (1970), reprinted in Joyce A. Ladner (ed.), *The Death of White Sociology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 435.

⁵⁸ For example, Billingsley complains that other analysts’ estimates of the prevalence of mother-headed homes among African Americans are either inaccurate or have been taken out of context. He reminds us that about three-quarters of all Black families, including a majority of low-income Black families, are headed (this was in the mid 1960s) by married couples. He reminds us that, numerically, white one-parent homes outnumber Black one-parent homes. Based in part on an elaborate academic typology of family forms, he even suggest at one point that “the ‘ideal’ family pattern, the simple nuclear family, may not be any more common whites than it is among Negroes.” (See Billingsley, *Black Families in White America*, pps. 199, 139, 15, 18.) Two points about this argument stand out. First, looking at it more than three decades later, with the

advantage of hindsight, Billingsley's claim that Black father absence is somehow being mismeasured seems defensive and beside the point. Today, as is documented in chapter one of this volume, about 70 percent of African American children are born to unmarried mothers and at least 80 percent of all Black children will spend at least a significant part of their childhood years living apart from their fathers. These are realities. There has been no failure of measurement, no statistical sleights-of-hand coming from scholars operating incompetently or in bad faith; as an empirical matter, the trend of Black father absence was, and is, quite real. Second, in making this argument – in effect, by protesting too much – Billingsley is indirectly acknowledging the Clark-Frazier-Moynihan premise that one-parent homes are problematic. If father-absent homes are benign and therefore valid, why make such a point of insisting that their prevalence has been overstated?

⁵⁹ Billingsley, *Black Families in White America*, pps. 33,98, 15, 190, 165.

⁶⁰ David M. Schneider, "Books: 'The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy,'" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 34, no. 3 (March 1968): 20-21. See also Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

⁶¹ Albert Murray, "White Norms, Black Deviation," in Ladner (ed.), *The Death of White Sociology*, p. 103.

⁶² Some seven decades ago, Charles S. Johnson concluded that "there is no such thing as illegitimacy" in the Black family. Gunnar Myrdal in his famous study. *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944) writes (p. 935): The Negro community also has the healthy social custom of attaching no stigma to the illegitimate child and of freely adopting illegitimate children and orphans into established families." (Myrdal bases his brief analysis of the African American family almost entirely on the work of E. Franklin Frazier, saying (p. 930-931) that Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* "is such an excellent description and analysis of the American Negro family that it is practically necessary only to relate its conclusions to our context and to refer the reader to it for details.") In their study of Black extended families in the 1970s, Elmer P. and Joanne Mitchell Martin similarly conclude that, although "it is ardently hoped that all family members will be married and financially independent before having children," children "born out of wedlock in the extended family seldom grow up feeling stigmatized and are seldom, if ever, referred to as 'illegitimate.'" See Martin and Martin, *The Extended Black Family*, p. 46; Charles S. Johnson (1934) quoted in Martin and Martin, p. 116

⁶³ Staples, "Toward a Sociology of the Black Family," p. 501. See also Staples, "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy," *The Black Scholar* (January-February 1970): 8-16. By the 1980s, Staples' view seems to have shifted somewhat toward what I am calling economism, with him placing greater emphasis on economic and other structural conditions that have the effect of (admittedly) weakening male-female relationships and preventing many African Americans from realizing their aspirations for stable family life. In 1984 he writes: "The problem of the Black family cannot be solved without resolving the economic predicament of Black men. They are one in the same." See Robert Staples, "Changes in Black Family Structure: The Conflict between Family Ideology and Structural Conditions," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (November 1985): 1014.

⁶⁴ Stack, *All Our Kin*, p. 24.

⁶⁵ Stack, *All Our Kin*, pps. 30-31,59,63, 119,53,55-57.

⁶⁶ Martin and Martin, *The Black Extended Family*, pps. 82-92, 111-112.

⁶⁷ Martin and Martin, *The Black Extended Family*, pps. 9,46.

⁶⁸ The Martins (*The Black Extended Family*, p. 106) specifically refer to the responsibility of scholars to “avoid viewing the black family from the standpoint of conventional morality.” Elijah Anderson, probably the nation’s most distinguished contemporary scholar working in the field of urban Black ethnography, similarly points out that such research, to be valid, “requires researchers to try to set aside their own values and assumptions about what is and is not morally acceptable...” See Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 11.

⁶⁹ For a defense of this proposition, see Robert N. Bellah, et al., “Appendix: Social Science as Public Philosophy,” in *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 297-307. These authors write (pps. 302-303): ‘To attempt to study the possibilities and limitations of society with utter neutrality, as though it existed on another planet, is to push the ethos of narrowly professional social science to the breaking point. The analysts are part of the whole they are analyzing. In framing their problems and interpreting their results, they draw on their own experience and their membership in a community of research that is in turn located within specific traditions and institutions...It is impossible to draw a clear line between the cognitive and ethical implications of our research, not because we cannot make an abstract distinction between the analysis of evidence and moral reasoning, but because in carrying out social research both are simultaneously operative. We cannot deny the moral relationship between ourselves and those we are studying without being untrue to both.’ In short, social scientists must recognize that even their best understandings are, by definition, elements of an historically situated dialogue in which, with effort, scholarly “distance” and some self-recognition are possible, but not pure objectivity; scholars can never, and therefore should never pretend to, exempt themselves from the human condition.

⁷⁰ M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, “Trends in African American Family Formation: A Theoretical and Statistical Overview,” in Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (eds.), *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995), 5-6.

⁷¹ Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, “Trends in African American Family Formation,” pps. 6-7, 21-22.

⁷² Bette J. Dickerson, “Introduction,” in Dickerson (ed.), *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), xv.

⁷³ Suzanne M. Randolph, “African American Children in Single-Mother Families,” in Dickerson (ed.), *African American Single Mothers*, pps. 118, 136, 138.

⁷⁴ Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 78-79.

⁷⁵ Donna L. Franklin, *Ensuring Inequality: The Structural Transformation of the African-American Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 219.

⁷⁶ Lena Wright Myers, “The Socialization of African American Males: A Broken Silence with Empirical Evidence,” *Challenge* 7, no. 3 (December 1996): 79. Barbara Omolade in 1987 similarly urges scholars to recognize “the strengths and choices of Black women as

factors in creating and sustaining Black single-mother families,” and concludes that the “African-American extended family network has positively sustained and supported divergent Black family patterns and lifestyles enabling Black female-headed households to be functional and successful.” Regarding the role of fathers in families and society and the question of whether or not children need their fathers, here is the entirety of Omolade’s discussion: “Some studies have been concerned with the impact of the absence of biological and social fathers on the children of Black single mothers, while ignoring the fact that most Black single mothers were married and that children still had contact with their fathers.” End of subject. See Barbara Omolade, “The Unbroken Circle: A Historical and Contemporary Study of Black Single Mothers and Their Families,” *Wisconsin Women’s Law Journal* 3, no. 239 (1987): 257, 261.

⁷⁷ Dorothy Roberts, “The Absent Black Father,” in Cynthia R. Daniels (ed.), *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 145.

⁷⁸ The title of a 1988 essay by Susan Cohen and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, “The War Over the Family Is Not over the Family,” nicely captures the phenomenon I am seeking to describe. These authors explicitly state that they view the family essentially as a pathway toward examining the “real” issue, which for them is gender role conflict. For other family scholars, the family debate is “really” a debate about children. Or about poverty. Or racism. Or sexual freedom. Or the needs of working women. Or economic productivity. But in my view all of these formulations are flawed. After all, the family is only society’s first and most important institution. Surely it’s not too much to expect that scholarship on the family ought to be primarily about the family, not some other subject, and ought to treat the family conceptually as an independent as much as a dependent variable. See Susan Cohen and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, “The War Over the Family Is Not over the Family,” in Sanford M. Dornbusch and Myra H. Strober (eds.), *Feminism and the New Families* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988), 25-46.

⁷⁹ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, pps. 15, 158-159.

⁸⁰ Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 133; and Robert I. Lerman, “Economic Opportunities of Young Men and Family Formation,” *American Economic Review* 72, no. 2 (May 1989): 62-66. In another study, Lerman finds that “unwed fatherhood showed no tendency to decline in spite of the dramatic improvement in the employment opportunities of young men” during the 1980s, and that “the flow into unwed fatherhood was virtually no lower among young men living in counties with low county unemployment rates than in more depressed counties.” Lerman concludes: “A number of other individual and family variables exerted much larger impacts than employment conditions on the flows into unwed fatherhood and marriage. See Robert I. Lerman, “A National Profile,” in Robert I. Lerman and Theodora Ooms (eds.), *Young Unwed Fathers: Changing Roles and Emerging Policies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993): 42,47-48.

A study of trends in Black family structure in the U.S. South since 1960 finds that the decline in married-couple families in nonmetropolitan areas has been almost as dramatic as the decline in metropolitan areas – a finding which, at a minimum, tends to disconfirm the thesis that specifically urban residential patterns (that is, racial and class segregation) and economic opportunity structures are the driving forces behind trends in Black inner

city family structure. A study of young unwed fathers by the economists Ann Rangarajan and Philip Gleason finds that improvements in the employment and educational status of these fathers do result in more child support payments to mothers, but do not result in appreciably more father-child contact time or in better mother-father relationships. See Cynthia M Cready, Mark A. Fossett and K. Jill Kiecolt, "Mate Availability and African American Family Structure in the U.S. Nonmetropolitan South, 1960-1990," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59 (February 1997): 192-203; and Anu Rangarajan and Philip Gleason, "Young Unwed Fathers of AFDC Children: Do They Provide Support?," *Demography* 35, no. 2 (May 1998): 175-186.

Another study of two national samples of unwed fathers finds that employment status does not affect the likelihood that Black men will marry the mothers in cases of nonmarital conception. Indeed, from the early 1960s to the early 1990s, the likelihood that a premarital conception would lead to marriage dropped among Black women from 40 percent to 10 percent, while for white women it dropped from 67 percent to 29 percent. Looking at this phenomenon nationally, apart from the quite plausible argument that greater material *prosperity* has made single parenthood more economically viable, it seems quite evident that this particular trend has less to do with the state of our economy than it does with our changing attitudes about the importance of marriage and about the social acceptability of nonmarital childbearing. Similarly, looking at possible economic determinants of divorce, the economists Saul D. Hoffman and Greg J. Duncan have concluded that "male incomes, [female] wages, and AFDC benefits did not play a large role in the change in the divorce rate over the past few decades and that the trend reflects primarily either changes in behavior or changes in noneconomic factors." See Madeline Zavodney, "Do men's characteristics affect whether a nonmarital pregnancy results in marriage?," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 3 (August 1999): 764-774; Amara Bachu, "Trends in Marital Status of U.S. Women at First Birth: 1930-1994," Working Paper 20, U.S. Bureau of the Census (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, March 1998): Table 2; and Saul D. Hoffman and Greg J. Duncan, "The Effect of Incomes, Wages, and AFDC Benefits on Marital Disruption," *The Journal of Human Resources* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 19-41, quote on pps. 37-38.

A study of Black and white marriage rates by Robert D. Mare and Christopher Winship finds that "socioeconomic factors cannot account for the drastic decreases in marriage rates in the past thirty years" and that, as a result, it "is necessary to seek alternative explanations." Similarly, Christopher Jencks observes that the trend toward father-absent, mother-headed homes "is up everywhere, not just in the underclass. This increase has not followed trends in the economy in any obvious way. Single parenthood began to spread during the 1960s, when the economy was booming. It spread during the 1970s, when the economy stagnated. It spread in the early 1980s, during the worst economic downturn in half a century. Today, a decade or so after Jencks made this observation, we might add that the same trend continued to spread during the rest of the 1980s and at least through the early 1990s. Indeed, as of 2001, after nearly a decade of an uninterrupted domestic economic boom that may be unprecedented in world economic history, about 33 of all children in the U.S. are born to never-married mothers, an historic high, and the U.S. divorce rate, though declining modestly, remains probably the highest in the world among the rich nations. See Robert D. Mare and Christopher Winship,

“Socioeconomic Change and the Decline of Marriage for Blacks and Whites,” in Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson (eds.), *The New Urban Underclass* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1991), 195; and Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy* p. 133.

⁸¹ Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy* pps. 120-136.

⁸² Orlando Patterson, Rituals of Blood; J. Oggins, J. Veroff, and D. Leber, “Perceptions of marital interaction among black and white newlyweds,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (1993): 494-511.

⁸³ Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

⁸⁴ Steven L. Nock, “The Consequences of Premarital Fatherhood,” *American Sociological Review* 63 (April 1998): 250-263; and Nock, *Marriage in Men’s Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁸⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Real Politics: At the Center of Everyday Life* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 15, 25.

⁸⁶ Lawrence Mead, *The New Politics of Poverty*, p. 131.

⁸⁷ Sidney Hook (ed.), *Determinism and Freedom: In the Age of Modern Science* (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 177, 179-180.

⁸⁸ Vaclav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in Havel, *Living in Truth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 54.