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Urban poverty and racial inequality in a post civil rights sunbelt community : the political and economic implications of Atlanta's Vine City, 1990

Ralph Briggs Smith

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ralph Briggs Smith entitled "Urban poverty and racial inequality in a post civil rights sunbelt community : the political and economic implications of Atlanta's Vine City, 1990." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Sociology.

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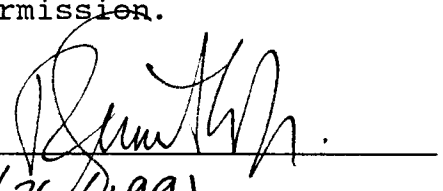
Signature 

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URBAN POVERTY AND RACIAL INEQUALITY IN A POST CIVIL RIGHTS SUNBELT COMMUNITY: THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF ATLANTA'S VINE CITY, 1990

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ralph B. Smith, Jr.

May 1991

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the oppressed, disadvantaged and powerless sisters and brothers who struggle daily with the social, political and economic constraints of urban poverty in the United States. May they someday experience peace within their minds and souls, and may their children live in a world free of the various forms of inequality which are rampant in our society.

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I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Donald Clelland for his guidance and patience. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. John Gaventa and Dr. Cynthia Fleming, for their guidance and assistance over the past three years. Additionally, I would like to express my appreciation to all of the people of Vine City for their honesty, openness and hospitality. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues, Paul Jacobson and Lachelle Norris for their insight, constructive criticism and support. And of course, I thank my mother and father for their support, though they may not agree with all of my ideas.

ABSTRACT

This study is an examination of urban poverty in a post industrial, post Civil Rights African American community in Atlanta Georgia. It explores questions raised by the contemporary literature on urban poverty, and tests the basic assumptions of three sociological perspectives: Afrocentricism, Class Structuralism and Behavioralism. The methodology involves rigorous open-ended interviews obtained through "snowball" sampling techniques. The subjects interviewed include disadvantaged and impoverished inhabitants of the community and institutional and political leaders and activists who are knowledgeable concerning the history of the community.

It was concluded that, contrary to traditional "top down" methodological strategies for examining poverty, a "grass roots", or "bottom up" perspective can be constructed through direct interaction with impoverished individuals. This perspective differs from the ones advanced by the contemporary literature.

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CHAPTER 1

Urban Poverty Research in the Eighties: Sociological Trends, Arguments and Areas For Development

In 1978, William Julius Wilson published The Declining Significance of Race, a study of the disturbing new trends in the African American ghettos of the United States. Having been coopted and repressed by the ideological and coercive apparatuses of the various levels of government, the capacity of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements to alleviate the problems facing impoverished urban minorities was seriously diminished. The return to normalcy in the seventies coincided with a worsening of inner city conditions, and in his seminal work, Wilson reintroduced the term "underclass" to describe a certain segment of the urban poor in an economically transformed society.

This widely criticized and highly acclaimed effort has become a focal point for urban poverty research and debate. In it, Wilson accuses social scientists of providing inaccurate, out of date and simplistic data on the most

salient dynamics involved in the steadily deteriorating ghetto conditions during the mid seventies. Wilson rejected the tendency of the "New Left" to attribute inner city poverty to traditional etiologies such as institutional racism and U.S. imperialism. Because of this, Wilson's thesis in the Declining Significance of Race, resulted in the rejuvenation of serious debate on the topic of urban poverty. The result has been the emergence of polemical discourse in the literature between militants, conservatives and liberals in the 1980's.

Nine years and numerous publications later, Wilson has refused to revise his original premises in The Truly Disadvantaged (1987). And while his critics continue to confront him with a wide range of theoretical problems, Wilson maintains the rather dubious honor of a pioneer, subject to the critical scrutiny of his predecessors. The purpose of the following analysis is to illustrate how the diverse, and somewhat chaotic restructuring of urban poverty research stacks up with the social reality of ghetto life in 1990. How equipped are we to assert that any Grand Theory in Sociology can account for the current manifestation of urban poverty? I will be suggesting that social science is out of step with the phenomenon it examines, and I will be proposing that new ground be broken.

For reasons which will become apparent in the following, I have located the focal point of current urban poverty

research with the work of William Julius Wilson. I have constructed a framework with an implicit assumption that the current literature must be viewed in the context of Wilson's central premises. Even the most vehement rejection of Wilson's thesis derives its impetus from objectionable points in the Wilson argument. To his credit, Wilson has succeeded in demanding important new directions. Whether or not his thesis provides the most appropriate theoretical framework for examining the dynamics of urban poverty is a complicated question indeed. At this time, it does not appear that social scientists and political theorists are prepared to answer it.

Even if one rejects all or most of Wilson's assertions about the etiology, consequences and policy implications of the current state of affairs, his argument that today's urban ghetto poses a more problematic environment to the individuals who live there is generally accepted. But what has become of the easily identifiable oppressive apparatus which maintained urban impoverishment in the preceding decades? Neo Marxist scholar Barry Bluestone, a former member of the S.D.S., describes the magnitude of the changes in the structural dynamics which have given rise to the Afro American ghettoes of today:

> The issues in the 1960s concerned clear cut fundamental human values. There was a definite right and wrong to the issues, and one hardly needed a sophisticated mathematical model to tell one from the other... In the 1980s, the issues are extraordinarily more complex. I wish there were some simple analyses and simple solutions to unemployment, economic growth, the income

> distribution and international economic equity, but there are none. (Bluestone, 1988, p30)

Wilson has a way of provoking arguments, and not always are his adversaries kind in their rebuttals. Charles Willie (1988), for example, takes issue with virtually every component of the Wilson thesis, and bestows upon him the label "conservative":

> In his study of The Truly Disadvantaged, Wilson claims that he is providing a balanced approach that ultimately may permit liberal policy makers (as opposed to conservative policy makers) to refocus their perspective and appropriately address the issues. Calling his approach "balanced" does not make it so. And Wilson is clearly a conservative masquerading as a liberal.(Willie, 1988, p865)

But conservative, liberal and radical scholars are all among those placed on the defensive by Wilson. Willie is not alone in contending that Wilson is a conservative in liberal clothing. However, Wilson is highly critical of the reemergence of conservatism in the literature. In a rebuttal to a 1985 series in the Chicago Tribune which associated Wilson with the neoconservative movement, Wilson responded:

> ...my views on the welfare system and the role of government are so distorted in Mullen's article that the reader not familiar with my work and philosophy would assume that I am a strong supporter of the neoconservative movement to cut back, or eliminate the welfare state and reduce government programs. On the contrary, I abhor and reject this position.(Wilson, 1985, p18)

Along with his critics, however, Wilson is also strongly supported by a diverse collection of scholars. As only the second African American president of the American Sociological

Association (E. Franklin Frazier was the first), he is the latest in a strong tradition of Black sociologists associated with the University of Chicago. The work of Oliver Cox, E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson are but three examples of this tradition. Wilson's work is regarded by the A.S.A. and other academic organizations as the latest example of the pioneering and insightful product of another brilliant Black sociologist from the Chicago School.

Ironically, Wilson's chief source of criticism comes from the leading vanguard of Afro American militancy (for example, once again, Willie, 1988). It is as if Wilson has made himself a case in point for his own argument that race is declining in significance as a factor in social differentiation. His supporters tend to be mainstream and interracial. Likewise, along with the Black militants, his critics include white Marxists.

What are these hotly debated issues Wilson has given us no alternative but to reexamine? By presenting three categories of sociological literature, I hope to elucidate the basic concepts of Wilson's thesis, and at the same time illustrate the diverse nature of contemporary urban poverty research. Additionally, I will be evaluating the basic arguments set forth by those who have both defended and refuted the various aspects of Wilson's work. Finally, I will be identifying what I perceive to be important voids in both the theory and methodology of the literature of Wilson and the

work of those who strive to extend, refute and support it. From all of this I intend to provide a rationale for the research being proposed.

A. The Militant Response to the "Declining Significance" Hypothesis, Intra-Minority Stratification and The Racial Implications of Contemporary Urban Poverty

Central to the Wilson thesis is the argument that the current manifestation of urban poverty cannot be adequately explained by institutional discrimination, racism and racial exploitation. Wilson contends that since the Civil Rights and/or Black Power movements, African Americans no longer constitute a monolithic, unified aggregate victimized by the conscious forces of an exploitative white power structure (Wilson, 1987). He argues that the programs of the Great Society, affirmative action in particular, has facilitated the emergence of a clearly delineated stratification system along which African Americans are divided. Thus, reasons Wilson, diatribes against racism are no longer especially germane to the study of urban poverty, even though when Wilson speaks of the "underclass", he is referring to Blacks (Wilson, 1984).

Furthermore, Wilson is very direct in asserting that the poverty of today's inner cities is strongly influenced by the out migration of upwardly mobile Black role models as well as by the racist practices of white male institutions. For

Wilson, the isolation from mainstream society caused by the structural transformation of the national (and to some degree international) economy is a strong predictor of the quality of life of up and coming inner city youth. He suggests that as affirmative action policies facilitated the mobility of community leaders, youth in their formative years had less and less contact with them, because it was no longer necessary to live in the inner city bantus created by institutional racism for those who possessed the capacity to contribute to the technological revolution. Wilson describes the impact of role modeling in the following passage from his 1988 article in The Black Scholar:

> Thus, a perceptive ghetto youngster in a neighborhood which includes a good number of working and professional families may:
> -Observe increasing joblessness and idleness, but will also witness many individuals regularly going to and from work;
> -May sense an increase in school dropouts, but can also see a connection between education and meaningful employment;
> - May detect a growth in single-parent families, but will also be aware of the presence of many married couple families;
> -May notice an increase in welfare dependency, but can also see a significant number of families who are not on welfare; and
> -May be cognizant of an increase in crime, but can recognize that many residents in his neighborhood are not involved in criminal activity. (Wilson, 1988, p6)

Not surprisingly, such concepts have generated a great deal of outrage among many Black sociologists, who for years focused exclusively on the sordid legacy of racial oppression in the United States, and revealed to a comfortably ignorant

white academia how racism was responsible for the impoverishment of city dwelling African Americans. To scholars such as Adolph Reed (1988), Julianne Malveaux (1988), Troy Duster (1986), Angela Davis (1988) and Charles Willie (1988) Wilson's position seems to sabotage the progress made by Black social and political scientists in the sixties and seventies. Malveaux, for example, is especially incensed by how Wilson's focus on intra-minority stratification detracts from the understanding of the broader contradictions in U.S. society which facilitates racial inequality generally, while projecting the ideology of equality (Malveaux, 1988)

Some of the more cynical critics of the African American militancy movement in sociology assert that the reason militants do not embrace the idea of intra-minority stratification is because they, themselves, are part and parcel of the newly emerging aggregate of upwardly mobile Blacks. Conservatives such as Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, Glen Loury and Martin Kilson, for example, chastise Black militants as hypocrites (Loury, 1986 and Kilson 1981). Kilson goes so far as to contend that militant scholarship is published with ulterior motives:

> Belonging to the top ranks of upwardly mobile Black families, the black intelligentsia denies the reality of stratification in order to deflect attention away from its own successes. It also endeavors to monopolize black influence over public policies that have aided the growth of the black middle and elite classes, in order to keep these policies skewed towards the interests of the upper rather than the lower strata blacks. (Kilson, 1981)

As ludicrous as it may seem for a conservative to imply that the literature published in militant journals such as The Review of Black Political Economy and The Black Scholar is designed to maintain the wealth and privilege of the most vehemently anti-elitist scholars in the social sciences today, this opinion has become quite popular among those who seek to sabotage anything which does not fit the criteria of mainstream social science.

Other studies imply that Black militancy is irrelevant to the struggles of the urban poor. For example, "The Origins of the Underclass" (1986), Nicholas Lemann suggests that philosophies which espouse race consciousness and pride are not embraced by those who constitute the "underclass":

> White society, though physically less than a mile away from the Chicago ghetto, is so distant that I rarely heard any hint of the intense race consciousness that pervades the rest of black society. Everything that has happened to lower class blacks over the decades, every new twist, from segregation to the migration North to the civil rights movement, seems to have separated them from society even more- separated from whites, from the South, from middle class black life, and finally even from uplifting preachment. (Lemann, 1986, p32)

Race consciousness and solidarity, it is generally argued by mainstream scholars (both Black and white), come second to the demands of survival. A popular mainstream argument against militancy is that it is essentially a bourgeois philosophy, and that its proponents are as far removed from the underclass

as are the conservatives.[1]

This assessment is seriously flawed. Black militant social scientists have a strong history of direct political activism in the ghettoes. The problems they have encountered, however, with the power structure have rendered their ideas highly "impractical", or "dangerous". But even despite the resistance to putting their ideas into practice, many of those deemed "radical" or "militant" have had a great deal of success in alleviating many of the social and psychological barriers associated with being poor. For Example, Black Nationalists have experienced far more success in rehabilitating drug addicts than most mainstream social service agencies, whose practical motivations for eliminating a social problem on which they thrive are, necessarily, somewhat suspect. Malcolm X describes the impact of the Nation of Islam on drug addicts in his Autobiography (El Haj Malik El Shabazz, 1965).

Militant philosophies, when applied to oppressed and disadvantaged segments of society, have provided a very powerful therapeutic tool in alleviating problems such as substance abuse. At issue is the self concept of people who have suffered tremendously from socialization in a society dominated by white, mainstream values and racist

[1]Kilson, for example, seems to be attempting to discredit what he refers to as the "Black Intelligentsia" on these grounds alone. He presents a largely defensive and reactionary rejection of Afrocentric thought on the inner cities of the United States.

rationalizations. It seems to make more sense to target the object of oppression in rehabilitation than to focus on "acceptable", or "normal" modes of treatment (See also Claude Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land, 1964).

Furthermore, the assertion that race consciousness is not pervasive in the ghetto can be countered by the urban rioting in the eighties in Miami, Chattanooga and Baton Rouge, all of which symbolized the expression of race consciousness among inner city Blacks. Those who more or less accept Wilson's central premises (see The Annals of the American Academy for the Political and Social Sciences, January, 1989) do not discuss topics such as civil unrest, but militants do. Rollison (1988), for example, uses the legacy of urban revolts as a framework for comprehending the class dynamics which currently pervade the Black Community, as well as its present day relationship to white mainstream society. Further, Glasglow (1980) uses the Watts riots as a base for understanding the current state of mind of those who constitute what Wilson defines as "underclass".

> The young firebrands of Watts were (and nearly all still are) part of what has recently been dubbed the underclass, a group whose emergence as a permanent fixture of our nation's social structure represents one of the most significant class developments in the last two decades. (Glasglow, 1980)

Mainstream social scientists and mainstream society in general are quick to blame militancy for inciting urban unrest, but few, if any, give militants credit for the work they have done

in improving the self esteem, the consciousness and the world view of those who must face the daily realities of inner city life.

Certainly, Black militancy is not a cure-all for the complexities involved in the proliferation of contemporary urban poverty, and it may very well be the case that militant African American sociologists have done well for themselves despite the increase in inequality among African Americans since the sixties. But unlike mainstream social policy, which has failed to make any appreciable differences in the quality of life of the disadvantaged, militancy has never been put into practice on any large scale as a social policy. When faced with the options of granting control of the ghetto to those who favor sweeping, revolutionary solutions to the current state of affairs and using marginal means to alleviate them, those in power invariably choose the latter.

Militants, such as Marable (1980, 1983 and 1985) and Davis (1981 and 1986), believe that in order to eradicate something as firmly entrenched in the existing order of society as the Black underclass, one must be prepared to dismantle the present system in a very fundamental way (Marable, 1983). It is my position that fear of this insight is the real driving force behind the critics of militancy (e.g., Kilson, Sowell 1984, Williams, 1982 and Loury, 1985), not that militant African American sociologists are part of the new wave of the upwardly mobile; the beneficiaries of the

Civil Rights Movement.

The tendency of militant African American scholarship is to categorize Wilson as a neo conservative (Willie, 1988). Militants take issue with Wilson's a-critical stance on such dynamics as the continued proliferation of racial inequality, which continues to be the most salient form of inequality in the U.S. despite the changes of the past twenty to thirty years. Militants inquire about the political implications of such tendencies. Reed (1988), for example, attacks Wilson's avoidance of some of the conclusions one could draw from the political implications of the presence of a Black "underclass" in the post Civil Rights era. Speaking of Wilson's The Truly Disadvantaged, Reed asserts:

> The Truly Disadvantaged is uninformed by any sense of politics as a factor in the creation and recreation of the social world. Overlooking codified segregation- the central issue of Black life for two thirds of a century- in a paean to the lost organic community, proposing a macroeconomic dating service rather than attacking patterns of wage discrimination against women, and reading conflict out of the history of social reform in the U.S. all exemplify this failing. (Reed, 1988, p168)

Militants appropriately point out that the upward mobility of African Americans in the past two decades occurred only because the Blacks who enjoy such mobility have embraced white mainstream values, thus changing very little about the system which produced the impoverishment of African Americans in the first place. Excluded from the resources afforded to the mainstream, the "Truly Disadvantaged" have refused to

embrace these values. It is true that the system remains in tact, despite the hope and idealism of the sixties. It is also true that Wilson chooses not to be critical of it on moral grounds.

But while it is the case that Wilson is a-critical of the capitalist system, it is not appropriate to place him among the wave of Black conservatives who have enjoyed much attention in the eighties. Wilson's work is complex, and is as critical of conservatives as it is of liberals and militants. A self styled Social Democrat, Wilson claims that his intention is to strengthen the leftist perspective. Further, he does not contend that institutional racism no longer exists, merely that it is no longer the most salient among a series of factors which have culminated in the solidification of an "underclass" (Wilson, 1987, p8).

Black militancy continues to provide a crucial source of criticism of the contradictions which abound in the social order. But like the conservatives and liberals who are incensed by Wilson's contention that their strategies for investigation are simplistic and obsolete, militants are forced to admit that the urban ghettos are worse off today than in the sixties, that the Black community is less unified, and that many African Americans have benefitted from governmental programs. Willie points out the marginality of empirical support for these assertions (Willie, 1988), but such concepts have been well established by a diverse body of

literature.

Even though Black militancy is a source of criticism of Wilson's thesis, the very fact that militants see fit to critique it implies that Wilson has had an impact on their scholarship. Journals such as Freedomways, The Black Scholar, The Western Journal of Black Studies and The Review of Black Political Economy all publish in response to Wilson.[2] It seems that a restructuring of militant thought may be under way to do battle with the system which allows for and thrives upon racism and racial inequality.

If Wilson's work has provoked militants enough to respond with a renewed emphasis on the dynamics involved in the latest manifestation of urban poverty, all of the hard feelings between Wilson and individuals like Charles Willie will be quite insignificant. African American militancy is a crucial source of inquiry into the etiology of today's incidence of urban poverty, and it is possible that Wilson's thesis has strengthened its credibility.

B. Microsociological and Behavioral Analyses of The "Underclass": The Rejuvenation of Conservatism in the Literature of the Eighties and the Prospect of Reversing the

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[2]Wilson has published in The Black Scholar, indicating that his work is not entirely objected to by what Kilson refers to as the "Black Intelligentsia"; as Kilson would like for us to believe.

Conservative Trend

Wilson redundantly contends that liberal social scientists, in their attempt to avoid "unflattering" or "stigmatizing" depictions of the inhabitants of the inner cities have deliberately avoided any careful scrutiny of the social problems which plague today's urban ghettos:

> The Liberal perspective on the ghetto underclass has become less pervasive and convincing in public discourse principally because many of those who represent traditional liberal views on social issues have become reluctant to discuss openly or, in some instances, even to acknowledge the sharp increase in social pathologies in ghetto communities. (Wilson, 1987, p2)

In the early seventies, social scientists who attempted to analyze the internal dynamics of urban poverty were charged with victim blaming and racism. Moynihan (1965), Murray (1970) and Rainwater (1971) were all rejected as racist during this time because of their tendency to attribute the problems associated with urban poverty to the values and attitudes of poor inner city Blacks and their familial heritage.[3]

Consequently, studies tended to focus on the strength and resilience of the individuals who faced the daily realities of oppression (For example, Joyce Ladner's Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman, 1971). Time and again Wilson points out that liberals sacrificed their empirical integrity in favor of maintaining a good standing with scholars who focused on more

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[3]Rainwater's analysis of "Lower Class Negro Culture" crystallizes the ideas of a white academician's attempt to demonstrate how the African American cultural heritage has been detrimental to African Americans.

edifying issues. Wilson is correct insofar that the liberal scholars of the seventies did not examine topics such as crime, teen pregnancy and unemployment while such tendencies were intensifying. Wilson asserts that while sociologists and political scientists were squabbling over how their work was being received, such problems were reaching catastrophic proportions.

By virtue of this, contends Wilson (Wilson, 1987), the early eighties experienced the establishment of a new conservative mind set. Reaganomics complemented the ideology that the behavioral inclinations of the poor, not institutional racism, is the true barrier to the mobility of disadvantaged urban minorities. Conservatism had infiltrated mainstream America, and with it came a cadre of conservative social scientists and policy makers who did not care if they were considered racist victim blamers.

Highly compatible with the supply side economic strategies of the Reagan Administration, work was published which focused exclusively on the behavioral characteristics of the inner city African Americans, blamed social programs for encouraging the reproduction of ghetto culture and implied that the programs of the Great Society had wasted valuable resources on assisting the poor, when the resources could have been better used to build bombs and missiles.

Neo Conservative social scientists, who publish regularly in such journals as The Public Interest usually disguise their

work under the less dubious label "micro", "behavioral", "psychological" or "individualist" sociology. But even a casual reading reveals why such work has become so popular with the self centered mind set of the eighties. It allows elitists to resurrect Social Darwinist, laissez-faire positions on poverty and express such ideas without fear of attack from the intellectual establishment.[4]

While Wilson scolds liberals and radicals for not paying attention to the worsening inner city conditions, he challenges the conservative approach in two ways. First, he has demonstrated that by ascribing primary importance to the cultural and behavioral patterns of the underclass, conservatives end up with a line of reasoning which is fundamentally circular. In clarifying his position on the culture of poverty school of thought, Wilson writes:

> The key theoretical concept, therefore is not "culture of poverty" but "social isolation". "Culture of poverty" implies that basic values and attitudes of the ghetto subculture have been internalized and thereby influence behavior. Accordingly, efforts to enhance the life chances of groups such as the ghetto underclass require, from this perspective, social policies (e.g., programs of training and education as embodies in New Deal workfare) aimed at directly changing these subcultural traits. (Wilson, 1988, p36)

Second, Wilson's work demands that priority be given to the structural constraints placed on the inner city poor of

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[4]The Public Interest frequently denigrates "New Left" perspectives on poverty, arguing that liberals and militants are dogmatic and reactionary, and their ideas are actually detrimental to the poor.

the eighties, something which is conveniently left out of micro-level analyses. Contrary to much of the criticism levied against him, Wilson's work is primarily structural, rather than psychological. He has clarified this in his more recent literature:

> Those who have been pushing moral-cultural or individualistic-behavioral explanations of the social dislocations that have swept through the inner city in recent years have created a fictitious normative divide between urban blacks that, no matter its reality- which has yet to be ascertained- cannot but pale when compared to the objective structural cleavage that separates ghetto residents from the larger society and to the collective material constraints that bear on them. (Wilson and Wacquant, 1989)

The result of the impact of Wilson's challenge to the micro approach can be detected in such works as Ken Auletta's The Underclass (1982) and Anderson's ethnographic study of sex codes among Black inner city teenagers (Anderson, 1989). Both studies, while focusing on first hand accounts provided by the urban poor themselves about the value structure of the inner city, attempt to reveal the complexity involved in determining the etiology of the problems faced by the poor (Auletta, 1982 and Harrington, 1983). The more qualitative, descriptive ethnographies provide a compelling first hand account of the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of the individuals who constitute the "underclass" without directly attributing their plight to their behavior. So while these approaches are microsociological, they present a more sensitive and personal component which is absent from the blatantly conservative

studies. (See also Claude Brown's The Children of Ham, 1976)

Most micro studies are far more quantitative. In acknowledging the lack of a coherent definition of the urban underclass, Rickets and Sawhill (1988) operationalized the term, using behavior as the sole determining factor in deciding whether or not an individual can be counted among the ranks of the "underclass". By their definition, an individual can be considered "underclass" if he or she scores one standard deviation above the established norm in the following four categories of behavior: 1) Dropping out of school, 2) Using means, often illicit ones, for survival other than the labor force, 3) Depending on welfare, and 4) Heading a household as a an unwed female. They concluded that less than one percent of the national population can be considered underclass, without even having to leave the ivory towers of mainstream academia to prove it. Sawhill and Rickets admittedly conform to popular mainstream discourse on the underclass in formulating this framework, and are non committal about their affiliation with their own findings.[5]

Additionally, Statistical analyses of the "intergenerational transmission of poverty" have become popular in the eighties because they are considered empirically sound. Kilson (1986), for example, presents data

[5]Sawhill and Rickets assert that they have constructed their definition of "underclass" based on previous literary usages of the term. They point out that they do not necesarrily advocate the use of the term "underclass"

on crime, drug abuse, violence and teen pregnancy, and concludes that there is a strong correlation between the cultural values of the underclass and the transmission of urban poverty from one generation to the next, though his main goal is to denigrate Black militancy (Kilson, p60).

Social dislocation is not caused by deindustrialization. Unemployment is not the effect of the disappearance of jobs. That the affluent benefit in many ways from the existence of the underclass has nothing to do with the preservation and recreation of urban poverty. Rather, "ghetto pathologies" are the consequence of welfare dependency and "irresponsible" or "illegal" behavior (not to mention literature produced by Black militants!). Harvard's conservative Black economist Glen Loury assesses the situation thus:

> When faced with the ravages of black crime against blacks, the depressing nature of social life in many low income black communities, the alarming incidence of pregnancy and unwed black teenagers, or the growing tendency of blacks on transfer from an increasingly hostile polity, it is simply insufficient to respond by saying "this is the fault of racist America. These problems will be solved when America finally does right by its black folk." Such a response dodges the issue of responsibility both at the level of individual behavior (i.e., the criminal perpetrator being responsible for his act), and at the level of the group (the black community being responsible for the values embraced by its people. (Loury, 1988)

Despite the obvious victim blaming implications of such an approach, many of the more recent "intergenerational transmission" studies are clear departures from such punching bags as Banfield's The Unheavenly City (1970), which based

class differentiation on whether or not one is capable of delaying instantaneous gratification in favor planning for the future (Banfield, 1970). In fact, Ladner, the author of The Death of White Sociology (1973) published a study which examined the transmission of poverty and its debilitating impact on African American women in Sage (1985). Without explicitly blaming the poor for their poverty, and without ignoring the structural constraints placed on today's urban poor, Ladner discusses the problem of intergenerational teen motherhood, and describes vividly the poor quality of life faced by inner city Black women who gave birth as teenagers, and who are now grandmothers:

> These grandmothers look and act considerably older than they are. They tend to carry themselves (in terms of posture) as if they were older. Many have health problems, including hypertension, obesity, diabetes, lower back problems and nervous ailments. Most appear to take medication for what they would describe as "bad nerves". (Ladner, 1984)

Most studies which examine the intergenerational transmission of the culture of poverty are not nearly so sensitive about attributing the continued deterioration of inner city conditions to the values and behavior of individuals. In The Public Interest it is generally argued by its authors (for example, once again, Kilson 1986) that if inner city Blacks would simply accept the standards of moral behavior, set by white mainstream society, there would be no "underclass". In adhering to behavioral or individualistic sociology, The Public Interest seems to deny that there is a

causal relationship between the so-called culture of poverty and the dominant culture which flourishes, often at the direct expense of the urban poor.

Studies which target Black ghetto culture as the primary contributor to urban poverty have gained widespread currency in many academic circles because they are considered pragmatic for social policy. It is easy to say that policy should be devoted to changing ghetto culture through better education, ensuring that criminals and other deviants be institutionalized, and teaching ghetto children to just say no to drugs. The practitioners of conventional wisdom and pop ideology like to read literature which suggests that poverty is the result of immorality and pathology.

What is not included in the micro-level, behavioral approach is that in a society which thrives upon profit making and get-rich-quick schemes, selling illicit drugs and running numbers are "rational" responses to an ascribed societal position. Conservatives expect the urban poor to be super moral, more moral than they would ever be willing to be when faced with the same set of options.

Wilson's work challenges the logistical problems involved in the more blatantly conservative micro approaches. Wilson indicates that the reasoning behind studies which attribute the current manifestation of urban poverty solely to culture and individual behavioral patterns is fundamentally circular (Wilson and Wacquant, 1989). Nothing of substance is

accomplished by attributing the persistence of urban poverty to the behavior of the poor. To do so implies that poor people can somehow be treated as a separate entity from poverty itself. Why are the poor poor? Because of their behavior. Why do they behave this way? Because they are poor. While there is certainly an important point in assuring that we are not denying the realities of the dynamics of life in today's urban ghetto, the conservative, microsociological literature of the eighties has had a detrimental impact on the urban poor because the power structure has put into practice policies which is based on its reasoning. Such is the power of theory.

I contend that this is another important reason why Wilson's work is so crucial at this time. Had it not been for his pinpointing of the circular reasoning behind the culture of poverty mentality, micro studies may be even more conservative and simplistic. Studies such as Taylor's analysis of the "subculture of disengagement" among African American inner city youth in The Urban League Review illustrate that even the most exacting depiction of a culture which deviates sharply from the mainstream must include a careful consideration of perverse demographic trends, deteriorating local economies and the functional transformation in the structures of the urban areas in the past two decades (Taylor, 1989, p36).

No longer will Rainwater's Behind Ghetto Walls (1971) or

Banfield's Unheavenly City (1970) be accepted as adequate insight into the daily life of the African American who lives in the projects. As we enter the nineties, there seems to be reason for optimism. Sociologists are less inclined to propose that the solution to today's urban poverty is the elimination of social programs and the reintroduction of laissez-faire, Darwinist social policy. Wilson's work has been helpful in this regard, though as I intend to elucidate, there is much work to be done before a complete and focused radical or liberal approach can be realized.

C. Deindustrialization, Political Economy, Structuralism and Colonialism: Macrosociological Analyses of "The Truly Disadvantaged"

> ...the predicament of the underclass cannot be satisfactorily addressed by the mere passage of civil rights laws or the introduction of special racial programs such as affirmative action. Indeed, the very success of recent antidiscrimination efforts in removing social barriers in the economic sector only points out, in sharp relief, other barriers that such efforts cannot begin to confront..., barriers which in short, transcend the issue of racial and ethnic discrimination and depict the universal problems of class subordination.-William Julius Wilson, 1985
>
> In the above passage, Wilson comes as close as he has ever come to understanding the class nature of national oppression. Although his views are distorted because he uses categories incorrectly, especially the categories of "class" and "racism", and incorrectly poses them against one another, what is meaningful in this passage is the hint that the problem of national oppression cannot be solved within a system of class exploitation.-Timothy V.

Johnson, director of the Marxist-Leninist Institute of Los Angeles, 1986

The main source of leftist scholarship on urban poverty is produced by social and political scientists who assume that the primary focus of analysis should be the social, political and economic structure of U.S. cities. Macrosociological analyses of urban poverty, most recently exemplified by Bluestone (1988), Wacquant (1989), Kasarda (1986), Downs (1989), Cottingham (1985), Johnson (1986) and Wilson and Wacquant (1989) locate the etiology of contemporary urban poverty in institutional racism, economic exploitation, unemployment and underemployment. Inferences are made not on the basis of individual behavior or culture, but on the class affiliation engendered by systemic and institutional forces.

Traditional structural analyses of urban poverty have posed the questions, "Who are the beneficiaries of racial discrimination and exploitation?" And "What role does racism play in the maintenance of the class structure?" Blauner (1969) first addressed these questions in his study of the urban revolts, and again in 1972 in Racial Oppression in America (Blauner, 1972). Willhelm (1980) further examines these questions, and assumes that one necessary side effect of industrial capitalism in the United States is the impoverishment of urban minorities (Willhelm, 1980). Bonacich (1972) reveals how capitalists create a dual labor market to encourage racial and ethnic tensions among the working class. This, according to her, results in the creation of

impoverished segments of urban minorities (Bonacich, 1972).

In 1980, Bonacich developed a typology which delineated various leftist models of racial and class oppression (Bonacich, 1980). She identified conflicting viewpoints between Szymanski (1976) and the internal colonial school of thought on the problem of worker racism. Szymanski contends that racism is an "irrational" response to capitalist domination because it serves to reinforce the bourgeois over all oppressed peoples by weakening the power base of the working class (Szymanski, 1972). Conversely, the internal colonial model supports the idea that white workers do accrue certain material benefits from racism, and it is hence "rational" (Bonacich, 1980).

But both schools of thought agree that racism is essentially a tool used by corporate elites to ensure that class subordination is maintained. Additionally, such scholars agreed that racial oppression ensures that urban minorities will be the most disadvantaged of the oppressed.[6] The poverty afflicting inner city minorities was believed to be the direct result of capitalist domination and its tool, institutional racism. One needed to look only at institutional decision making to identify the objective contradictory relationship between capitalists and workers in the industrial era. In a nation whose history is dominated by

[6]Leftist sociology is unified by its assertion that racism enables the ruling classes to accumulate capital by exploiting all workers.

racist ideology in its institutions, it follows that minorities will be more adversely affected by class subordination than will oppressed members of the majority race.

There is much overlapping between literature which could be considered "militant" or "radical" and that which is "structural" or "macrosociological", though as Wilson's critics (Reed, 1988, for example) argue, Wilson himself deliberately avoids any acknowledgement of the political implications associated with the class structure.[7] In accordance with the overall impact on the literature Wilson's thesis has had, structural analyses of contemporary urban poverty are not as easily distinguishable as "leftist".

As has been previously indicated, Wilson levies his sharpest criticism against the tradition of leftist and macrosociological literature which, during the most critical stage in its deterioration, avoided discourse on the internal dynamics of the urban ghetto, according to Wilson (Wilson, 1987). Largely due to Wilson's analysis of urban impoverishment in post industrial, post Civil Rights society, the leftist perspective was initially damaged. Wilson's contention that a new era in the socioeconomic organization of U.S. cities had emerged, challenged the "New Left" to examine the oppressive apparatus of the new phase of capitalism.

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[7]Wilson disassociates himself from the "New Left" because he considers their arguments ideological, and hence, non empirical.

Against scholars who adhered to the colonial models espoused by Carmichael and Hamilton (1968), Tabb (1970) and Allen (1970), Wilson implies that traditional Marxian and colonial approaches obscure the most salient structural dynamics which have given rise to the inner city conditions of today. Kasarda (1986) and Downs (1989) also produce literature which suggests that these approaches, such as they are, do not adequately account for the class structure caused by deindustrialization (Kasarda, 1985).

Specifically, Wilson's literature supports three lines of reasoning which seriously impair the traditional macrosociological argument about the relationship between the urban poor and mainstream society. First, in order for the colonial analogy to be an adequate portrayal of this relationship, one would not expect to see the present class structure among minorities. In accordance with traditional colonial theory, the white power structure uses racist ideologies to justify the domination of racial minorities through conscious, observable decision making in the social, political and economic institutions. African Americans, for example, would be viewed as an entity unified by their common oppressed status. In 1990 the relationship is much more insidious because many high profile, pro system minorities have assimilated into the mainstream, giving the false impression that racial oppression is no longer tolerated by the white ruling classes.

Rollison (1986) responds to Wilson's challenge that colonial theory is obsolete by proposing a new strategy for revealing a persistent colonial relationship between mainstream and ghetto. In assuming that the urban rioting of the sixties was an expression of revolutionary discontent, not at all unlike the independence movements of the Third World nations, Rollison concluded that his data supports a "neo colonial" relationship at work today.

> In summary, the results support the hypotheses that the revolt activity of the sixties had, by 1979, led to both increased Black employment in white collar occupations and the percent of Black families in poverty. In other words, it led to the Black differentiation that the neo-colonial model predicts as a result of the Black revolt activities of the sixties. (Rollison, 1989, p8)

This conclusion is based on the idea that the power structure began a process of co-opting Black leadership after the riots, and today it is African Americans who ensure that their disadvantaged brothers and sisters are demobilized.

Wilson's second criticism poses problems for Rollison's revised reasoning, but is especially problematic for those who adhere to traditional Marxian analyses. To Marxian and Neo Marxian scholars, Wilson poses a challenge to the conceptualization of the ghetto as a source of surplus value (Wilson, 1987). If the "underclass" is merely an extension of the exploited working class, or simply a "marginal" working class, how does one account for its dearth of exploitable resources? Where, one might ask, is the surplus value in localities where factories have been closed and torn down

during the past twenty years, and where there is no longer use for unskilled labor?

Why, for any other reason besides ensuring that the unemployed and unemployable do not revolt, would the key figures in the local power structure care whether or not control is maintained over a segment of the population which can no longer serve the purpose of facilitating capital accumulation? While there is certainly validity in Caplovitz's findings that the poorest people pay the highest prices for their basic needs (Caplovitz, 1966) it would not seem to make much sense for a capitalist to target unemployed welfare recipients as a source of cheap labor. In 1990, the decline of industrial capitalism has resulted in the obsolescence of the inner city labor market. Bluestone (1988) presents us with convincing data on the impact of the decentralization of the goods producing industry:

> Between 1969 and 1976, 22.3 million jobs had disappeared as a result of plant closings (and the interstate and overseas business establishments). This was equivalent to nearly 39% of all the jobs that had existed in 1969.
>
> When we extrapolated these numbers to the entire decade of the 1970's, we concluded that somewhere between 32 and 38 million jobs had disappeared in this 10 year period. (Bluestone, 1988, p31)

Wacquant (1989) further emphasizes the impact of deindustrialization with his data on unemployment in Chicago:

> In Chicago, deindustrialization reached such magnitude that it meant nothing short of an uninterrupted "Great Depression" for ghetto blacks. In 1954 over 10200 manufacturing establishments were located within the city

> limits, providing nearly half a million blue collar jobs (production workers up to and including foremen) and over 600000 in total employment. By 1982, the number of mills and factories had been halved, their overall payroll had gone down 55% and blue collar jobs decreased to 172000, a staggering cut of 63%. (Wacquant, 1989, p513)

With such telling figures about the newly emerging stratification among African Americans and the disintegration of the ghetto as a source of cheap labor, one is inclined to abandon traditional critiques of the existing structural arrangement of society. In light of the confounding variables presently at work, how may we reformulate a critique of the continued proliferation of inequality? Ironically, an associate of Wilson's, Loic J.D. Wacquant (cited above), has initiated such an undertaking. Wacquant offers a convincing argument against the conservatives and/or behavioralists by locating the source of today's ghetto poverty in the social policy, both contemporary and historical, of local and federal governmental officials:

> Whether it be through regulatory programs (zoning, growth control, environmental impact reports and so on) or federal incentives (public housing and urban renewal programs, urban development action grants, block grants and revenue sharing, tax increment redevelopment and industrial bonds), local and federal governments have pushed urban policies which have overwhelmingly benefitted entrepreneurs, land rentiers and other local and regional elites at the expense of poor residents. (Wacquant, 1989, p516)

Wilson, contrary to the assertions of many of his critics, never actually rejects or defends Marxian class or colonial analyses. He merely points out that in the seventies

and eighties, the tendency of macrosociological literature on urban poverty has been to reject careful scrutiny of the worsening conditions of the inner cities, along with all of the newly emerging conflicting variables in the social, political and economic structure, so as to eliminate the possibility of being labeled "racist", "elitist" or "conservative". Wilson contends that this tendency has limited the credibility of the macro approach, but his own work is very macrosociological in many ways. His basic assumptions about urban poverty are firmly rooted in class analysis.[8]

Wacquant has presented us, at long last, with a viable alternative to Wilson's lack of emphasis on the politically and emotionally charged indictments of racial and class subordination. Once again we may begin to identify and express legitimate political discourse on what seems to be the conscienceless and faceless process of deindustrialization, taking into account the findings of Wilson. Perhaps it is not, as was previously assumed, incompatible for literature to acknowledge the growing disintegration of inner city African American communities and critique the structural forces which have given rise to it.

Wilson's motivation for avoiding any serious critique of the structural forces behind the deterioration of the inner cities in the past two to three decades may involve his

[8]^This is more evident in Wilson's most recent publications.

affiliation with governmental policy makers. But there are many scholars, Wacquant, Jaret, Bluestone, Malveaux, to name a few, who do provide more "radical" accounts of the structural factors involved in the current state of affairs. Wilson does not prove, or attempt to prove that institutional racism and capitalist exploitation are not among the factors involved in the worsening ghetto conditions. He merely contends that they cannot, in and of themselves, be held accountable for the current manifestation.

On the question of oppression, Wilson has remained silent. He discusses the "isolation" and "subordination" of the "truly disadvantaged" and identifies the closed opportunity structure constraining urban minorities. He examines the stratification of a new era in capitalism and reveals the exacerbation of economic polarity in the post industrial period. Finally, he attributes ghetto "pathologies" to the structural constraints of the eighties, and disassociates himself from conservative, behavioral analysis. But Wilson deprives us of an interpretive dimension to his philosophy and his findings. In an attempt to avoid falling into what he apparently views as an ideological trap, Wilson avoids any political inferences about the racial and class polarization of 1990.

This is no longer defensible. While a reorganization of leftist thought may have been justifiable in the seventies and eighties, it no longer serves the purposes of maintaining a

sense of integrity in the social sciences. Racial and class oppression, and the dynamics which continue to facilitate the various forms of inequality establish a legitimate base for further modes of inquiry.

D. The Responses to the Wilson Thesis: Summary and Conclusions

In short, the work of William Julius Wilson has had the following effects on sociological and social scientific literature aimed at understanding the etiology, the consequences and the possible policy implications of urban poverty:

1. It has forced macrosociologists to acknowledge the devastating impact deindustrialization has had on the inner city, and the internal dynamics it has caused.
2. It has initiated a reversal of the conservative, victim blaming mentality of micro or behavioral sociologists and conservative governmental policy makers, who stepped in to fill the void when leftists shunned the internal dynamics of inner city depreciation during the past two to three decades.
3. It has provided a sound rationale, though not directly manifest, for rejecting conventional wisdom about ghetto problems.
4. It has generated a more sophisticated debate in academic circles about the causes and consequences of urban poverty.

Ideally, this will result in more creative and imaginative ideas for policymaking and grass roots organizing.

Not that it is common for a majority, or even a sizeable minority to extol the virtues of Wilson's thesis, I would like to emphasize that it is of no particular value to do so. Wilson's work is important only insofar as it has created new problems and demanded answers to new questions about urban poverty. Left unexamined, no new insight into these questions and problems can be obtained and the implicit issues of inner city impoverishment will be left unresolved.

CHAPTER 2

Urban Poverty in the Sunbelt: Limitations to the Basic Assumptions, Arguments and Methodology of Urban Poverty Literature; and a Proposal for Continued Research

The ongoing literary debate over the etiology and consequences of the current manifestation of urban poverty implies that social scientists are ill-equipped to formulate coherent policy strategies to mobilize "the underclass". Sound critiques of the conservative movement in the literature of the eighties have unfortunately not resulted in viable strategies for the alleviation of the social problems afflicting the residents of the inner cities. The polarity between wealth and poverty continues to increase. The conventional wisdom of the mainstream continues to attribute ghetto poverty to the "pathological" behavior of ghetto residents. At the same time, the opportunities for meaningful participation in the so-called technological revolution for inner city minorities continue dwindle.

Simultaneously, social scientists scramble to account for the structural and psychological transformation of the inner cities with very little agreement over how and why things continue to depreciate, not to mention what their role should be in determining what needs to be done about it. This, in and of itself, would provide a sound rationale for critiquing and extending the current literature. It is imperative that both alternative and evaluative directions be initiated by those who claim to have a sincere interest in the quality of life of the inhabitants of the inner cities of the U.S.A.

The polemical nature of what Wilson refers to as the "underclass debate" implies that there are many components of the literature which may be targeted for development, critique and extension. In the following I will be concerned with constructing a rationale for examining areas of substantive interest which are largely absent from the debate, exploring new methodological strategies and challenging many of the basic assumptions of what has been published up to this point. To summarize my goals, I will be proposing the investigation of the following problems:

1. The absence of any application of Wilson's thesis to urban poverty in the Southern United States. While the impoverishment of Southern minorities has generated some empirical analysis in the eighties, the unique problems of the urban poor who live in "boom" cities such as Atlanta and Houston have been incorporated into analyses of such

underdeveloped rural regions as Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta (Lichter,1989). When Wilson speaks of the "underclass", he is referring to the disadvantaged segments of "rustbelt" northeastern and midwestern cities which have experienced a sharp decentralization of the goods producing industry in the seventies and eighties.

2. The persistence of poverty in the so called "sunbelt" cities has not been examined by the participants in the underclass debate, because of two questionable assumptions: 1. That the urban poor of cities like Atlanta, which have benefitted from the economic restructuring of the past two to three decades, are somehow better off than their counter parts in cities like Chicago; and 2. That the struggles of the disadvantaged segments of Atlanta's inner city are more akin to the problems faced by the inhabitants of the underdeveloped rural regions of the South.

3. The limited attention paid to the political economy of the urban poor. Perhaps because his research is presented to governmental policy makers, Wilson does not critique the continued proliferation of inequality fostered by systemic and institutional decision making. One gets the impression from Wilson's work that the transformation of capitalism in the past two decades has given rise to a system which is conscience-less, an entirely different entity from the directly observable oppressive tactics of racists who formed the basis of local and federal governmental policy making

during the industrial era.

4. The top-down methodological strategies incorporated by both policy makers and social scientists. Aside from Anderson's ethnographic study of teen sex codes in inner city Chicago (Anderson, 1989), the literature fails to include any consideration of the perspectives of the constituents of the "underclass". As Willie (1988) correctly points out, Wilson's central premises do not allow for the integration of the world views of ghetto residents into his analyses. Social scientific inquiries into the problems which have given rise to the current inner city conditions are primarily made by examining the data compiled by official governmental sources, for example, the standard metropolitan statistical areas (S.M.S.A.'s) designated by the U.S. Census Bureau. Qualitative research is rarely utilized because of an implicit assumption that the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of the urban poor do not constitute good science. I strongly reject this assumption, primarily because it leads to the false conclusion that inner city residents do not have any valuable insight into their own problems and how they relate to broader society. Anderson has already initiated a more qualitative direction in the literature, and I am proposing that this angle can lead to some quite different conclusions from those held by the governmental and academic policy makers (Anderson, 1989 Hannerz, 1968, and Brown, 1976).

There are other important limitations to the "underclass

debate", which would also justify further research. However, it is not my intent to provide an overview of the theoretical and methodological problems of the world of academia, and its study of urban poverty. Such an undertaking would jeopardize the subjective, intrinsic value of the following project being proposed.

A. Atlanta, 1990: Deindustrialization, Inner City Deterioration and Racial Inequality: A Rebuttal to the "Convergence Hypothesis"; and an Extension of Contemporary Urban Poverty Research

Kasarda (1985), Downs (1985), Wilson (1989) and Waquant (1989) attribute the worsening of ghetto conditions in the last two decades to the economic transformation of U.S. society. In the seventies and eighties, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia all experienced a sharp decline in the number of stable, blue collar job opportunities previously available for unskilled and semi-skilled inner city residents. The out-migration of skilled workers to the sunbelt and the suburbs created an urban environment characterized by unemployment and underemployment and, according to Wilson, a new kind of urban poverty emerged.[1]

[1]This is the central premise of Wilson's Declining Significance of Race, 1978, and has been extended, critiqued and debated during the eighties. It is generally accepted that the urban poverty of today is distinguishable from the urban poverty of the industrial era because of the isolation

Today, isolation and abandonment afflict the inhabitants of the inner cities. And because the industrial decline has been most pronounced in the "rust belt" cities of the Midwest and Northeast, urban poverty studies have focused on the cities of these regions. When Wilson, his adversaries and his allies refer to such problems as community disintegration, social dislocation and cycles of depravation, they are basing their conclusions on data collected from rustbelt cities[2]

I hypothesize that while it is true that the large metropolitan areas of the "sunbelt" have been the beneficiaries of the industrial decline in the North, most, if not all, of the trends in inner city poverty in the South mirror those of the northern cities. I believe that an impoverished inner city youth in Atlanta will perceive the world in much the same way as an inner city youth in Philadelphia. The city of Atlanta, which is saddled with the second highest poverty rate of any major U.S. city, has undergone a similar structural transformation during the past two to three decades, despite the boom in its surrounding

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and lack of jobs, which in turn, is said to result in the emergence of social problems such as violence, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, etc.

[2]Wilson and Wacquant tend to use data collected from Chicago, and then make generalizations about other rustbelt cities. Kasarda analyzes data from such cities as Cleveland and Detroit. Bluestone (1982 and 1988) provides in depth analyses of unemployment in Detroit. Other analyses of urban poverty focus on the cities of the East, Midwest, and West, but up until this point the theoretical constructs of contemporary urban poverty research have not been applied to sunbelt cities.

counties (Sjoquist, 1988). Hence, an African American youth in both localities must contend with similar structural constraints. His or her life chances are highly dependent upon how well she or he can manage an environment in which poverty is the most salient obstacle. In this context, the white mainstream value structure makes very little sense. To the ghetto youth of both Philadelphia and Atlanta the fruits of the technological revolution are equally alien. Hairston (1987) emphasizes that when confronted with the dynamics of poverty caused by unemployment and underemployment, survival becomes a more important factor than education.:

> Atlanta ranks as one of the poorest cities in the country There are pockets on the Southside in which 90% of the residents never graduated from high school and close to the same percentage live below the poverty line. (Hairston, 1987, p13)

The difference between Atlanta and Philadelphia is the relative growth and prosperity enjoyed by Atlanta's suburbs. It is the economic polarity between the city of Atlanta, which is 70% Black, and its suburbs which are over 90% white, which renders it distinguishable from the "rust belt" cities; not the internal dynamics of the city proper. Heylar (1988), Beers and Hembree (1987), Sjoquist (1988) and Slessarev (1987) all discuss and describe the ever increasing cleavage between impoverished central-city African Americans and suburban whites who have reaped the fruits of the service and information industries. Heylar describes Atlanta thus:

> It is the land of the Mercedes and the mall, of the hungry and the homeless. It is the nation's third

> fastest growing metropolitan area; it is the nation's second poorest core city. It is a magnet for executives on the make and for the poor from the country. ...Understand, there is a world of difference between Atlanta the city and Atlanta the metropolitan area. The city has the big-name brand- It is Coca-Cola Co's headquarters and the big league teams, albeit mostly bad ones. But the metropolitan area is what the Big Hustle is really all about. The suburbs produce jobs at five times the city's pace. They include the nation's fastest growing county- Gwinnett -while the city's population shrinks.(Heylar, 1988, p1)

Sjoquist (1988) offers a further illustration of Atlanta:

> Atlanta offers a sharply contrasting mosaic -- the poverty line in the public housing projects and the riches of Buckhead, the mansions of Tuxedo Road and the weathered, wooden row houses in Cabbagetown, the glistening office building and the abandoned stores, the grocery carts filled with aluminum cans and the BMW's filled with grey suited executives. Although these contrasts are perhaps more defined than in other cities, Atlanta is not much different than other, older cities. It is Blacker and poorer than most, yet it resides in the midst of one of the fastest growing, most dynamic regional economies in the country. (Sjoquist, p1)

On the surface, the emergence of urban poverty in a sunbelt city seems to contradict the basic premises of contemporary urban poverty research. Atlanta's metropolitan area has grown and prospered during the last two decades. This combines with the popular impression of it as the "Black Mecca" to obscure the deterioration of its inner city and the detrimental impact the industrial decline has had on its disadvantaged African Americans. Jaret (1987) critiques what has become an accepted premise about the impact of economic growth in the South on racial inequality.

According to the "Convergence Hypothesis", the

technological and service boom in the sunbelt should result in a reduction of racial inequality and enhance the social and economic advancement of all segments of a booming metropolitan area. Jaret summarizes convergence theory:

> It is claimed that this growth and the expanding "economic pie" provides a context in which interracial socio-economic inequality may be more easily reduced. The convergence perspective holds that as large numbers of non-Southern migrants, industries, and investments are attracted, filter and penetrate into the South, there will be a an "evening out" process which makes the South more similar to the rest of the nation on most social, political and economic variables. This would imply a reduction in black-white socio-economic inequality in the urban South. Thus, the following hypothesis can be derived from the convergence perspective on urban growth and economic restructuring in the South: population increase and post industrial (service sector) economic restructuring are positively correlated with black-white socioeconomic equality. (Jaret, 1987)

Contrary to this mode of understanding, African Americans in Atlanta's most impoverished areas are worse off economically than they were in the sixties. Manufacturing jobs within the city limits declined by 24% between 1970 and 1985, while the suburbs enjoyed an increase of nearly 28,000 new manufacturing jobs in this same period. Northwestern Atlanta, which is over 80% African American, is the only area in the entire region where there was a decrease in the number of jobs. Orfield (1987) discusses the pessimistic outlook for African Americans in Atlanta's central city:

> Blacks are isolated from jobs by the intense residential segregation of the metropolitan area and by the lack of any public transportation reaching into some of the most rapidly growing suburban employment centers in the U.S. The record

> in the Atlanta job market in the 1980's may well portend very serious problems for the region when demographic trends of the 1990's produce a much smaller group of young people entering the workforce. (Orfield, 1987, p.ii)

I hypothesize that, in direct contradiction to the idea of "convergence", Atlanta's inner city neighborhoods are worse off today than they were twenty to thirty years ago. Additionally, I predict that, instead of Atlanta's inner city minorities becoming more assimilated into the mainstream as a result of the wealth and resources of its suburbs, the inclination of those who have been excluded from the prosperity will be to revolt against what they identify as a sham. If there is a difference between the societal participation of an impoverished Chicagoan and an impoverished Atlantan, the Atlantan will actually be more hostile and more alienated from the mainstream because the symbols of prosperity are everywhere, while the opportunities for participation in it are closed.

Atlanta may have mastered the art of civic promotion, but one-third of its population lives under poverty conditions which continue to deteriorate, not improve (Sjoquist, 1988). The prospect for change in the social, political and economic structure of Atlanta in the 1990's seems dim. Contrary to the convergence perspective, Atlanta's inner city neighborhoods are experiencing the following dynamics which paint a rather dismal picture for its central city African Americans:

1. Deindustrialization will continue to result in the

disappearance of stable working and middle class employment. This has and continues to cause the out-migration of the more skilled segments of the population. Consequently, there has been a sharp decline in population from nearly 500,000 in 1970 to less than 430,000 in 1990. The remaining inhabitants of the poorest neighborhoods are increasingly finding themselves more isolated, and less likely to embrace the mainstream ideologies which enable Atlanta to market itself as a "prosperous" and "progressive" city. The population decline can be interpreted as an intensification of the cleavage between wealth and poverty, white and Black. The data does not provide a rationale for concluding that the technological revolution will facilitate a "convergence"; quite the contrary.(14)

2. Industrial decline will continue to impose hardships on the remaining inhabitants of inner city Atlanta. Steady employment, though never abundant in the city, has all but disappeared, leaving residents to construct survival strategies deemed "illicit", "immoral" or "marginal" by the mainstream. The alternative would be to compete for the limited number of menial, low paying, insecure jobs provided by the "Tempfare" (Slessarev, 1987).

3. Ghetto neighborhoods will continue to struggle against the tendency towards community disintegration. Community leaders will be faced with the task of curtailing the natural tendency of the disadvantaged to cope with their situation in unhealthy

ways. Drug abuse, violence and teen pregnancy will all continue to rise, while at the same time, the prospect of garnering support for meaningful participation in community solidarity will continue to diminish, because poor Blacks will reject the standards of conduct set by white, mainstream institutions, the same institutions which have exploited, oppressed and excluded them.

It is not pleasant to predict what may become of Atlanta's inner city neighborhoods if the current trends continue. It is equally distressing to understand that these trends symbolize an expression of the macroeconomic dynamics which simultaneously impose constraints on poor, inner city African Americans while at the same time facilitate the accumulation of wealth among whites just outside of town. Local, national and international elites who enjoy the strangle hold on the accumulation of wealth, also constitute the power structure of Metro Atlanta. Gwinnett County, while using the name and image of Atlanta to market its service industry, refuses to share its tax base with the city proper. Further, contact between wealthy suburban whites and impoverished urban Blacks is curtailed because Gwinnett refuses to allow Atlanta's rapid transit authority to cross its boundary. Slessarev depicts the arrangement thus:

> At the same time suburban politicians in areas adjunct to the city boundaries have sought to contain the area's Black population within the city boundaries by increasing the separation between the suburbs and the city. The counties located to the city's northern perimeter have refused to

> participate in MARTA (Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority). They have prevented public housing construction in the suburbs by refusing to even establish eligibility for federal funding and setting up zoning provisions that effectively exclude low income housing. (Slessarev, p4)

Atlanta's starkly contrasting stratification embodies some very serious implications. By 1996, when the Olympic Games (a.k.a. The Coca Cola Games) invade Atlanta's urban environment it may not be possible to disguise the internal dynamics at work in a metropolitan area which contains both one of the highest poverty rates among Blacks and the highest degree of conspicuous consumption among whites. While some may argue that many African Americans, too, have prospered in the "Black Mecca", the stratification among Blacks is of secondary magnitude, and fits within the context of the racial polarization of Metro Atlanta. Although Atlanta has apparently opened its doors to skilled and educated African Americans who have embraced the values of the white mainstream, the most salient form of inequality remains racial.

I am proposing that it is time to investigate the proliferation of urban poverty in a region which enjoys the fruits of the most advanced phase of capitalism, the so-called technological revolution. It is no longer appropriate to assume that Atlanta's impoverished African Americans are thriving upon the opportunities afforded to those who form the vanguard of the "Black Mecca". Likewise, Atlanta's ghetto inhabitants can no longer be incorporated into the study of

the rural poverty which abounds in the "Black Belt" regions of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi.

Atlanta is a city affected by the broader changes in the dynamics of the urban environment of a post industrial society. I predict that inquiries into the forces which have given rise to its poverty will lead to conclusions which reveal that Atlanta is much like Chicago and Philadelphia. Hence, it is worthy of examination by those who are considered "experts" on the topic of urban poverty.

B. Atlanta's Vine City: The Political Economy of an Inner City Sunbelt Neighborhood, 1990; A Critique of Wilson's A-Critical Stance on Advanced Capitalism; and the Prospect of Militant Praxis

Vine City is the neighborhood to the immediate west of Atlanta's central business district. It is the childhood home of mayor Maynard Jackson and the one time residence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is a neighborhood which once contained the headquarters of the Student Nonviolent-turned-Nationalist Coordinating Committee, and was targeted by Black Nationalist and Pan African intellectuals from the University Center Complex as a possible site to commence the establishment of an African American nation. Through the years, Vine City has experienced a variety of tactics to improve the quality of life of its residents by city planners,

grass roots organizations such as Hector Black's Vine City Project, and the Southern Regional Council (Stone, 1989).

Today Vine City lies in the shadow of the Omni, CNN and World Congress Centers, the Peachtree Plaza and the various other glittering high rise palaces which symbolize the growth and prosperity of a region dominated by information technology. Ironically, it is an area of desperation and despair for many of its remaining residents. It embodies many of the characteristics associated with Wilson's "underclass" neighborhoods. These include A high unemployment and underemployment rate, a high incidence of violent "criminal" activity, the prevalence of drug abuse, a high degree of social, political and economic isolation from the mainstream, a high degree of teen pregnancy, the pervasiveness of substandard housing, and so on.

Stone (1989) is pessimistic that Vine City will be able to withstand the structural destabilization which has resulted in the high incidence of social problems. He predicts that the community will succumb to opportunistic development strategists in the nineties:

> By 1987, Vine City was again the target for nonhousing development. A proposed dome stadium (this would be Atlanta's second stadium in the downtown area. The old one would be used for baseball, the new one for football and supplemental exhibit space) adjoining the World Congress Center would destroy at least two churches, a school run by one of the churches and some commercial buildings. ...In the case of both Vine City and Buttermilk Bottom, black residents were unable to defend against destabilizing development. The Vine City story is not closed yet, but its future as a

residential area appears unlikely. (Stone, p122)

The problems caused by community disorganization have intensified in Vine City since the days when Kwame Ture and H. Rap Brown agitated for the overthrow of the racist power structure. I believe that it will make less and less sense to address the issues faced by impoverished Vine Citians with standards set by white, mainstream institutions, because these institutions serve only to maintain the status-quo. Most of the literature published about the social and political consciousness of oppressed and impoverished people promotes the time worn mainstream perspective that the poorest segments of society are the least likely to mobilize. I am proposing that an alternative theoretical strategy be constructed.[3]

Scott (1989) examines the problem of quiescence among peasants. He asserts that it is insufficient to examine the resources and overt struggle of oppressed peoples, if one is to fully comprehend their mobilization capacity:

> If only open, overt, declared forms of struggle are called "resistance", then all that is being measured may be the level of repression that structures the available options. More than one peasantry has been reduced brutally from open, organized, radical activity at one moment to sporadic acts of petty resistance at the next. (Scott, 1989, p22)

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[3]The idea that the worse of segments of society are the least likely to initiate, support or participate in social movements which would improve their living conditions is widely accepted and generally unchallenged. However, movements such as those initiated by Marcus Garvey in the 1920's provide counter factual evidence. Garvey won the support of millions of poor urban African Americans before being swindled, convicted of bank fraud and exiled.

I do not dispute the basic assumption that the poorest segments of society are less likely to revolt against an oppressor than segments which possess the resources to do so. But I do believe that the alienation of poor people is an expression of discontent. The violence and the drug addiction, the hustling and the teen pregnancy can all be examined from the point of view that such behavior is symbolic of rebellion against the privileged and powerful; latent if not manifest. Rarely do the award winning journalistic accounts of the behavior of the poor consider the possibility that African Americans who are immobilized within the context of an affluent, but racially stratified society behave the way they do not only because it is a reasonable survival strategy. It is also an expression of their non-compliance with the status-quo.

In Vine City there is a unique history of political activism which combines with the debilitating effects of the economic constraints which have dominated its social and economic structure during the past two to three decades. If there is no observable discontent in Vine City because its residents do not possess the resources to combat the power structure, I propose an examination of the question of latent discontent. What alternative means can be used to interpret the ways in which Vine Citians are coping? Neither social scientists, governmental policy makers nor journalists rigorously analyze the implications of the problems which are

associated with impoverished inner city neighborhoods. In light of the failure of social policy, it would seem that such an inquiry is justified.

The lack of any serious consideration of the political and economic implications of the current trends in the reproduction of urban poverty by mainstream social scientists creates a conspicuous void in the literature. Wilson, for example, proposes a broad based, all encompassing job training program to prepare inner city residents for the economic transformation of the urban environment. He advocates full cooperation with governmental policy strategists at a time when the government routinely vetoes civil rights bills, subsidizes the service industry and supports supply side economic planning. As "catastrophic" as conditions in the ghettos have become, one would think that Wilson would be inclined to inquire about non mainstream strategies to deal with the state of emergency (Wilson, 1984).

Others have asserted that policy should be devoted to assimilating the urban poor into the mainstream by targeting ghetto culture through drug and sex education, without any consideration of how absurd the accepted white, mainstream value structure sounds to someone who lives with the daily realities of racial and class exclusion. The world view of the privileged and powerful, out of which much of the "help" provided to the disadvantaged is concocted, does not allow for any analysis of the broader implications of the "pathological"

behavior it seeks to alleviate.[4]

Rarely is there ever any discussion in the literature, as there was in the sixties, about how the contradictions of capitalism are interpreted by the impoverished and exploited people of the urban environment. Because Vine City provides ample evidence of this country's history of racist exploitation and subordination, the political implications are self evident. Its structural relationship to the wealthy, privileged sections of its metropolitan area render it a neighborhood which feels the full sting of an internal contradiction in the most fundamental societal form.

Many Marxian community power studies, most notably those of Gaventa (1981) and Greer (1970) apply the Gramscian concept of hegemony to the quiescence of impoverished and impotent populations. Understood in this way, the poor residents of Vine City do not revolt because of the ideological infiltration imposed on them by the various means, primarily psychological, of control at the disposal of the power structure. But as both Gaventa and Greer found in their studies, revolutionary sentiment persists in more latent forms, and when the time is right it can become manifest. Revolutionary sentiment in the Vine City of the late sixties and early seventies was expressed in terms of Pan-African and Black Nationalist thought and activism (Carson, 1981).

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[4]The literature published in The Public Interest accepts the sovereignty of the conservative establishment and bases its policy recommendations on white, mainstream values.

In 1990, given the simultaneous affluence of the suburbs and the increasing poverty rate of Vine City, I predict that the neighborhood possesses the potential for anti-systemic activism. Gaventa asserts that it is not sufficient to examine directly observable phenomenon if one is to comprehend fully the power relationship between the power structure and the disadvantaged. It is necessary to interpret the non action of the powerless:

> By far the least developed and least understood mechanisms of power- at least within the field of political science- are those of the third dimension. Their identification, one suspects, involves specifying the means through which power influences, shapes and determines conceptions of the necessities, possibilities and strategies of challenge in situations of latent conflict. This may include the study of social myths, languages, symbols, and how they are shaped or manipulated in power processes. (Gaventa, 1980, p15)

This creates important new directions for research. Extreme conditions call for extreme measures. Two questions emerge when one becomes willing to look beyond the acceptable, work within the system approach to ghetto poverty advocated by Wilson and his associates (Wilson, 1984). First, how may social scientists penetrate the directly observable?; and second, what is the prospect for militant praxis once this is accomplished? If the people of Vine City begin to attribute their condition to the workings of the system, they will not be very willing to cooperate with Wilson's job training program. Should this happen in the context of the current state of affairs, mainstream social scientists will need to

reorient themselves to something which was an undiscovered, but no less real dynamic all along.

I propose an investigation of the political implications of the dynamics involved in Vine City's relationship to the Atlanta metropolitan area. I intend to provide a rationale for examining the current trends in urban poverty with more active criticism than previously offered by social scientists and governmental policy makers. The following questions summarize my implicit assumptions: 1. What has become of the projects which sought to revolutionize Vine City in the sixties, and how do the current residents feel about social and political activism today?

2. What structural and psychological barriers maintain the demobilization of Vine City's residents?

3. What is the prospect for future activism, in light of the poverty and powerlessness in the midst of the wealth and power of the region?

4. How do the residents of Vine City feel about their relative condition, as compared to the affluence of Metro Atlanta?

5. What are the most viable strategies for reversing the current trends in inequality which can be constructed out of the grass roots in Vine City?

Such questions form a mode of inquiry which is a clear departure from the directions of contemporary urban poverty research. I believe that new directions are justified because of the failure of mainstream social policy and the one-sided

discourse on the topic. In a sense, an inquiry from the proposed perspective may be construed as a refutation of Wilson's central premises. However, such is not my intent. I prefer to think of it as an extension of his findings, combined with a critique of the systemic trends which facilitate racial inequality.

C. Methodology

Quantitative analysis of urban poverty dominates the literature. Both micro and macro level studies produce data compiled from census tracts which leads to conclusions which inevitably support or refute an ideological construct. Such is the nature of the discourse on such an emotionally charged, and here to fore unfocused issue. Even the most empirically sound urban poverty studies, intentionally or otherwise, contain a certain element of dogmatism which can not be completely eliminated until an acceptable synthesis can be reached. At this time, it does not appear that the trend is in that direction.

I do not propose that it is an appropriate time to construct a synthesis, though ultimately such would be an implicit goal. Rather, my concern is to challenge the conclusions which are based on the most popular methodological strategies. I believe that alternative methods will enhance and enrich the literature, thus breaking down what is

generally accepted as the only "legitimate" mode of inquiry.

The central premise of the methodology I am proposing involves the idea of examining the problems of urban poverty from a grass roots perspective. In order to detect the full impact of racial inequality, the debilitating effects of urban poverty, the degree to which the problems confronting the inner city rustbelt neighborhoods are similar to the urban poverty of the sunbelt, and the appropriateness of Black Nationalist or Pan Africanist militancy as a viable strategy for eliminating poverty among disadvantaged African Americans, I suggest that sociologists leave the ivory tower and experience first hand the perspectives of the people who are considered "underclass".

Research conducted with the intention of attaining the the grass roots perspective is primarily qualitative and descriptive. Ideally, participant observation would be the most preferable research strategy. However, the draw back to participant observation would be the issue of time. A thorough participant study would necessarily involve interaction in a wide variety of circumstances over an extended period of time. Sound qualitative research, however, need not be confined to participant studies. The goal of attaining a grass roots perspective can be reached through rigorous interviewing, provided the research questions are appropriate, and directly focus on issues of grass roots organizing.

Therefore, I intend to support my hypotheses through interview responses from individuals comprising three distinguishable categories. The interviews are to be obtained through "snowballing" tactics. The categories are presented below:

1. Interviews with former members of the SNCC, and any other activists who directed anti-systemic activism aimed at improving living conditions in Vine City. I will be interested in gaining their insight into contemporary problems, as well as descriptive accounts of the movements which sought to mobilize Vine City's residents on the grass roots level. What problems are associated with such an undertaking, and what is the prospect for the reemergence of future movements of this kind?

2. Interviews with contemporary community leaders. How do the clergypersons, the planners, the social workers, the tenant managers, etc., perceive the causes and consequences of the problems facing Vine Citians today? How would persons holding such positions account for the changes in their community over the past twenty to thirty years? How would they describe the people who live in their community, and to what degree do they believe their constituency would be willing to participate in a grass roots movement in light of the current structural dynamics at work in the broader society?

3. Interviews with individuals who live in Vine City and are directly affected by the trends which have resulted in inner

city poverty; and who would also attribute their situation to structural forces. In other words, these individuals could be, by some definition, considered "underclass"; and at the same time possess the latent revolutionary sentiment described thus far.

Sound qualitative studies are often buttressed by quantitative data, as a preliminary step towards reinforcing the rich description which ensues. I believe that this is acceptable, so long as the subjective, intrinsic value of the project is not jeopardized. Therefore, in addition to the core of the methodology (which will be the responses to interview questions) I will present data on the extent of the poverty in Vine City, including brief longitudinal analyses of median income and housing conditions. By including such data, I intend to enhance the data collected from interviews.

To restate the hypotheses I have previously identified in the course of my analysis, I am concerned with testing the following assertions:

1. Vine City is much like any other inner city neighborhood in the U.S., despite the growth and prosperity of the region which encapsulates it. Contrary to the "convergence hypothesis", the conditions under which disadvantaged and impoverished inner city African Americans in the sunbelt must live have not improved as a result of the accumulation of wealth in the region. In fact, the opposite is the case. Their quality of life, like the quality of life of the inner

city residents of the deindustrialized Midwest and Northeast, has deteriorated during the past twenty to thirty years.

2. As a result of the economic restructuring of Vine City during the past twenty to thirty years there will be less community solidarity, and more anti-systemic activity which is construed as "marginal" or "pathological" by the mainstream. The decline in economic opportunity simultaneously coincides with a rise in violence, drug dependency and despair.

3. Contrary to conventional wisdom and contemporary urban poverty research, the above cited problems are an expression of discontent. Behavior deemed "criminal" or "immoral", is not merely a survival strategy, but is symbolic of acquiescence.

4. Vine City possesses latent revolutionary sentiment. The so-called "underclass" persists in the midst of a widening polarity between wealth and poverty. Implicit in this arrangement is the potential for revolt, though the physical and psychological control tactics at the disposal of the power structure prevents revolutionary ideas from becoming manifest.

5. The reason social scientists have not come to conclusions which suggest that the urban poor possess any sort of organizational potential at the grass roots level is because their methodological strategies do not allow for the collection of data from the "bottom up". In order to assess grass roots mobility prospects, it is necessary to obtain the perspective of the grass roots. If this is done, social

scientists will come to some different conclusions about how data should be interpreted.

CHAPTER 3

Critiquing and Extending the "Underclass Debate": Qualitative Data on Urban Poverty in the Sunbelt

Up to this point a rationale has been constructed for the empirical investigation of urban poverty in a sunbelt community. I have asserted that the central premises of the work of William Julius Wilson has resulted in what Wilson, himself, refers to as the "underclass debate", a series of arguments between conservatives, liberals and militants about the causes, consequences and solutions to urban poverty in post industrial society. Though sometimes adamantly denying any ideological affiliations in regards to this topic, social scientists are often reduced to upholding certain traditional perspectives in examining the dynamics.

I have contended that it is not sufficient to assume that the deterioration of inner city African American communities during the last thirty years is a problem afflicting only the so-called "rustbelt" cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Furthermore, it is not accurate to assume that the recent boom

in the suburban South has resulted in an alleviation of the problems associated with impoverished urban African Americans in southern cities like Atlanta and Houston.

I have presented data on the stratification of Atlanta's metropolitan area which suggests that racial inequality continues to flourish, challenging the conventional wisdom that racism and prejudice are no longer salient in the composition of U.S. cities. Atlanta, with all of its neon clad high rise palaces and futurist freeways, is hardly the "Black Mecca" it is reputed to be. By official accounts, over one third of Atlanta's African Americans struggle against the dynamics of an impoverished urban environment. Atlanta is second only to Newark, NJ in its poverty rate among minorities (Sjoquist, 1988).

Because of the racial polarity in the Atlanta metropolitan area, and because ghetto dwelling African American Atlantans do not appear to be organized for any sort of mobilization activity, I have offered an alternative interpretation of quiescence among the most disadvantaged segments of the urban environment. In contrast to theoretical models which assume that the poorest segments of society are the least likely to contain a capacity for mobilization, I have suggested that the disadvantaged may revolt against the structural constraints which maintain their powerlessness, if the opportunity presents itself. That this capacity is latent and not directly observable should not obscure the

implications of the presence (or non presence according to some scholars) of urban impoverishment in the class structure. To understand this, I have contended, it is necessary to view behavior which is deemed "marginal", "pathological" or "immoral" as an expression of discontent.

Furthermore, I have argued that the methodology utilized by mainstream social scientists to arrive at conclusions about urban poverty are incomplete because they fail to incorporate the perspectives of the human subjects they strive to make inferences about. I have proposed that urban poverty be analyzed from the "bottom up", as well as the "top down", and that this can only be accomplished through rigorous qualitative field work. I have suggested that in order to comprehend the mobilization potential of the disadvantaged, it is necessary to interact with them, their community advocates and the people who have attempted to mobilize them in the past.

In summary, I have proposed that the mode of inquiry into the problem of urban poverty in the United States be critiqued and extended. The existing literature provides a sound basis for further examination. I predict that the central premises of the "underclass debate", when applied to an inner city sunbelt community through the utilization of qualitative methodology will lead to conclusions which differ from the ones offered by those who adamantly adhere to, strongly reject and simply comment upon the thesis of William Julius Wilson.

In the following I will be concerned with revealing to what extent the data I have collected through in depth interviewing in Vine City, an historic Black community in central Atlanta, supports the hypotheses I have proposed. Are the problems of Vine City similar to the problems of north Philadelphia, Chicago's Lawndale, or Harlem? To what extent do Vine City's residents accrue the benefits of functioning within the context of the most dynamic regional economy in the nation? What forces inhibit the capacity of Vine City's residents to break out of the cycle of poverty many find themselves in? And finally, what are the political implications of a system which rationalizes the maintenance of a community like Vine City? How may we measure Vine Citian's capacity to revolt in light of the current inequality? All of these questions will be explored in the ensuing sections.

A. Probing the Social, Political and Economic Structure of Vine City: The Compatibility of Qualitative Field Work and Grass Roots Organizing; and the Activist Legacy of the Community

In 1965 a task force directed by the Southern Regional Council investigated the alarming incidence of social problems in Vine City, Atlanta's microcosm of an urban African American

community. After rigorously interacting with its residents for a three month period, the SRC field workers constructed a perspective on the classical symptoms of impoverishment. This perspective was unique because it was based on the point of view of the impoverished. The objective was to mobilize Vine Citians to organize around specific problems, and the basic assumption was that this could only be done through utilizing a "bottom up" strategy.

Governmental policy makers, whose rhetoric implied that a renewed sense of priority was to be given to the poor of the United States, was just that, mere rhetoric. The SRC, along with the various other emerging civil rights organizations, knew that social change could only be realized through direct mobilization strategies, and that mobilization was possible only if the field workers had a clear understanding of the perspective of the grass roots. The contrast between top down governmental policy making and grass roots organizing was depicted in the SRC report:

> Six people- four Negroes and two whites- met in late January of 1965 to discuss ways of working in Vine City. One of the Negroes was from Vine City. He spoke of the people and their problems. He told the group that the recent civil rights law meant nothing to the average Vine City resident. He criticized the new War on Poverty for not doing what was really needed. It was not bettering jobs, houses or streets, nor increasing welfare benefits; it was only attempting to help a small percentage of people overcome some personal inadequacies. He said the group needed to try to mobilize the people in Vine City into doing something about the conditions which caused the personal shortcomings. (SRC Report, p2)

This was only one of several projects to construct an organized movement for social change in Vine City out of its grass roots in the 1960's. Hector Black, a white Mennonite and Harvard graduate, utilized a federal anti-poverty grant to work in Vine City in accordance with the Vine City Council, an unofficial local organization designed to improve housing conditions. Dorothy Bolton, a lifelong resident of Vine City, organized the Domestic Service Union, to ensure that the women of Vine City, who worked as maids, could enjoy better working conditions (Stone, 1976).

But as the realities of national pathology and injustice became manifest in the mass media towards the end of the decade, it became apparent that the problems of Vine City were more attributable to the internal contradictions of U.S. society. It was no longer sufficient to use task specific issues in Vine City to provide a rationale for action. National issues such as racism, the widening polarity in the class structure and U.S. imperialism were to be used as a basis for constructing strategies to foster social change. The grass roots were still thought to be the appropriate perspective for action, but appeals were being made which sought to dismantle the existing structure of society as a whole. This, it was believed, was the only viable strategy for making fundamental changes in the quality of life of people from Vine City.

In 1966, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

experienced a split in its ideology when a group of its members developed a position paper arguing that it was no longer acceptable or appropriate to assume that the precedents set by earlier civil rights efforts could reverse the impoverishment of African Americans. The group, known as the Atlanta Separatists, contended that the SNCC should agitate for the control of the Black community, so as to establish a Black nation, and Vine City was targeted as the locality where such a political philosophy could be incorporated.

The separatists, spearheaded by Bill Ware, were strongly influenced by the ideas of Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon. Ware believed that Vine City was an appropriate site to initiate racial separatism because it was a prototype of the Black community, and its problems were analogous with the struggles of the colonized African nations. A seasoned grass roots organizer, Ware clearly understood all of the intricacies of community organizing. He, like all of the other members of SNCC, knew the importance of comprehending the grass roots perspective, and amidst the social and political turmoil of the sixties, Ware believed that the oppressed and impoverished could dismantle the existing structure in a very fundamental way. Clayborne Carson describes Ware's intentions thus:

> Once involved in the Atlanta project, Ware's experiences reinforced his belief in the need to stress racial appeals. He and other members of the Atlanta staff saw themselves as conscious innovators participating in a unique experiment in urban organizing. Vine City was an area afflicted with all of the classic problems of urban slums: unemployment, poor housing, inadequate schools and

> public services, all of which lead to feelings of powerlessness and political apathy. Atlanta was reputed to be the most progressive southern city, yet the SNCC staff believed that the city's liberal white establishment and their moderate black allies neglected the problems faced by blacks in the city. The Atlanta staff strove to increase black "control over the public decisions which affect the lives of black people." They warned that without such control southern blacks would "succumb to the fate of most of the northern ghettoes: a welfare and patronage system will be established and the new voting power of Negroes will work to the benefit of a small few." This process was already at work in Atlanta, according to the SNCC staff where "the small established Negro leadership is working rapidly to solidify still further its political control. They urged SNCC to develop programs to take advantage of the demographic process that they referred to as the "Blackening of urban areas". "We shouldn't have to say too much about the potential black power this represents." (Carson, 1981, p193)

The Atlanta Separatists never got their chance to seize control of Vine City. Like the other militant movements of the era, the SNCC did not survive the seventies return to normalcy. White backlash combined with the deliberate infiltration of militant organizations by the FBI and the CIA to crush anti systemic activism (Carson, 1981). These efforts were successful when the ideological apparatuses of the federal power structure succeeded in regaining its capacity to project the image that Black militancy was the cause, not the consequence of national problems. SNCC disbanded in 1971, and with it died the plan to revolutionize Vine City.

The community activism which has characterized Vine City during its history as a Black community provided the foundation I utilized to investigate how the problems of

contemporary urban poverty are manifest in its social, political, economic, and to psychological structure. But before I directly address the question of what may be concluded about the prospect of future mobilization attempts in Vine City, or how Vine City relates to Wilson's argument about the nature of urban poverty, it is important to clarify the process by which the data was collected.

As I indicated in the preceding chapter, I targeted three samples of persons associated with the Vine City area with whom to conduct interviews. These samples are:

1. A sample of former militant activists who sought to take advantage of the conflict which abounded in the sixties. I was able to obtain responses from seven such individuals, all of whom had specific interests in Vine City during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.

2. A sample of the present day community leaders who hold key positions and are knowledgeable concerning the social structure in Vine City. I interviewed seven ministers from the local churches, the executive director for the Vine City Housing Ministry, a church-based neighborhood development organization, an elder who is active in the VCHM, a social worker, the tenant president and grievance chairperson of Egan Homes, a public housing project in Vine City, and the neighborhood representative from the city planning department.

3. A sample of the grass roots. I interviewed fourteen disadvantaged residents of Vine City. In an attempt to test

the hypothesis of latent militancy, I obtained responses which either affirmed or questioned the concept of militancy as a practical or idealistic tool in eradicating the present race and class polarity. Holistically (as one might expect), this was the least coherent of the samples. It includes interviews with elderly residents, many of whom have lived in Vine City all or most of their lives. It includes a large "snowball" sample of interviews with the "brothers on the block", the unemployed or marginally employed African American males in their twenties, thirties and forties, who have met the demands of their survival by utilizing means outside the accepted norms constructed by the mainstream. Finally, I interviewed three single parents, who were struggling to survive amidst the inferior institutional facilities afforded to them.

Saul Alinsky has stated that in order for a grass roots organizer to be successful in gaining support for a mobilization movement,

> The community organizer digs into a morass of resignation, hopelessness and despair and works with the local people in articulating, "rubbing raw" their resentments. He must agitate to the point of conflict. (SRC report, 1966, p4)

I believe that there are similarities between Alinsky's method of organizing the powerless, and qualitative methodology which seeks insight into the political economy of an impoverished and powerless community. I found that the most valuable responses to my research questions, in terms of gaining support for my hypotheses, were ones which were the result of

my "touching a nerve", or as Alinsky would say, "rubbing raw a resentment".

This implies that the pursuit of empirical insight into urban poverty and the act of community organization are inseparable. My intent was not to stir up discontent, agitate for the overthrow of an oppressive political apparatus, or even to test the plausibility of generating social activism of any kind. Yet, because I was engaged in the process of constructing a deeper understanding of the impact of impoverishment and powerlessness through direct interaction with individuals, it was not possible to avoid the interplay between activist and methodological strategies.

In this way, my research gives the appearance of containing a certain element of participatory development. This is completely unintentional. However, if the following responses to my interview questions contribute to social activism in Vine City in any capacity, then so be it. I could not help, during the course of collecting my data, but to develop the desire to change what I have come to believe is an objective contradiction. As the morning shadows of Atlanta's Peachtree Plaza fell on the burned out and boarded up shacks and shanties of Vine City, I found myself struggling with the concept of value neutrality, a key component of the dominant paradigm in mainstream sociology.

The legacy of community organization, the struggles of the impoverished and the implications of racial inequality in

1990 form the foundation from which the research questions and methodology emerge in this study. Let us now turn to the results of this study.

B. Impressions of Vine City Past: Life in a Pre-Civil Rights African American Community in the Urban South

In order to obtain insight into the question of whether or not the Wilson thesis provides an adequate theoretical model for understanding how the structural and physical composition of Vine City has changed during the last thirty years, I posed questions to the interviewees which challenged them to reflect back on what life was like in the sixties and before. If the respondents were not acquainted with Vine City for an extended period of time, I requested that they merely try and recall what others had said about the area.

During my inquiry into social change during the past thirty years in Vine City, I was most impressed by the conflicting, and contradictory accounts of the way things were. I received responses which vividly described the debilitating physical environment, the formal legitimacy of racism and racist violence and the hardship it bred. Other respondents spoke of the community solidarity, the wide variety of services and the stability of the working people.

The Southern Regional Council emphasized the former

account:

> Vine City is a slum in Atlanta, Georgia. Approximately 1550 families live in the six by four block area bounded by Northside Drive, Simpson Street, Sunset and Hunter Avenues. The residents live in a variety of dwellings, many of which were formerly one-family homes, but are now multiple family units. Ten or fifteen people crowd into these three or four room apartments. Often a toilet is shared by all. Many of the streets are unpaved in Vine City. When it rains, the water washes dirt and cans and bottles into the sewers, clogging them. At times like this the trash floats about, wine bottles nodding like swans. (SRC Report, 1966, p1)

A childhood resident of Vine City and current religious leader recalls the impact racial oppression had on the identity of people from Vine City when he was growing up by offering personal experiences which imply that the quality of life in Vine City never has been what most would consider good. He recalls how the formal legitimacy of racial segregation impacted the interaction between Vine Citians:

> When I first came here I was sitting on the bus, and some white people can't understand why we feel this way, and I'm on the bus, not bothering nobody, the bus is half empty and the bus driver said "What you doin' sittin' here, boy, get in the back." The most degrading thing. There were plenty of seats, I wasn't bothering anybody, I wasn't breaking any rules. It was just that attitude. Some people would carry that with them and take their frustration out on each other.[1]

Others recalled the degradation and suffering of coming up in a pre Civil Rights southern city:

> I was a maid when I was coming up. I had to work in the homes. They was taught that they was better than I was. And 'til I got old enough to ask why,

[1] Tom Jones interview, Atlanta, Ga., March 1990

> I didn't question it. When I did ask why they told me its cause I'm Black. They'd explain to you that Black people is niggers. That was said to you and you took that. You didn't dare say anything, no matter how it made you feel. The change didn't happen til Dr. King came along.[2]

Additionally, a former SNCC activist described Vine City as a kind of zone in transition, a place where impoverished and oppressed Blacks from the rural South came in search of a better way of life, only to struggle against the dynamics of a hostile urban environment. Unskilled and uneducated, the new arrivals to Vine City in the pre Civil Rights era often fell victim to the cut-throat competition of the urban industrial society, and were doomed to a life of urban impoverishment.[3]

These depressing depictions describe only part of Vine City in the 1960's and before. The impressions offered by the respondents to the interview questions who lived in the community, and who have witnessed first hand its social, political and economic transformation both confirmed and contradicted the conceptualization of Vine City as a slum. Generalizations about the environment of Vine City in the sixties are difficult to make because of the diversity of the responses.

One description of Vine City in the sixties and before, which is diametrically opposed to the SRC depiction of it as

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[2]Dorothy Bolton interview, Atlanta, Ga. , March 1990

[3]Stanley Wise interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1990

a dilapidated slum, is how it is remembered as a cohesive Black community with a unique cultural history. A life long resident of Vine City and perhaps one of its most prominent social and political figures, remembers the days when Vine City was something of an entertainment and shopping mecca for Black Atlantans:

> Vine City is a unique community. Always has been. We did things a little differently than they did in Harlem. You see, we were in the South, (laughs) so it was a little bit different. We had all the big bands come here, they would come sometimes to Vine City. We had the Magnolia Ballroom, which was an entertainment ballroom where you could go and dance back in the years when Ray Charles was getting his start.
> *Did Ray Charles ever appear at the Magnolia Ballroom?
> Yes, and James Brown. It was a unique community, and a community that was mixed with low income peoples, professional peoples. They were all mixed in there together. Everyone knew and respected one another. We had things like the stop and shop, laundry, shoe shop and we had a large grocery store- Roger's- it was kind of like Krogers. And we had our historic site across the street called the Magnolia strip. We had a little city there. It accommodated us. We accommodated it. So it was important. Vine City was the talk of the town. We knew that we was locked out of a lot of things, but we made the best of it. We had what you call a good time. Because we had the restaurant right there on the corner, and the night club, we didn't need to go nowheres else. We had everything we needed right there. Everyone would dress up, would go there to dance. So we didn't have no trouble as we are having today.[4]

An African Methodist Episcopalian minister in the heart of Vine City spoke of a time when a sense of value in the concept of community prevailed, and the "focus" of the people

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[4]Bolton interview

was healthy and positive.[5] Likewise, the executive director for the Vine City Housing Ministry offered further support for the conceptualization of Vine City as a community with a rich tradition of community solidarity and historic importance:

> Well, Vine City is a very historic community. You have within it the Clark-Atlanta University Complex, Morris Brown, Morehouse and Spelman Colleges. You have Sunset Street, which has been very prominent in the past, and continues to be very prominent today. It was the one time home of many past leaders in the city. Martin Luther King, Jr., Julian Bond, Maynard Jackson, the present mayor. At one time it was considered the retirement area for the prestigious faculty from the AU Center. It was considered a starting ground for future leaders. So it has its place.[6]

An Atlanta Housing Authority apartment manager for the Vine City's Egan Homes housing project and former nonviolent civil rights activist has similar memories of Vine City, and offered this comparison and contrast with how things are today:

> Things are much worse today. Over the last twenty years especially things have gotten much worse. There used to be a time when you could walk through the Vine City area, by yourself, day or night, and you thought nothing of it. You saw a lot of people standing around, but they didn't bother anybody. And they wouldn't let anybody bother you. But now, if you have a pocket book or you have a billfold, if they <u>think</u> you might have anything, you know, you're dead or you're hurt, or you're whatever.[7]

The responses which project the image of Vine City past as an organic Black community, with ample services and living

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[5]Everett Isaac interview, Atlanta, Ga., January 1990

[6]Paul Brown interview, Atlanta Ga., July 1990

[7]Madelyn Jones interview, Atlanta, Ga., March, 1990

resources were not provided solely by its institutional and political leaders. Charles, an unemployed "brother from the block", who lived in Vine City in the sixties remembers:

> Things was plentiful in the sixties. I could get a job, a good job, around here if I wanted to. And I ate better then, too. Nowadays its more "can I survive until the next day?" Everybody reaching and grabbing for something, but you got to have the knowledge, the experience.[8]

The western edge of Vine City is the site of Atlanta's oldest housing project, Egan Homes. A resident there for 26 years, and current tenant president recalls:

> The yard was clean. The manager would come by and inspect your apartment every so often. The apartment was for me and my kids. If a man moved in, I would be evicted, you know. They kept the grass cut, and they'd inspect the furniture, anything to make the apartment look good. You had building captains to watch the kids, you know like if you worked. You knew that the children were in school, unlike now. If you go to work, the other mothers, they'd let you know how your kid was doing. It was just a great relationship.[9]

Perhaps the most appropriate interpretation of the discrepancy in the descriptions of Vine City thirty years ago and before can be made when it is based on the following assumptions:

1. Vine City, like any other African American community prior to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements was constrained by the forces of racial segregation. As such, it was an area maintained and controlled by the white racist power structure

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[8]Charles interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1990

[9]Melissa Green interview, Atlanta, Ga., March 1990

for its own social and economic purposes. This is to say that Vine City was subjected to economic exploitation, and despite its community solidarity, it was never a prosperous area. The SRC description of Vine City is correct insofar as it revealed the extent to which conditions were poor for a great many people because of their oppression.

2. Because of the second class citizenship ascribed to African Americans, particularly in the South, the Black community was not afforded such services as standard housing, efficient garbage clean up, parks and other recreational facilities. Hence, the problems described in the SRC account of Vine City persisted even though there were a number of stable working class and professional people in the area.

3. Vine City was a stratified community. The poor, destitute people functioned within the same environment as the working class, the teachers, the business professionals, and even one very wealthy family.[10] This internal class structure further confounds attempts to generalize about life in Vine City prior to and during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.

According to the various accounts of Vine City's physical and social make-up during and prior to the sixties, the following may be concluded:

1. There was a high incidence of poverty in Vine City, but

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[10]I am referring here to the Herndon's, whose insurance company is reputed to be one of the most successful Black businesses in the country. The Herndon mansion still exists as a tourist attraction in Vine City

there was also a social and economic base from which many of its residents enjoyed stable employment, adequate services, and cultural expression.

2. There was a sense of community pride which pervaded the neighborhood. Because of this, the residents of Vine City cooperated with and looked out for one another. The possibility of being victimized by violent criminals was remote, though one of the respondents indicated that things did "get a little out of hand" from time to time at and around the Magnolia Ballroom, in terms of intoxicated patrons fighting.[11]

3. Other social problems such as drug abuse and teen pregnancy were not nearly as prevalent. One woman talked about "moonshine and ace-high"[12], but illicit drug use was not prominent, according to the respondents. Other respondents, for example, a social worker at the John F. Kennedy School in Vine City discussed how teen pregnancies have exponentially increased since the sixties, but were not salient before then:

> Well, I worked in this area as a case worker 20 years ago. The biggest differences I see are the number of children, and the ages of the parents. Now you have young unwed mothers with one or two kids, whereas before parents were in their late twenties and thirties, and many were married, their husbands had jobs, you know.[13]

4. The problem of violence in Vine City was primarily the

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[11]Bolton interview

[12]Bolton interview

[13]Donna Smithson interview, Atlanta, Ga., March, 1990

result of police brutality, and other racist tactics to reinforce Jim Crow laws and racial segregation. Other problems were also rooted in undisguised, overt racial oppression. The SRC report included lengthy conversations with the residents of Vine City, and many discussed how the police would viciously beat even the most compliant and non resisting "suspect" (SRC Report, 1966, p5)

On the surface it may appear that responses to my request that the interviewees reflect upon what their community was like in the past provides some support for Wilson's "declining significance of race" thesis. Prior to the gains made by Civil Rights Legislation, racism was unquestionably the most dominant factor in the problems faced by Vine Citians. The respondents, as a whole, seemed to be implying that, today, things are different in this regard. But is it that racial oppression is less prominent today, or is it more accurate to conclude that today's incidence of racial inequality is attributable to a more insidious type of racism?

Further insight into this, and other important questions can be provided if a comparison is made between the pre Civil Rights Vine City and the environment of today. How did the respondents describe and account for the changes in their community since the sixties, and what can be concluded about the current social, political and economic trends at work today?

C. Social, Political and Economic Decline in Vine City: Exclusion From the Suburban Boom, Similarities With Inner City Rustbelt Neighborhoods and Response Unanimity on the Question of Inner City Deterioration

Responses which address the question of social change in Vine City since the sixties were obtained through three lines of questioning: How does Vine City compare with the other inner city neighborhoods in the Northeast and Midwest? Are things better or worse than they were in the sixties? How would you describe your community today? Additionally, follow up questions addressed specifically the out-migration of upwardly mobile Vine Citians, and the impact the loss of role modeling and leadership has had on the neighborhood.

All of these questions are a direct test of the fundamental premises of the Wilson thesis. I obtained responses to questions of community collapse, structural isolation, the increase in the incidence of social problems, the loss of positive role modeling, the rise in unemployment, and the declining significance of race, through merely requesting that the respondents compare their community, as it stands today, to the one of the sixties.

By far, the most dominant theme in the responses to the question of how things have changed in Vine City since the sixties is the assertion that things are unquestionably and unequivocally worse today. A lifelong community activist

synopsizes the changes in Vine City over the past thirty years, and the various labels people have placed upon it during its deterioration:

> Vine City wasn't a bad place. Like I told you, we had low income peoples, but it wasn't a Black ghetto and it wasn't a slum, it wasn't an anything. People started leaving because of the tag you put on it. A slum- I don't want to live in no slum! The first thing they had was "Black Community". Then it was "ghetto". After that, "slum". That's three things, isn't it? They done run out of names now. I guess they'll just call it a "poor area."[14]

It was clearly painful for this woman to recall the manner in which Vine City has changed:

> When I talk about Vine City it hurts. Because if you stand there on that corner like I did, right there on the corner of Vine and Magnolia- that was the heart of Vine City- I sold papers there for several years, it hurts to see the turnover. The Kennedy School was a beautiful place when they first opened it up-beautiful. But now I tell people I'm ashamed of it because its gotten so run down. Yes, it was a good community, a working community. Today people come there from other communities. They done made it a place to sell drugs. It was a working place. There wasn't no people who didn't work- everybody worked. I mean some good workers-railroad workers, school teachers, doctors, lawyers, we had some engineers that worked there. You just can't find those kinds of peoples now. Professors... no, you won't find them over there today.[15]

The certain, often emphatic assertion that things are worse today in Vine City cut across the three sampling categories. From the pained, disheartening responses of community activists and former militant agitators like the

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[14]Bolton interview

[15]Bolton interview

woman cited above, who had poured their hearts and souls into bringing about positive changes in Vine City, to the serious, pensive responses of the ministers of the local churches, to the angry retorts of the brothers on the block, there was a cohesive agreement that things are worse today in Vine City.

There was but one interviewee, whose response to the question of whether or not things have gotten worse over the last thirty years may be interpreted as a departure from the responses of all of the other interviewees. The city planning representative for the Vine City area, was reluctant to say that the incidence of social problems had worsened since the sixties. He contended that things were bad, then, too, and that the main difference was the reduction in population in the community. He spoke of the abandonment of the living structures and the vacant land, but vehemently denied that there had been an increase in social pathologies.[16]

The following excerpts encapsulate the near unanimity on the question of post Civil Rights change in Vine City:

> Our church was broken into last night. Its gotten to the point where you have to chain everything down. Twenty years ago, we'd leave the church wide open and no one would have even thought of breaking in. Things are worse, especially in terms of consciousness. We have got to find some way to cause people to take pride in themselves. Its a new day altogether than before. I have been here 24 years and I have raised many of these people. I have seen them since they were children. Things are much harder for them today.[17]

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[16]Greg Pearson interview, Atlanta, Ga., March 1990

[17]Ed Hurley interview, Atlanta, Ga., January 1990

Drugs, violent crime, teen pregnancy and unemployment are even more of a problem than anyone is willing to admit. The dope addicts and dope pushers, and the others are taking over like cockroaches and rats. They kind of remind me of my son's doberman pincer. He stakes out his claim to a territory because no one else has established it. Vine City used to be a nice neighborhood. Only in the last twenty years or so has it become a "ghetto".[18]

There has been a change of focus among the people in this community. At one time the focus was on Black pride and consciousness. A sense of community prevailed. Today, the focus is on survival. ...People do not leave their places of residence. Many elderly fear for their lives when they venture out. They are afraid of trust. There has been a destruction of the elderly during the last twenty years.[19]

All of the indicators show that things are getting worse. Income indexes, all of the plethora of problems, crime, infant mortality, income, violence in terms of domestic and other kinds of violence, all of these things indicate a deterioration of the community and its institutional structure. That is, it is a community in chaos. A community in decline. A community that is collapsing.[20]

People now will just walk in your home, and its only because the tenants let them, but in the mean time its really the drugs controlling a person's apartment. I can just walk up to your door, right into your house and go in your refrigerator. Its just like an open house, you know. So things have gotten much worse than they used to be, especially when it comes to crime. We had a man shot here in the Vine City area. They shot that man 15 times so I hear. Somebody was shot last night. Somebody was shot the night before. Somebody got robbed the first thing this morning when we walked in the door. Somebody had just gone right in somebody's

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[18]Marcus Johnson interview, Atlanta, Ga., January 1990

[19]Isaac interview

[20]Ed Brown interview

apartment. So, yes its terrible.[21]

Oh, things are much worse. I just say they're worse now because there's so much dope in here. You ain't safe nowheres. It just makes things so much worse on you now. Its much worse than it was back there in 1970. Much worse. The dope and the drugs makes it much worser. A lot of violence, too. It makes it tougher. I don't go out nowhere. Its just so dangerous. I might go across town to see my son sometimes, but I try to be right here when night comes. Right here in my house. Twenty years ago I would have gotten out, but today if you go out, you come back and somebody done broke into your house. So it was much better then.[22]

If you ain't got no paper, how you going to survive? you got to try to beat the system. If I got to hold down two jobs just to survive, something's going to break down in me, I lose out on the survival. The system done changed. Technology is so advanced. Now the power structure is moved out and the ones without is left out. ...People be talkin' about the crime rate is rising fast. If you was hungry, tell me, what would you do? You got to pay or get paid. That's the program. ...I see them red dog mother fuckers beat people in the streets. We done flipped back. We ain't got no leaders, nobody.[23]

A lot of the good tenants are moving. They're moving. And at night when the shooting and things start, that's when everybody rolls right out of bed and hits the floor, because you don't know where the shooting is coming from. Some of them will run out there to see them shooting, so in other words its a show to them, you know- like the OK Coral. ...Twenty years ago people had jobs and they made a certain amount of money. Now they don't care what you make. So a lot of them are just moving.[24]

*Is there more killings, drugs and crime around here over the last twenty years?

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[21]M. Jones interview

[22]Hap interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1990

[23]Tom interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1990

[24]Green interview

> Over the last ten years! It ain't got to be the last twenty. Over the last ten years we got this thing called crack cocaine. This here used to be a rich neighborhood.[25]

Some respondents discussed economic decline, i.e., the disinvestment in the community, the loss of jobs, etc. Others described the community decline, i.e., the loss of leadership and the lack of participation in civic activities. Many cited the problems of proliferating social pathologies, such as drugs, violence and teen pregnancies. But there was only one dissenting response to the question of whether or not living conditions are worse today in Vine City than they were in the sixties. Respondents in all three sampling categories agreed that the quality of life in Vine City is worse today than it was prior to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.

This supports my initial hypothesis that African Americans in the urban South are often excluded from the wealth and prosperity even in a booming post industrial metropolitan area. Although there were some unique differences cited between Vine City and the various inner city neighborhoods of the Northeast and Midwest, the overriding social, political and economic variables were described as similar. The most salient similarity was the assertion that Vine City, like its Northern counterparts is a community afflicted by the current trends in racial and class polarity.

In other words, the structural dynamics of urban poverty

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[25]Bobby interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1990

are roughly the same, although being in the South, according to some of the respondents, rendered the area different in certain interpersonal and cultural respects. Southerners, whatever their class or racial affiliation, are said to be more friendly and hospitable, or "folksy". Although I have no concrete comparative data to substantiate this generalization, I suspect that it is true. The people in Vine City seemed to enjoy "visiting" with me and each other. As one man, "Yogi" the "proprietor" of the store on the corner of Walnut and Magnolia told me when I asked him if anyone out on the block would be willing to talk with me, "Oh yeah. Everybody around here loves to talk."[26]

The responses to the question of social change in Vine City also seem to support certain elements of the Wilson thesis, though as it will be revealed in the ensuing sections, this study also seriously challenges Wilson, and many of the other proponents of the "underclass debate" in many important ways. Whatever disagreements may abound in urban poverty literature over the causes and consequences of the existing phenomenon, virtually all scholars of the topic agree with Wilson that things are worse for inner city minorities today than they were in the pre civil rights era. The residents, activists and community leaders of Vine City likewise do not refute Wilson on this variable.

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[26]Yogi interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1990

D. Attribution and Social, Political and Economic Decline in Vine City: Conflicting Interpretations and Explanations

If Vine Citians, and those actively associated with Vine City, agree that living conditions are worse today than they were thirty years ago, the agreements cease when responding to the question of why. The social, political and economic decline of Vine City was attributed to a number of variables.

Sometimes, but not always, the response discrepancies were manifest in the sampling categories. For example, the community leaders were more inclined to blame the social and psychological attributes of the impoverished residents for the current state of affairs, thus implicitly supporting a conservative, culture of poverty argument. The former activists blamed structural dynamics such as the political leadership and its interest in the corporate power structure. A common response of the residents themselves was that Vine City's problems were caused by outsiders.

Unlike the response unanimity on the question of social change during the last twenty to thirty years, the problem of attributing the community decline set the stage for debate. Is substance abuse and teen pregnancy the cause or the consequence of community decline? Has the out-migration of upwardly mobile African Americans, the beneficiaries of civil rights legislation, resulted in the isolation of the disadvantaged, or is the societal position of Vine City's

poorest residents the result of a racist society? Have structural changes in the national economy caused the high incidence of unemployment and underemployment in Vine City, or are the out of work and marginally employed content to depend on welfare and anti-systemic means to survive? All of these questions were addressed by the respondents, often with a high degree of certainty, but with very little unanimity among them.

Three main themes dominated the responses to the question of attribution. When asked to account for the deterioration of Vine City during the past thirty years, the residents, activists and community leaders all tended to cite the following:

1. Drug trafficking and drug dependency. During the past twenty to thirty years a "drug culture" has developed in Vine City. This "culture", according to some, is the root cause of the broader, more structural problems like unemployment. For others the opposite is the case. Unemployment causes a sense of hopelessness, and allows for a lot of idle time, thus making people ripe for the victimization of drug traffickers.
2. The absence of social, political and economic leadership. Some cited the absence of role models to uphold certain life-affirming moral standards. Others discussed the lack of political guidance to articulate the needs of the people. Still others identified the absence of financial planners to manage the fiscal needs of the community, and establish an

economic base from which to solicit the interest of potential investors. But in general, the respondents viewed deficient role modeling as a salient barrier to community rejuvenation.

3. The conservative leadership in the federal government. Many of the respondents spoke of the hardship imposed on the people of Vine City during the eighties when the Reagan Administration transformed the war on poverty into a war on the poor. The elimination of the social programs upon which many Vine Citians depended for child care, recreational facilities and employment training disappeared during the eighties, thus wreaking havoc among the poor. Racial implications were also cited in conservative strategies to reduce poverty by some respondents. An ideology was developed by conservative policy makers which implied that deficiencies in the moral character of impoverished inner city African Americans was the cause of their poverty. Hence, a rejuvenation of white supremacy emerged in the eighties to complement the political decision making by the federal government.

Without question, drug trafficking and drug dependency were the most frequently cited problems afflicting Vine City. Substance abuse was cited by virtually all of the respondents as a salient contributor to the deterioration of their community. However, there was much disagreement in the sampling categories in terms of directionality. Is the "drug culture" in Vine City a cause or a consequence of current

conditions?

One former militant activist from Atlanta not only treated the increase in substance abuse as a consequence of structural constraints, but also made an association between the drug infested African American communities and racism:

> Look who is bringing the drugs over here. To say that it is Black people who are the root cause of the drug problem not only provides a justification for racism, but it also ignores the fact that Black people are not the ones with the speed boats. They are not the ones accumulating money in bank accounts. Whites have an interest in the drug problem among Blacks.[27]

Another former activist and current community developer attributes the problem to structural dynamics, citing the competition between drug traffickers and community developers who struggle against one another to stake their territorial claim to the area:

> As I mentioned, Vine City has suffered tremendously over the last thirty years. We didn't act as uniformly as was necessary to attract investors to the community. There were no spokespersons, if you will, to speak for the approvement of loans. Consequently the money did not come in. By virtue of this, the drug market shifted to Vine City.[28]

To attribute the so-called drug culture which is said to be thriving in Vine City to the structural changes during the past thirty years, necessarily implies an interplay between the drug culture and the rise in unemployment. Many of the respondents cited this relationship:

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[27]David Stevenson interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1989

[28]P. Brown interview

> When you don't have a job, and you can't find a job, you have a lot of idle time. You start doing things which have no significant value to yourself or to your peers. Stuff like that leads to drugs. Many of the people here in Vine City are saying "hey- if I can make a couple hundred dollars selling crack, then I am not going to mop your floors".[29]

> When you have been out of work for a long time, that is when you stop questioning the direction your life has taken. It becomes a matter of pride. Pride in yourself, pride in your community. And respect, too. You lose all of that because you don't value yourself. After going from one degrading job to the next, it becomes a matter of viewing yourself in a certain way. Its a hard thing to change.[30]

> Drug dealers do not see the harm they are doing. To them its simply a matter of business. People not only need jobs, they need decent jobs. Jobs that will be better than selling dope. Until that happens, you will never change the drug problem in our community.[31]

One man cited the persisting barriers to advancement still afflicting the inhabitants of Vine City. In his view, Vine City is afflicted by a racist power structure, and this has resulted in the drug problem:

> Racism is very prominent, and is becoming more socially acceptable, especially in the institutions of higher learning. I know for a fact that Ohio State University is one of the most racist in the country. You have students coming out of these places with the knowledge of how to go about keeping racism alive while calling it something else. Redlining is an example. If you are Black, no matter what your background is, you have to go through hell to get a car or a home loan. Many of us do not want to go through the trouble, so we

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[29]P. Brown interview

[30]Ellen Johanson interview

[31]Hurley interview

turn to other means.[32]

One man, from the corner of Walnut and Magnolia offered an example of what is meant by "other means":

> *So how do you survive? Isn't crack sort of expensive?
> I work for the Atlanta Braves baseball stadium. And I was working with the Varsity downtown.
> *Is it regular work?
> Its regular, yeah, but the pay at the stadium is part time, and I lost the job at the Varsity. So now I'm back with this dude, you might have done talked to him, as much talkin' you been doin round here. I grew up with this dude on these streets here. I know ways and means of gettin' money, you understand? Because I take white people, most white people ain't like you, theys scared to come around here, so I take them to get drugs and they pay me. That's everyday. They give me the money, and I come back and give them their drugs.[33]

The responses above to the question of to what to attribute the prevalence of drug trafficking and dependency in Vine City were asserted by individuals who have witnessed its transformation from a stable, working community to one of unemployment and underemployment. These respondents had actively engaged in the struggle to eliminate the constraints imposed on the community by the white racist power structure during the past thirty years only to witness racism in its newer, more insidious form. If these respondents did not speak explicitly of racism, they did allude to "the corporate realm", as one man put it, as a fundamental factor in the

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[32]Greg Pearson interview, Atlanta, Ga., March 1990

[33]Jerome interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1990

maintenance of poverty, and hence substance abuse problems.[34]

But what of the people who are forced to contend with the here and now, people who do not think in sociohistorical terms? The respondents from the grass roots sample tended to either complement the responses of the militant activists in attributing the drug problem to the social structure, or were very careful to contend that outsiders were responsible, that Vine City was and is a "nice place" with nice people. One man held himself accountable for his own drug problem, but viewed the emergence of drug trafficking in Vine City as something which had infiltrated the community from the outside:

> Due to myself, don't get me wrong. I'm not homeless because I'm hungry. I'm homeless because I do drugs, and spends all my money. OK. I tell ya, its like this right here- it ain't only the President's fault. It due to the fault cause of crack cocaine, cocaine, drugs. Don't nobody care about nothin' round here no more since crack cocaine come in here.[35]

Other grass roots respondents attributed the problem similarly:

> *How would you describe Vine City?
> Oh, its a nice place. There's nice folks around here. ninety-nine percent of the problems you here about- the drugs, the killings, the rapes, they was caused by people coming in here from outside. The peoples here is, what you call, lower income, but that don't matter. You can still be good folks even if you don't have money.[36]

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[34]References to the "corporate realm or the "corporate power structure" were made not only by the former activists, but also by the Reverend Everett Isaac.

[35]Bobby interview

[36]Yogi interview

> The dudes out here, we ain't trouble makers. We just out cattin'. The problems you been hearin' about is from outsiders. Vine City is a nice neighborhood.[37]

Many institutional leaders agreed that outsiders play a big role in social problems afflicting Vine City:

> With all these outside people in here, it causes the inside people to get involved in something they would not ordinarily do, if they weren't around. I have tenants here who have gotten involved with drugs and stuff, and sometimes I just want to cry. Because they've been here their whole life. 14, 15 years old, even before I got here, you know, then all of a sudden they decide they want to get involved in drugs.[38]

> Nine times out of ten, what's going on is not caused by the people who live here. Its the outsiders. I came here Tuesday night, and it looked like they were having a dance in the streets. It was wall to wall people! And I'm looking at these people, and of all of these people, only one or two live here.[39]

Frustrated by the disturbing developments in their community, and the lack of enthusiasm among the impoverished to take an active role in the alleviation of poverty and its side effects, some institutional leaders in Vine City attributed social problems to those receiving public assistance. One woman, a tenant, who holds a position with the housing authority, blamed governmental programs for encouraging welfare dependency:

> A lot of people don't work and don't want to work. I feel that the state, the federal government,

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[37]Michael interview, Atlanta, Ga., July 1990

[38]M. Jones interview

[39]M. Jones interview

> whoever, is at fault there. Because if we continue to give people welfare and they sit down and know that if they have a baby, they can go get a welfare check. Personally, if it was me to sign the welfare check, they wouldn't get one. I will not continue to pay, to subsidize women to keep having children. That's my feeling. They come around at the first of the month saying, where's my check? My Check?! What have they done to earn that check.?[40]

Another woman, while more sensitive to the struggles of Vine City's poor still maintained that people have a choice as to whether or not they are to be victimized by the barriers to mobility:

> Well, me personally, I think its the young mothers, the new generation. They're really not concerned, they just want somewhere to stay. They don't worry about anything else. And they want things they can't afford, so they go to the dealer, and once they go to those people, once they get inside the door, you can't put them out. ...the dealers. They're here to stay, until they get evicted. Then they move to another part of Atlanta, and I really just think its their own fault.[41]

Others, while agreeing that there were certain things that the poor could be doing to change their economic position, probed deeper into the problem. Several noted that the real escalation of social problems in Vine City occurred simultaneously with the demolition of social programs in the Eighties.

> Its built into the system. Its going to take a lot of things to break out of it. You blame various levels. For instance, the Reagan Administration. I bet you a lot of white people will never know the harm and the devastation that Reagan left for poor

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[40]Ms. Devon interview, Atlanta, Ga., March, 1990

[41]Green interview

> folks. He cut out social programs. Damn it! some of those programs worked. One is Head Start. People be saying why the heck are we spending our money for Head Start? Well, hell, somebody's got to come along and wake up and say hey, it is cheaper to educate that child than to have him over there in jail somewhere.[42]

In support of a Wilsonian, "declining significance of race" hypothesis, some respondents specifically cited the out-migration of indigenous leadership, be it social, political or economic. Some interviewees bristled when presented with the idea that urban poverty in the post industrial era is attributable to programs like affirmative action. Others offered this as a primary attribution. According to Wilson, a fundamental variable in exploring questions of unemployment, underemployment, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and other "pathologies" is the out migration of Black leadership in inner city communities.

In Vine City, there was some backing for the controversial hypothesis that, since the solidification of civil rights legislation, many successful minorities have abandoned their community. This, according to some respondents is a primary attribution:

> One of the reasons is that we don't have knowledgeable people in the area, helping access whatever is available by way of funds, what not. This is one of the gaps. You talk about minorities receiving less. If you pay close attention to a lot of things, a lot of stories that you hear now, you will find that in some areas there are a lot of gangs and in other areas there are not. You will find that discrimination is still rampant in

[42]T. Jones interview

certain areas and that it is hard to break the barriers. You find a few people breaking out of the barriers and they can climb to a certain level. But in Vine City over the years money has been made available, but the people here didn't really know anything about it. They didn't have any way to access the money. You have people who consider themselves leaders, who really knew nothing.[43]

*So what you are saying, then, is that the sixties was a better time for Vine City?
Sure. You know why? We moved out. You know where I lived when I first came here? Right down this street here. We moved out of Vine City. Our churches are still here. Some of us still come back here to go to church. I'd say twenty five percent or less of the members of this church actually live in Vine City.[44]

Yes, role models have left Vine City. Maynard Jackson, who lived right over here is an example. ...and Vine City is all the poorer for it. With the more successful people moving out, there has been a change in focus of the people. At one time everyone talked about the pride in their heritage, and the history of their community. Today people feel isolated and forgotten. In order for their voices to be heard, a tragedy has to occur, like this string of killings of elderly. You can see this stuff in the six o'clock news.[45]

All the people that had money is dead and gone. We don't have those peoples now. It was fixed up when they were here. But see we have this turnover. ...Died out. Many of them have just died out, honey. Doctors, nurses, lawyers- we had them all living in here. And they owned homes, property. Some of them owned two or three homes, like Mr. Herndon. He owned the whole street.[46]

Explaining the conflicting, and often contradictory attributions provided by the respondents is a task confounded

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[43]T. Jones interview

[44]T. Jones interview

[45]Isaac interview

[46]Bolton interview

by the same problems which perplex the contributors to the underclass debate. The difficulties in drawing coherent and consistent conclusions about the debilitating dynamics of urban poverty were first brought to the fore by Wilson (Wilson, 1978). There is virtual unanimity on the idea that the oppressive apparatus of the industrial, pre civil rights era has become more diffuse, abstract and intangible, thus complicating matters. No longer can a racist power structure enforce the overt exploitation and impoverishment of urban minorities through direct mechanisms of control and coercion. A dominant theme in the process of comprehending post civil rights urban poverty is the absence of objectivity, and this problem surfaced in this study.

Objectivity, it seems, has become a casualty of post industrial transformation. What was once the obvious and only etiology of urban poverty among minorities has now become elusive and complex. The seasoned militant activists from the civil rights period addressed this problem:

> The nature of the injustices are quite different. In the past you had all of these forms of racial humiliation. segregation, all of this other kind of stuff which helped crystalize what the issues were. Today the issues are much more murky in terms of a clear definition. The issues are not as clear to form a basis to organize around. Before the opposition was clear. There were those white racists who fought to maintain the system, now you have a group of Black politicians who are making decisions which ultimately serve the same end.
> *And what end is that?
> To maintain the system. Why is it that Atlanta, with all of its growth, which has been by anybody's stretch of the imagination, been phenomenal, not been able to do anything about inner city

> neighborhoods like Vine City, where you have critical shortages in terms of housing, in terms of services for this, that and the other? These are supposed to be progressive politicians. These are not reactionary racists.[47]
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> But your original question to me was whether or not the type of activism in the sixties would be workable today. And I guess the answer is that some of the things that were done then are certainly applicable today. Other things would have to be changed. We were in a posture then of desegregating facilities, registering people to vote, and attempting to crack and knock at the most blatant forms of injustice. A person who has the resources to move out of Vine City today, may do so. You can go to lunch counters, and you can pretty much shop wherever you want to. You can register to vote. In fact, in Vine City I think you can do it right on the street. They have these mobile registrars that come around. So those were the major issues that moved us then that we were attempting to deal with. I am saying that those kinds of things are not transferable anymore.[48]

Perhaps the most appropriate way to comprehend the attribution discrepancies among the respondents is to gain further insight into individual perspectives. Every individual who is affected by the social problems afflicting Vine City understands his or her relationship to the social world in a subjective way. If the systems of control, containment or domination are not tangible, one tends to identify certain aspects of the oppressive apparatus, but will not be able to comprehend holistically the object of injustice. If one disadvantaged individual is having a particularly difficult time obtaining public assistance, he or

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[47]E. Brown interview

[48]Stanley Wise interview, Atlanta, Ga., July, 1990

she may be inclined to attribute urban problems to federal budget cuts. Another individual may locate the etiology with unemployment because he or she is having difficulty finding a job. Others may have had run-ins with racists, and would be inclined to attribute the problem to racism and prejudice.

The same holds true for the institutional leaders. The respondents from the housing authority, who witnessed the day to day behavior patterns of the young, unwed parents, were convinced that the root cause of urban poverty was teen pregnancy and substance abuse. Others, having had the experience of dealing with what one clergyman referred to as the "spiritual bankruptcy" of disadvantaged Vine Citians ask how people can be expected to mobilize when their coping mechanisms are based on survival.

Prior to the economic transformation of the urban environment, attribution would undoubtedly have been more uniform, objective. If, in 1955, for example, a study examining the incidence of poverty in Vine City were to utilize interviews to accumulate data on the etiology of urban problems, respondents would undoubtedly cite the injustices of Jim Crow legislation (provided, of course, that they felt at liberty to express their feelings on such matters). There was an objective, identifiable oppressive apparatus under which every African American individual struggled against. Today, the injustices are elusive, and each individual has a different experience in coping with them.

Let us now explore the political implications of this highly complex system of social, political and economic dynamics which have resulted in the continued proliferation of racial inequality and its consequence, urban poverty.

E. Racial Inequality and its Solutions, The Political Proclivities of Impoverished Vine Citians: The Responses of the Grass Roots and Their Spokespersons

> First you have to understand the poor. They don't talk too much about it. They're watching... always watching. That's when they can kick something off. They'll talk about it amongst themselves, but they wouldn't talk about it with you. Very few would say anything about it. But you come too close, that's when they'll rise. They don't mind dying, now. I ain't seen a Black community yet afraid to die. They'll tear it up before they'll let you mess with it. They feel the pinch of racism. They know what its about. (Dorothy Bolton)

In order to provide support for the idea that impoverished urban minorities in the post Civil Rights South possess a latent capacity for mobilization, it is imperative to reassess the highly quantitative data on urban poverty. It must be demonstrated that there is more to ghetto pathologies than benign self indulgence, or simple survival. Now that it has been well established empirically that in the post industrial urban environment, minorities are worse off than they were prior to and during the Civil Rights struggle, it is

time to add an interpretive dimension to the findings. What inferences can be made about the current trends in racial inequality and urban poverty?

In Vine City, respondents addressed questions about the political implications of its poorest residents in ways which suggest that the disadvantaged have an understanding of their relative position to the dominant society. Furthermore, it can be demonstrated that they construct strategies to cope with the systemic forces which constrain them. Do the urban poor identify a common adversary? Are they angry about the prevalence of the various forms of inequality? Would they support movements of radical social and economic transformation? What can be made of their seemingly self destructive lifestyles? Answers to these questions are complex, to be sure, but a case can certainly be made for the idea that Vine City's "truly disadvantaged" possess a capacity for revolt, and that they are, in a sense, expressing their discontent today in forms which are rejected as "pathological" or "illegal" by the mainstream.

History is another important consideration in the question of latent mobilization potential among the disadvantaged. Have the urban poor revolted in the past? In the 1960's, urban Blacks all across the United States attacked the assets of white capitalists, and for a time fought nothing less than a sustained, broad based revolutionary challenge to the ruling classes of a world hegemonic power. The urban

rioting of the sixties embodied perhaps the most visible expression of outrage at the pervasiveness of racial inequality in the United States by its most disadvantaged segments. That it occurred simultaneously with the decolonialization of many African nation-states gives its significance a global dimension.

Of course, the qualitative data accumulated on Vine City in this study does not adequately support the idea that the post industrial inner cities of the United States will soon rise up against the institutional forces which constrict them. In fact, a re-emergence of rioting in the same spirit of the sixties seems highly unlikely at the present time. But this should not obscure the argument that in this particular inner city community, poor people have an understanding of their societal position. This may seem like a marginal assertion, but it is important if one is to obtain a complete understanding of the political proclivities of the urban poor.

An implicit assumption of contemporary urban poverty research suggests that impoverished urbanites of African descent in the late 1980's are unconcerned or unaware of their relationship to dominant society, its culture, its economic position and its ideology. The respondents in this study provided counterfactual evidence. In Vine City, Wilson's "truly disadvantaged" often identified themselves as oppressed, victimized by racism, and angry about the widening polarity between wealth and poverty. The cadre of unemployed

"brothers from the block" spoke at length about their relationship to the privileged segments of society, as they see it. Many spoke of "the system", and viewed the process of coping with its constraints as a "game".

One respondent, who was clearly agitated, affirmed the ideas of anti systemic leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, but would have to be convinced of the legitimacy of their "game". It is important to note, however, that his definition of the word "game" is quite different from the definition a more privileged individual might offer:

> ...This right here is a historical site and it is still controlled by the system and the system profiting by it. I never work within the system and I ain't never gonna work with the system.
> *You sound as though you know a lot about the system. Have you heard of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, those guys?
> Straight up, man, You down with those cats?
> *Yes, I'm down. Do you think the guys standing out here on this block would go along with what Malcolm X was saying?
> You've got to have a solid foundation. You got to show people you for real. Like you- I'm not sure you're for real. I'll talk to you to a point, but anything more than talk and I'll be walking the other way. If somebody like Stokely took me and showed me the game... Shit! you got to show people the game. And I don't know what your game is.[49]

Others referred to the political process as a "game":

> If you ain't got it you only this side. All them that got it on that side. And the ones on this side don't give a damn about the ones on that side. Damn it, you got the rich and you got the poor. Thats all it is. Dog eat dog. Just a motherfucking game to see who can get what out of

[49]Charles interview

who.[50]

Anger and frustration are two other variables which can be utilized to gain insight into the societal comprehension of the grass roots. Many of the men from the corner of Walnut and Magnolia used interview time to vent. This further challenges inferences based on quantitative data:

> Don't make no difference how much you got. You got rich people who don't give a damn about nobody, what color they is. All they is is fat on the hog. Shit! Fat on the motherfucking hog. You got dirty people rich, poor, white or Black.[51]

> Preacher man be talkin' a lot of shit about us, sayin' we this way or we that way. Check this out, he can say that because he already set up right. Preacher man ain't got to worry bout gettin something to eat.[52]

> You got a lot of people walking the streets is hungry and they ain't gettin the assistance the way they should. You put the people in place, in the position where they supposed to get at, get the system out to 'em. They think its stealin' and they won't help the people. They maybe help I get I say in "the crowd" like maybe they help the family plan. It go on down like this here: I put you in the job, you might know this person or this person. This person know this person and this person know that person and that person know you. Well, then we help get it out to ya. But we ain't gonna help the ones who really need the damn help.[53]

Conversely, qualitative inquiries can provide support for

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[50]Bobby interview

[51]Bobby interview

[52]Charles interview

[53]Bobby interview

traditional, mainstream conclusions about the political proclivities of urban poverty. Respondents from the community leader category described the poorest members of their community as a-political. Either through citing the fear, the hopelessness and despair, the lack of resources or even the moral character of the disadvantaged, community leaders did not see the most impoverished as having any proclivity whatsoever to alter the existing order in any way, latent or otherwise. One man admitted that while the men on the corner of Walnut and Magnolia might have some understanding of their relative position in society, their hostility toward the system is of no substantive worth:

> Oh sure, you can always find some rabble rouser who couldn't spell "cat" if he had to, but he knows how to stir up folks. We could maybe do some things in Vine City that have never been done before, but this type of negativism doesn't help anybody.[54]

Some asserted that the poorest residents of Vine City do not constitute an appropriate or practical starting point for mobilization:

> I don't think they really know their position. I think it is the role of the churches in the community to help them find their place. If we can use money to help people see that they can make a difference in the plight of their lives, I think that would help everybody concerned in the community.[55]

> It will take more than an idea to change what is going on in our community today. Residents need jobs, they need the support of religious and

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[54]T. Jones interview

[55]P. Brown interview

> educational institutions. A change in consciousness needs to occur. The church is needed as the stabilizing force to help change the death syndrome in Vine City.[56]

Others refused to give the urban poor even that much credit, and targeted them as the problem, not the solution:

> There is a history of protest in Vine City, that is true, but attempts to upscale the living conditions today is difficult because much of it is a crime infested jungle, and people will not want to come here to live until we change this image.[57]

> *How do you think the average tenant of Egan Homes would respond to leaders who want to change the system? Do you think they see the system as the problem? Do they talk about racism?
> The only thing I can do is quote what they said about Reagan. Reagan ain't no good, he gonna cut our checks off, something like that. They are concerned more about those checks. And they say I ain't gonna get no job, I'm gonna get me another baby. ...So they wouldn't hardly say it'd be racism. Very few would say it'd be racism.[58]

> *Would the poorest people in Vine City take part in any kind of social change?
> Some would say they would, but when the deal comes down, they don't participate.
> *Since you have been living here have the people ever taken part in neighborhood improvement programs, stuff like that?
> Oh yes, we used to have a softball team, a basketball team. There was playground equipment for the children to play on, you know. But now, since 20 years ago, they just tear it down. It was a likeable community, and it would be again with the right leadership. You need somebody to come in here and be firm with these people.[59]

To the question of political mobilization among the poor in

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[56]Isaac interview

[57]Julius Carpenter interview, Atlanta, Ga., March 1990

[58]Green interview

[59]Green interview

Vine City today, many activists and former activists responded with pessimism, but agreed that the implications of a widening racial polarity in the Atlanta metropolitan area are serious.

> *What will happen if the current trends continue, in your view? What is your prediction?
> It'll explode. Only until it explodes, until people get to the point where they absolutely give way to uncontrolled rage, will Atlanta begin to give some attention to its inner cities. But just because you get rage, it doesn't mean that it will alter the structure in any way. That is simply a boiling over of frustration at people's inability to find any rational way to deal with their situation.[60]

> *Do the poorest residents of Vine City present any sort of force to alter the existing structure in any way? Are they angry?
> Well, either angry or inebriated. Being homeless in this country today is really a pretty hopeless situation. People who are homeless are absolutely at the bottom rung of society. They are subjected to the various forms of victimization. And so their life is pretty transient, pretty indeterminant. So they would not be a force that you would want to work with immediately. ...I mean when we came originally over there, we just rented a place, showed up and began with some of our substance from work we had done in other places. I don't think it would be that easy now.[61]

> Let me ask <u>you</u> a question. Do you think we could have a nonviolent movement anymore? We could maybe have a Stokely Carmichael movement, but I don't think that would serve the purposes of providing jobs, for example. Would I hire you for anything if I knew you were a militant? I used to march. I was spit on, and I was beat in the face and all that. But do you think the generation now would accept somebody beating their face? They would be more violent than they ever have been. Africa would be nothing like what would happen here. And I am being very serious. But you see, you get these people involved in it you see what would

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[60]E. Brown interview

[61]Wise interview

> happen. You would have the smoke bombs, the fire bombs, the uzi's, the sweeper, have you heard of that one? They would just come in and sweep everybody down and it wouldn't work at all.[62]

There was some response unanimity across the sampling categories when prognoses were asserted. Though some insisted that there is some grounds for hope that things will or can change for the better, the overriding images projected for the future of Vine City were pessimistic. One man succinctly stated his misgivings about what will happen if the current trends are not reversed:

> If we do not act uniformly and take advantage of the redevelopment opportunity we have right now, Vine City is doomed. In the future it may become a matter of whether we have a community here or not. It is imperative that we act, and act quickly or Vine City is a doomed neighborhood.[63]

And while the "brothers from the block" of Walnut and Magnolia may express their hostility towards elitism, while their street survival tactics may be construed as anti-systemic, there was an element of fatalism in their responses. One man was convinced that the world was coming to an abrupt and tragic end, and pointed out that the incidence of social problems was a sort of divine intervention which no mortal could subvert:

> No man can correct what is already happening. If you ain't saved, you know, it ain't- the Bible is just fulfillin' itself. The world is coming to an end, and ain't nothin can change it no how. No man-you can bring Martin Luther King back today, or

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[62]M. Jones interview

[63]P. Brown interview

> any other great leader- Abraham Lincoln- you can bring them all back and ain't nothin gonna change the world never cause crack cocaine got the whole world. ...We in the last days and people don't understand.[64]

Several others with whom I spoke in Vine City under less formal interviewing conditions spoke of the importance of God Almighty in their lives. One woman commented, "Thats all we got now."[65]

It seems that one prominent survival of African American culture in Vine City is the church. Societal transformation, which has resulted in the community decline of Vine City, has not, as of yet, erased its spirituality. Many grass roots respondents reacted to questions about their political proclivities by citing the importance of God:

> I would go along with the movement of The Bible. I wouldn't go along with the movement of no man. What man alive can stop what God sayin'? The Lord spoke these words B.C., before Christ. Before this world came to be, it gonna be kicked. Mama killin' daughter, daughter killin' mama, daddy killin' son. Has that happened today?[66]

> The Lord God Almighty is my leader. Stokely has his views and I have mine. I ain't sayin' nothin bad 'bout Stokely, but he just one man.[67]

The church in African American culture has been an important coping mechanism for the centuries of oppression people of African descent have struggled against in this

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[64]Bobby interview

[65]Carol interview, Atlanta, Ga., March 1990

[66]Bobby interview

[67]Carol interview

country. Social and political scientists, however, have asserted a more pejorative assessment of the Black Church. Marxian class analyses, for example, have argued that religion is simply a tool of the bourgeoisie to maintain its hegemony over the masses. It is an "opiate" which subverts the "rational" political struggles of the oppressed. The Culture of Poverty school of thought likewise sees religion among poor people as an element of the culture of poverty, which enables the reproduction of impoverishment (Rainwater, 1970).

Such views may have some empirical validity (although the culture of poverty model fails to incorporate the structural relationship of the poor to the elite), but they cannot fully comprehend the symbolic importance of the Black church in African American history. More subjective conceptions of the role of the church in impoverished African American communities are crucial to the comprehension of this key element of Black culture.

Afrocentric perspectives on the church in African American communities provide the subjectivity which balances the analysis of its role. The study of the religion in this view incorporates the aesthetic expression of spirituality, for example. This is important because sociological interpretations do not explore the unique heritage of the African American community. It is important in this study because it enables one to gain insight into the perspective of the grass roots. If one is to construct an understanding of

how to examine the mobilization capacity of the grass roots, it is imperative to develop a strong concept of the cultural identity of the particular group being studied, and how it is manifest. Sociological analysis fails to incorporate such a concept in its study of poverty because it relies upon objective generalizations about poverty. These generalizations are believed to be valid regardless of subjective differences between oppressed cultures.

The role of religion, and how it relates to the political proclivities of impoverished Vine Citians, is a question which needs further consideration. Politically, it may be viewed as a liability, a coping mechanism or an aesthetic expression. To Vine City, the Black church may be a force which can heal or reconcile, or it may simply be an expression of fatalism and powerlessness. It is certainly not direct evidence that Vine City's grass roots will support a movement of revolutionary transformation. But one generalization can be asserted, based on the data accumulated in this study: It is a component of consciousness. On the grass roots level in Vine City, there is some spiritual unanimity.

Certainly one may get the impression that a re-emergence of militant activity in the inner cities of post industrial society is very unlikely. It may be concluded that the disadvantaged would be a tactical liability if targeted for broad based, revolutionary change. Further, the responses to questions about political mobility on the part of the

interviewees in Vine City may be construed as evidence that the so-called underclass is no way a unified, monolithic entity out of which a social movement of any kind could be sustained.

These types of issues are important, and warrant further investigation. However, the original question was not whether or not the disadvantaged will or can challenge or alter the current trends in racial and class differentiation. Today, the answer to that question is clearly, no. In this study, I merely set out to find support for the idea that, in Vine City, 1990, the injustices and contradictions of this phase in the economic development of the power structure, discontent has been silenced, but not eliminated; isolated, but not destroyed.

Do the brothers from the corner of Walnut and Magnolia identify a common adversary? Yes, they do. Are they angry when the perceive the prevalence of conspicuous consumption in the "Neon City", and know that the barriers to their participation in its wealth and privilege are insurmountable? Yes, they are. Would some mobilize around a leader like Malcolm X? Some would, but after having been engaged in "the game" for so many years, even Malcolm X himself would have a difficult time convincing them that he was "for real".

Responses to these types of questions do provide support for the concept of latent revolutionary sentiment, if not potential. The disadvantaged may be invisible. The

repressive capacity of the power structure may be so formidable that anything besides the abuse and market of illegal substances would be obliterated immediately, and then rationalized. But social science can reveal that while the dynamics at work in Vine City may be tragic, a voice still exists, though it may not be heard. One man seemed to experience a catharsis after several minutes of venting his frustrations at the current contradictions. He was appreciative for the opportunity to get a chance to express his political views. For this study, that, in and of itself, provides sufficient grounds for further investigation of this kind. I close with his words:

> Man, I can't tell you how good it feels to be talkin' like this. Nobody ever listens to nobody no more. Everybody got to be runnin' they mouth about this or that, but ain't nobody listenin'...[68]

[68]Charles interview

CHAPTER 4

Concluding Remarks, Answers and Questions: New Directions For Urban Poverty Research

As with any exploration of new territory, my inquiry into the dynamics of urban poverty in Vine City left me with more questions than answers. This is a shortcoming only if we choose not to investigate the questions with which we are left. In fact, I view the unanswered questions not so much as a shortcoming, but as an opportunity. If, as Wilson suggests, the "underclass debate" is wrought with shortcomings because of its misplaced priorities (Wilson, 1987), questions, and not answers, are what we need. I left a great deal of unfinished business when I departed Atlanta on July 31, 1990, which is justifiable if new directions are etched out.

But before discussing the questions left behind by this study, let us examine briefly what may qualify as answers to questions I had prior to entering Vine City.

Upon entry to Vine City I was concerned with providing insight into the question of whether or not Atlanta's inner city neighborhoods are afflicted by dynamics similar to those

of deindustrialized rustbelt inner cities. This question was prompted by a sense of bewilderment on my part at the dearth of sociological literature on poverty in boom cities.

Specifically, I was interested in exploring certain Wilsonian assertions about urban poverty in a metropolitan area where information technology has generated enormous economic growth (Jaret, 1987). Is poverty in inner city rustbelt communities solely the result of economic decline? If the answer to this question is "yes", one would expect that a region benefitting from the new phase of capitalist development would be able to eradicate, or at least alleviate, poverty.

However, the answer to this question is "no". Vine City is a case in point for the argument that factors other than regional deindustrialization maintain racial inequality, and its consequence, urban poverty. Second only to Newark, NJ in its incidence of poverty, Atlanta has concentrated its wealth in the hands of suburban and exurban whites. One can identify specific decisions making which has resulted in this development (for example, the refusal of suburban counties to share their tax base with the city proper) (Beers and Hembree, 1987). Atlanta's inner city minorities are thus in a situation similar to their sisters and brothers in Newark.

Responses to questions about social change during the last thirty years crystalize the thesis that Vine City has undergone a process of impoverishment which is similar to that

of its northern counterparts. Structural barriers to advancement in the information-technological transformation changed Vine City from a cohesive (but oppressed) African American community, to one of abandonment, isolation and disinvestment. This has left the remaining people, unskilled and inadequately educated. They are therefore not at liberty to partake in the wealth and prosperity of their region.

Prior to entering Vine City I was perplexed as to why the "underclass debate" failed to inquire about the political significance of the increased polarity of wealth and poverty, white and Black, over the last thirty years. The literature, I asserted, is dominated by "top down" methodological strategies, thus reinforcing an elitist perspective on the problem. Very few scholars have sought to construct a grass roots perspective. I asserted that if one makes the effort to understand urban poverty from the "bottom up", one will arrive at different conclusions and ask different questions about the political proclivities of the disadvantaged.

The question raised here is do the disadvantaged possess a latent capacity for political mobilization. The answer is "yes". In Vine City, people express their discontent in unhealthy ways, but it is still discontent. Because their voices have been repressed and isolated, they are heard by the mainstream only when they result in "pathology". Their self destructive life styles are evidence for this assertion. From a grass roots perspective the opposite is the case. In

listening instead of talking, in asking questions instead of providing answers, I believe that I have supported the idea that the poor of Vine City have a comprehension of their societal position for which they have not been given credit. There are, in other words , alternative ways of interpreting the "pathological" or "illegal" behavior.

Unfortunately, this is where the "answers" end and the "questions" begin. Although I believe I have completed a preliminary step in the process of constructing a grass roots perspective, the process can never be complete until one begins to empathize, not sympathize with the constraints the grass roots struggle against. I left Vine City with a great deal of sympathy, but to say that, as a result of my research, I can now empathize with the people there would be pretentious, and false.

How can scholars go about solidifying a grass roots perspective? I think the place to start would be to look at the ethnographic literature, minimal though it may be, and construct research designs which involve extensive participatory research. Elijah Anderson's work in Chicago has been and continues to be a source of great insight into the perspectives of the urban poor. But Anderson's analyses do not specifically address political implications. I believe that Anderson's methodology, combined with the goal of gaining insight into the political proclivities of the participants would be an appropriate (not to mention fascinating) analysis.

Another question left unanswered in the study of Vine City is what are the specific differences and similarities between a southern "boom" city like Atlanta, and a decaying, deindustrialized inner city neighborhood in the rustbelt. Unfortunately, response unanimity on the question of community decline in Vine City did not result in sufficient comparative insight. People in Vine City can not be expected to compare their neighborhood with neighborhoods in the north. To accomplish this, a comparative dimension to the participatory study described above needs to be added.

Finally, a question which is of primary importance to the participants in the "underclass debate", which is avoided in this study, is the question of how to operationalize a term like "underclass". I must admit, it is time for me to fess up on this point. I made no attempt whatsoever to delineate a concrete definition of "underclass", and in some critics' eyes, I am sure to be found guilty of sloppy operationalization. Were the "brothers on the block" "underclass" or were they marginal working class? According to the Sawhill and Rickets definition, the "underclass" is only a fraction of the impoverished, those individuals who are so far removed from the mainstream that they are barely able to meet the demands of their survival (Sawhill and Rickets, 1988).

I take this to mean the chronically addicted to drugs, or the mentally disturbed. I saw many people like this in Vine

City, but I did not talk to them. There was the man doing a drunken pirouette in the middle of the street, his arms raised to the sky, shouting gibberish which meant something to him, if no one else. There were the "nodders", the individuals who lay motionless against the side of the Vine City Superette. If these are the only members of the "underclass", I must concede that they probably do not possess even a latent capacity for mobilization.

However, I still believe that their condition is the result of an oppressive and unequal society. A colleague in Atlanta suggested that someone ask the angry, pirouetting drunk, "Say, man What are you saying?" Although he may not be knowledgeable concerning revolutionary grass roots politics, he may be able to express his disdain for his societal position. Neither I, nor my colleague was willing to confront this man at this time.

This defining process has its merits, and I think definitions are feasible by utilizing ethnographic research. The crucial question, however, is where to go with the definition. What is implied and how may one interpret its implications? In my defense, I believe that the carefully operationalized studies are guilty of not exploring such questions. Sawhill and Rickets, Hughes, et. al. seem to be more concerned with the appearance of their work than with the human subjects about whom they analyze (Sawhill, 1988 and Hughes 1988). They squabble over certain points in their

literature, but they do not take into consideration what is implied by their findings and their assertions (Hughes, 1988).

In closing, I believe that now is the time for asking questions about urban poverty, and that the questions should be asked not only of "experts" on urban poverty, but of the impoverished themselves. The barrier between social science and the urban poor will never be reconciled, if it is not crossed. A Complete comprehension of the implications of urban poverty will never be constructed unless scholars are willing to enter ghetto communities and treat the poor not as units of analysis, but as real, thinking, feeling individuals who have important insight into their situation for which they have not, up until this point been given credit.

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