



Social Structure and Culture in the  
Study of Race and Urban Poverty  
A Critical Analysis of Issues, Evidence  
and Policy Perspectives in  
Contemporary American Sociology

Niels Planel

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### **Abstract**

This essay proposes a critical analysis of issues, evidence and policy perspectives pertaining to social structure, culture and agency in the study of race and urban poverty in contemporary American sociology.

### **Résumé**

Cet essai propose une analyse critique des enjeux et politiques concernant les structures sociales, la culture et l'autonomie des individus dans l'étude des questions raciales et de la pauvreté urbaine dans la sociologie américaine contemporaine.

**Mots-clés** : Structure sociale, culture, autonomie, race, classe, pauvreté urbaine, sociologie, William Julius Wilson, Sandra Susan Smith, Elizabeth Hinton, Robert Sampson

**Keywords** : Social structure, culture, agency, race, class, urban poverty, sociology, William Julius Wilson, Sandra Susan Smith, Elizabeth Hinton, Robert Sampson

# Social Structure and Culture in the Study of Race and Urban Poverty

Niels Planel

## 1.

As *The New York Times* was reporting that the U.S. unemployment rate had reached a rare low of 3.9% this spring and that the economic prospects for America were brightening by the day,<sup>1</sup> it cautioned that some segments of the population were still facing a dire labor market. “*Lowest ever black jobless rate is still twice that of whites*”<sup>2</sup>, it had warned earlier this year, noting that a similar rate for whites would amount to a “near crisis”. The newspaper was blaming this state of affairs on structural factors : At fault were, *inter alia*, unequal school funding, residential segregation, the important incarceration rate of African-Americans, lack of skills and racial discrimination. And while April’s numbers may have looked good – the rate of unemployed African-Americans stands at 6.6%, the lowest on record since the seventies –, they did not account for the jobless, the significant number of individuals who are no longer looking for a job. Despite the growing appetite of companies for new hires – any hire –, despite President Donald Trump’s claim that “*we’re at full employment*”, 50 years after the passing of Martin Luther King racial inequality still is a somber reality facing the U.S. And absent in this analysis as much as in many other similar ones produced by liberal media, however, were the cultural factors that may have been affecting this set of circumstances for poor inner-city residents – not only by mediating the impact of structural forces such as racial segregation and poverty on them but by

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1. “U.S. Job Growth Picks Up, Unemployment Rate Falls to 3.9 Percent”, *The New York Times*, May 4, 2018.

2. “Lowest Ever Black Jobless Rate Is Still Twice That of Whites”, *The New York Times*, February 23, 2018.

being reflected in policies that directly affect residents' well-being and life chances.

Following the groundbreaking publication in 1987 of *The Truly Disadvantaged*, a study by sociologist William Julius Wilson that not only highlighted the role of structural forces such as the outmigration from the inner city of wealthier African-Americans since the seventies or deindustrialization in the increase of concentrated poverty and the collapse of the family structure, but that also showed how other elements, such as isolation and lack of social capital, contributed to the most vulnerable not being able to reconnect to the labor market even during better times, American sociology reintegrated the study of culture into its analytical framework of urban poverty. This followed two decades of quasi omerta that ensued after the publication of Daniel Moynihan's controversial report, *The Negro Family* (1965), widely criticized for using a cultural explanation that supposedly amounted to "blaming the victim", that is, to holding African-Americans responsible for a situation that was not of their doing in the first place.

In *More than Just Race* (2009), Wilson explored anew some of the themes associated with racial inequality and concentrated poverty, offering his discipline a brief yet deep reflection on social structure, culture and their interactions in the refinement of the analytical framework used to understand racial inequality and urban poverty.

In Wilson's own words (W. J. Wilson 2009, 4), *social structure* refers to the way social positions, social roles, and networks of social relationships are arranged among institutions (such as the economy, the polity, education and organization of the family). Meanwhile, *culture* refers to the sharing of outlooks and modes of behavior among individuals who face similar place-based circumstances or have the same social networks.

Furthermore, two types of structural forces contribute *directly* to racial group outcomes : *Social acts*, which refer to the behavior of individuals within society (stigmatization, discrimination, admission to educational institutions, etc.); and *social processes*, which refer to the "machinery" of society that exists to promote ongoing relations among members of the larger group (laws, policies, and institutional practices that exclude people on the basis of race or ethnicity). *Political or economic forces*, meanwhile, contribute indirectly to racial group outcomes. They are *indirect*, notes Wilson, because they are

mediated by the racial groups' position in the system of social stratification (2009, 5).

But the Harvard sociologist emphasizes other forces that may also contribute to or reinforce racial inequality, i.e. *cultural ones*, such as national views and beliefs on race; and *cultural traits* that emerge from patterns of intragroup interaction and that reflect collective experiences within those settings (W. J. Wilson 2009, 14–15).

These are not to be confused with racism, Wilson cautions, an ideology of racial domination with two key features : beliefs that one race is either biologically or culturally inferior to another ; and the use of such beliefs to rationalize or prescribe the way that the “inferior” race should be treated in the society, as well as to explain its social position as a group and its collective accomplishments (W. J. Wilson 2009, 15).

Wilson's explanation helps better distinguish between culture and racism, in contrast to conservative analysts' dangerous confusion in this regard. Rejecting social structures as a possible cause of disadvantage, some of the most prominent among said analysts have inadequately used genetic explanations and misinterpreted data to analyze and explain the plight of minorities in America as products of their supposed “inferiority”, “low IQ” or “laziness”. In light of this supposed natural state of inequality, conservatives have pushed back against public policy and welfare as a waste of energy and resources to correct what in their view is uncorrectable.

Yet, for fear of being branded as potentially racist, liberal social scientists have long resisted analyzing the cultural components of racial inequality, essentially focusing instead on structure, and leaving conservatives too happy to fill the void with racist explanations that have essentialized minorities and cast them as resistant to any form of change. To sociologist Orlando Patterson, however, holding an individual responsible for their behavior is not to rule out any consideration of the environmental factors that may have evoked the questionable behavior to begin with (W. J. Wilson 2009, 20). Furthermore, Wilson's nuanced view is that, while “*structure trumps culture*” (W. J. Wilson 2009, 21), it would be a mistake to ignore how they interact together.

While not absent from Wilson's work, one concept is not discussed as systematically, though, and that is agency. Should one derive from his work that,

with the right equation, composed of variables pertaining to structure and culture, one could almost predict any single inner-city inhabitant's future? Economists seem to believe that. But social scientists? How would they explain that, in the same housing project, on the same floor, when observing two adults who went to the same school and grew up together, one will get up in the morning and spend his day earning a salary as an Uber driver while the other will prefer devoting his time to the certainly more lucrative (albeit more dangerous) activity of drug trafficking<sup>3</sup>? Should one infer that a social scientist could anticipate both behaviors, were he given the right variables, or that said individuals operate within a set of possibilities and constraints delimited by structure and culture and that it is ultimately impossible to predict individual patterns?

In a September 5, 2017 discussion with J.D. Vance at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, Wilson addressed the issue of agency brought forth by the author of *Hillbilly Elegy*: Those who break free from the chains of structure and culture are “outliers”, he stated, borrowing from the title of journalist Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 book.

Social scientists may one day crack the code of outliers, those statistical anomalies that defy the odds as much as they prove the rule. Yet, so long as they do not, agency will keep challenging the rigid concepts of structure and culture and limit the full predictive powers social science would otherwise derive from applying them to the analysis of urban poverty and racial inequality.

It remains that structure and culture are indeed impacting a vast majority of individuals and communities and profoundly shaping the reality in which the urban poor evolve. If, however, “*there is little evidence that cultural forces carry the power of structural forces*” (W. J. Wilson 2009, 61) such as an economic boom, shouldn't policymakers focus mainly, if not exclusively, on structure? There is no denying that deindustrialization, the absence of skills or good jobs, or racial discrimination, to only name a few of the challenges captured in *The Truly Disadvantaged* three decades ago, are severe obstacles to the prosperity of the American inner city and its poor residents. Since policymakers' time and resources are scarce, why even worry about cultural forces?

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3. This type of questions is indeed discussed by developmental psychologists.

## 2.

UC Berkeley sociologist Sandra Susan Smith's work brings this matter under a new light. In her first book, *Lone Pursuit*, published in 2007, she studied the process of finding work among the African-American jobless. Her ethnographic work lends empirical support to the theory of culture as a factor of racial inequality and urban poverty – in this case, one that generates distrust, defensive individualism and non-cooperation among poor African-Americans. In fact, one could argue that she outlines the possibility of culture trumping structure in some instances.

Says Smith : “(...) *it is through social interactions and engagements that the poor diagnose problems of joblessness, theorizing about its primary causes and possible solutions. It is through social interactions as well that the joblessness discourses they produce have their ultimate consequences, shaping how poor blacks engage with each other as actors, specifically as job-seekers and job-holders, in ways that affect their labor market outcomes above and beyond the initiating factors deemed to cause joblessness. By examining the process of finding work closely and systematically, I learned that interpersonal relations between job-seekers and job-holders were characterized by a pervasive distrust that deterred cooperation between these two sets of actors*” (2007, 3).

The strength of her work also resides in her ability to quantify those effects and attitudes to some extent, noting for example that a full quarter of the 105 job-seekers she interviewed for her research were resisting seeking or accepting assistance from their networks “*for fear that they would not be able to fulfill their obligations or might be maligned by their job-holding ties*” (Smith 2007, 169). This is clear evidence of the manifestation of cultural forces in the job-seeking process.

Is this what is at play in the spring of 2018, where unemployment among African-Americans remain about twice as high as the national average, this, despite employers desperately hiring just anybody who will have minimal qualifications? Looking carefully, would one find out that, beside the structural causes enumerated in various analyses, cultural forces such as defensive individualism and non-cooperation also are causing a significant number of job-seekers to miss opportunities at a time when the U.S. economy is seemingly booming? This view must be carefully explored, for one could be quick to “blame the victim” and do nothing to remediate this situation ; to the

contrary, if Smith's hypothesis holds true, policymakers should urgently work on addressing those cultural bottlenecks (including in ways explored in part 3 below) so that the jobless can embrace and benefit from the improvements of the U.S. labor market.

It is worth noting that there may be no fundamental contradiction between Smith's analysis and the accent put by Wilson on the preeminence of the structural causes of joblessness in the *Truly Disadvantaged* or *More than Just Race*. While Smith lists the Harvard sociologist among the "*proponents of the deindustrialization perspective*" (2007, 7) (while also acknowledging the key role he played in having urban poverty scholars take into account the impact of personal relations in the formation and persistence of indigence), Wilson regularly emphasizes the need to study culture and structure as joint forces. If anything, Smith's work meets the three main imperatives listed by Wilson in the exploration of the cultural dimension, i.e. i) providing a compelling reason for including cultural factors in a comprehensive discussion of race and poverty; ii) showing the relationship between cultural analysis and structural analysis; and iii) determining the extent to which cultural factors operate independently to contribute to or reinforce poverty and racial inequality (W. J. Wilson 2009, 79). Smith's arguments on defensive individualism, distrust and non-cooperation can only be valid in a context where there are structural elements allowing for such negative perceptions and behaviors to form in the first place. Studying the interactions between culture and structure is key but overall, structure trumps culture in that a widespread culture of the sort described by Smith would not emerge but in places of hardship struck by critical structural forces such as the inner city. In analyzing the key factors behind joblessness, Smith may have better emphasized that culture and structure are complementary to each other, in that structural forces appear to unleash cultural ones – or that cultural ones *mediate* the structural ones' impact – that in turn and at times trump or reshape the structural ones. Or as the Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson notes: "*Put simply, there appear to be cultural mechanisms embedded in reinforcing cycles of structural disadvantage*" (2015, 226).

Sampson provides in this regard a much needed, nuanced critique of the cultural explanation when he notes that "\*culture has proven much harder to confront, both conceptually and empirically"; "(...) most would likely agree that there are few, if any, direct indicators of culture that are measured in

consistent ways over time, such that stability and change can be assessed\*” (2015, 205).

Culture does exist. One only needs to observe the “cool pose”, that posturing once described as the “*aloof swagger and studied unflappability projected by young black men from inner-city urban areas*” or, more importantly, as “*a way for black youths to maintain a sense of integrity and suppress rage at being blocked from usual routes to esteem and success*” although it can be perceived fairly differently by whites<sup>4</sup>; the impact culture has on barely adult females in becoming mothers to achieve some form of status in neighborhoods decimated by concentrated poverty; or how it wrongly influenced conservative policymakers to develop a sprawling incarceration system rather than tackle the structural root causes of indigence. From that perspective, the experiments referred to by Sampson (2015) constitute thought-provoking tests to capture it, although the sociologist acknowledges that causality is not demonstrated.

What remains questionable, however, is the methodology to study culture, and consequently, to evaluate its impact. Whether sociology, among others, can come up with better metrics, a stronger quantitative method to measure it – in order to capture its permanence, its variations and its evolution over time and beyond broad generalizations –, and perhaps even a frame, is a fundamental challenge for the discipline: Solving it may not only help better distinguish between the study of culture on one hand and essentialism on the other, but will also lead policymakers to better formulate policies that could trigger positive behavioral change – the same way Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street* is said to have constituted a good predictor of violent behaviors despite being criticized by some colleagues from his discipline. In this regard, big data could prove useful in complementing – not replacing – ethnographic work in the not too distant future in ways that the pioneering analytics work of Raj Chetti has started to demonstrate<sup>5</sup>.

It is ultimately important to recognize that culture is not a fixed element, cast in stone and immune to change, for doing otherwise is taking the risk

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4. “Black Scientists Study the ‘Pose’ Of the Inner City”, *The New York Times*, April 21, 1992.

5. One such promising example is captured by the Equality of Opportunity Project’s data and the piece derived from it and that was published in *The New York Times* with the title “Extensive Data Shows Punishing Reach of Racism for Black Boys” (March 19, 2018).

of essentializing behaviors and pushing decisionmakers toward inaction in so doing. Quoting from his colleagues, Wilson says it best : “*Lamont and Small further argue that cultural “frames do not cause behavior so much as make it possible or likely”. In other words, cultural frames are necessary but not sufficient explanations for behavior*” (2009, 115). This powerful intuition distinguishes Wilson from essentialists, who believe culture can ultimately be treated as a causal mechanism that will constantly generate the same outcomes among monolithic individuals depending on their race, gender, etc. Rather, culture, just as much as structure, delineates a set of constraints and possibilities within which individuals will evolve differently. It is however a category that holds some predictive power to the extent that, but for a very limited number of exceptions (the “outliers”), individuals under its influence will most likely adopt behaviors and attitudes delimited or captured by it at a given point in time, while retaining the possibility to change and evolve along with it.

This point is perhaps best illustrated not by another voluminous sociological study but by a short 18-page article published more than two decades ago. For both Sampson and Wilson have separately written extensively about those issues; but perhaps less known is the study they co-authored in 1995 that explored criminality in the United States and the impact both structure and culture may have had on it. Back then, criminologists were reluctant to explore the topic of black crime for fear of being branded as racists. So, over lunch one day, the then-Chicago sociologists decided “*to take the bull by the horns*”<sup>6</sup>.

While Sampson and Wilson’s theory is “*probabilistic, rather than deterministic, in nature*”, as they will write two decades later (Sampson, Wilson, and Katz 2018, 6), it clearly distinguishes the role individual behaviors plays in the observed social phenomena – a very limited one, that is, from the perspective of population turnover and the almost non-existent impact it has had on the high rates of delinquency in studied neighborhoods, as per Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay’s 1942 findings (quoted in Sampson and Wilson 1995, 39). And while the authors clearly do not dismiss the relevance of culture, the study refers to white homicide rates in California – triple those in Maryland (similar results are observed within the African-American community in those states) – to conclude that an identical race produces different systemic variations,

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6. As per William Julius Wilson’s own account.

which, in passing, is a fairly strong rebuttal to the essentialist argument about the supposed inferiority of some ethnic groups : The authors actually note that “*the predictors for white robbery were shown to be in large part identical in sign and magnitude to those for blacks*” (Sampson and Wilson 1995, 40). Hence, the emphasis is put on a general theory of historic and contemporary macrostructural factors affecting communities and their populations. Or as Wilson will put it more simply two decades later, structure again trumps culture.

This study perhaps also helps explain why Wilson, following in the footsteps of Shaw and McKay, has appeared reluctant to embrace narratives of individual agency as proposed by philosophers or contemporary authors such as J.D. Vance – as if it simply were an elusive notion in the field of sociology – , dismissing free particles in society as “outliers”, and instead focusing his research on the community as “*the unit of explanation and analysis*” (Sampson and Wilson 1995, 39). By contrast, his colleague Sampson seems ready to integrate philosophical concepts – such as John Rawls’ – into his empirical work (2015, 209). Yet, Wilson appears at times to paradoxically see sociology and the study of structure and culture at the service of a larger aspiration, one that he alludes to when he quotes from the philosophical work of Joseph Fishkin, *Bottlenecks : A New Theory of Equal Opportunity* : A society where one’s fate can no longer be predicted at birth. A society of outliers, if you will.

Harvard historian Elizabeth Hinton has documented the devastating impact culture had when it was inappropriately injected into the policymaking process, turning what was a War on Poverty into a War on Crime, in turn creating new structural barriers to racial equality through the establishment of a mass incarceration system that is unique in the world by its size.

The disorder ensuing the riots of the early sixties changed the priorities of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, with the merger of antipoverty programs with anticrime ones and the rise of a sophisticated incarceration system that would grow significantly over time. Importantly, Hinton writes that “*Johnson and many other liberals recognized poverty as the root cause of crime, but following Daniel Moynihan’s hugely influential 1965 report, “The Negro Family,” they also viewed community behavior and not structural exclusion as the cause of that poverty*” (2015, 103). In other words, culture would come to improperly, tragically outweigh structure in the policymaking process and in

the political discourse. This was only the beginning : The soon-to-emerge “law and order” agenda of the conservatives, starting with the Nixon presidency, would put race – or racism – at the center of the analytical framework used to develop the War on Crime. By assuming African-Americans could not change because of “pathological” reasons, by ignoring the structural impediments black urban poor were confronted to, and not correcting them, conservative policymakers would slowly contribute to the rise of the carceral state and to mass incarceration as the main treatment to mass poverty, slowly replacing opportunity programs along the way.

In turn, what had originated from a misguided cultural – if not racist – interpretation eventually gave birth to a punitive, massive structural force that would eventually drag more than 2 million Americans to jail in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – a disproportionate number of them, African-Americans from America’s poorest neighborhoods who would soon morph into absent fathers, a phenomenon that would negatively reverberate on the inner city through a “*cumulative spiral of disadvantage*” (Western 2007, 109) resulting in earnings losses, skills erosion, illness, antisocial behaviors, broken families, restricted access to good jobs, in a context which was, and remains, challenging to blacks in the first place. Thus, the legacy of enduring racial inequality still weighs on the African-American ghettos today, even after the country had its first African-American president.

Structure may trump culture. But as illustrated in the case of the War on Crime or in *Lone Pursuit*, the two are deeply intertwined and sometimes culture ends up acquiring a preeminence of its own. In this context, one can see how the neoclassical promise that “a rising tide will lift all boats” is no more than an economic fallacy – and helps better understand how the African-Americans’ unemployment rate could be about twice the national average even in good economic times. Thus, and as Harvard Graduate School of Education doctoral candidate Danique Dolly pleaded, “*don’t let culture go*”.

### 3.

In light of the above, addressing the inter-related problems of racial segregation, urban poverty and economic advancement certainly requires designing policy

recommendations that incorporate structural factors as well as cultural ones, depending on their respective influence.

Yet, one domain where culture may be best forgotten, at least tactically, is politics. The nineties' "culture wars" between Bill Clinton and a Republican Congress have proved to have devastating consequences for those concerned with the economic advancement of the most vulnerable segments of the society, and African-Americans in particular. By contrast, they have supported the development of a conservative agenda that does not favor the alleviation of urban poverty. This correlates with Harvard sociologist Michèle Lamont's observation that structural explanations of inequality are likely to incentivize people to demand change while cultural ones will have the opposite effect. It is now easy to understand why: A misunderstanding of the concept of culture too often leads many to believe that the subjects of a culture are monolithic and will resist change. Meanwhile, many more will support the idea that a structure can effectively be changed. Very few politicians have been able to explain in simple terms the complex impact of culture while making it clear that it does not mean that change cannot be obtained.

Fighting structural discrimination alone is however not enough. Targeted policies to deal with cultural factors matter. For instance, in *Lone Pursuit*, Smith concludes that it is crucial to i) help residents gain much-needed, market-relevant skills, ii) provide jobs, iii) facilitate residents' ability to find and keep work, and iv) provide opportunities to build relationships of trust and cooperation (2007, 172).

Moreover, abandoning culture from a tactical point of view does not mean that politics has no role to play in shaping it. To the contrary, on the specific issue of mass incarceration – a distinctively American problem –, and so long as politicians push for its growth, the remedy will be, first and foremost, a political one.

More broadly, and as structure will trump culture at least most of the time, the above policies should be deployed together with, or following, the enactment of a job program that could garner the support of both liberals and conservatives, and that would be seen as universal in nature (i.e. for all Americans), rather than focused on minorities in particular (while benefitting them perhaps first and foremost). Here, one can think of a substantial infrastructure bill that Democrats in Congress would have no (tactical) issue supporting and sending to the desk of President Donald Trump, himself a strong proponent of that

type of initiative. Some experts have estimated the cost of an infrastructure program that would meet the dire needs of America in this regard to be close to USD 1 trillion, well above the 2009 stimulus package. This would benefit the urban poor as much as the rural ones, to the extent that the bill also proposes policies similar to those advocated by Smith and thus facilitates access to jobs promised by such a program.

This bill would align well with Wilson's recommendation that generating political support, overcoming institutional entrenchments and proposing a frank political framing of poverty to build common ground become crucial steps to transcend divisions on the treatment of indigence (W. J. Wilson 2009). To the extent that said infrastructure bill could put the jobless back to work for years, it would also espouse sociologist Patrick Sharkey's view that urban policies need to be durable (2013).

Taking the longer view, the urban poor's decades-long struggle with cumulative adversity may not be resolved with the passage of a single infrastructure bill, however ambitious. This is why Sampson's recommendation to intervene "*holistically at the scale of the neighborhoods, communities, and cities themselves*" while rethinking policy evaluation in order to assess impact appears sound (Sampson 2012, 420). Additionally, Sampson and Wilson (Sampson, Wilson, and Katz 2018, 26) also list cash assistance or tax relief combined with job training and sustained efforts to enforce housing laws and physical upkeep of the community as well as the creation of public sector jobs. The notion that these initiatives would need to be sustained over the long-term aligns with Sharkey's above-mentioned imperative. For these efforts to be led with the energy and resources such a battle requires, resuscitating a modernized Office of Economic Opportunity, which has been described as "*the command center*" of the War on Poverty that was in its time "*the place to be for smart, ambitious young people in Washington*"<sup>7</sup>, would be a necessity. Staffed with policymakers, economists and sociologists, such an agency would be laser-focused on fighting the cancer of poverty that is destroying the lives of millions of individuals across America.

A decade ago, a young, promising senator from Illinois aspiring to become the first African-American president was confronted by his toughest campaign challenge yet, when YouTube videos showing his former pastor severely denouncing the United States through incendiary statements surfaced. To

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7. "What Does Obama Believe In?", *The New York Times*, August 15, 2012.

address the divisive controversy, Barack Obama would make an unusual move : In a speech entitled “*A More Perfect Union*” (2008), the presidential hopeful would do this rare thing for a politician, acknowledging with candor the centrality of *both* culture and structure, race and class, in the enduring hardship experienced by so many, and attempting to offer remedies for all. Said Obama : “*The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It’s that he spoke as if our society was static*”. His firm belief that America’s arduous progression toward racial and economic equality would not be achieved unless embraced by all echoed Martin Luther King’s own quest to realize economic justice for all. A senator’s faith in his society’s ability to change its social structure and culture may have been exactly what America needed at the time to keep moving in the direction of progress – however long the journey. As inequality appears on the rise among many other advanced and increasingly diverse nations, may such faith become more widespread, for a cure addressing concentrated poverty’s structural as well as cultural factors is urgently needed.

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