

but not, in general, he says, about what Thomas Jefferson called the “numberless instances of wretchedness” that stemmed from gross inequalities of property. As Noah Webster, the staunch Connecticut Federalist, said in support of the Constitution in 1787, “a general and tolerably equal distribution of landed property is the whole basis of national freedom” and “the very soul of a republic.”

The actual distribution of property then did not live up to that egalitarian ideal, of course. On the eve of the Revolution, by one recent analysis, the richest one percent of Americans held more than 10 percent of the nation’s total wealth. Even so, the inequality of wealth in that era was much less than it was in Great Britain and Europe—and much less than it would be in later periods in the United States.

“Because the vast preponderance of American wealth came from the land, because American land was plentiful, and because ownership of the land was widely distributed” (compared with the Old World), observes Wilentz, Americans then could imagine their country as a kind of utopia. All wealth was created by human labor, they believed, and, while perfect equality would always be beyond reach, great disparities of wealth could be avoided as long as government did not interfere.

“Though not unchallenged, and though open to conflicting interpretations,” Wilentz writes, “the conceptual basics of the egalitarian tradition lasted for a century after the Revolution.” In the latter decades of the 19th century, however, large new business corporations and trusts emerged, along with “an all-too-conspicuous American plutocracy,” and economic thinking changed. The labor theory of value was inadequate as a basis for understanding the corporate economy. By the 1920s, many Americans had come to regard not only the huge corporations but gross inequality of wealth as “a perfectly natural result of market forces.”

Yet, Wilentz says, “the American egalitarian impulse” survived, albeit in dramatically different form: “Now government became the instrument, and not the enemy, of equality.” And the Progressives, New Dealers, and Great Society liberals showed that this “reinvented proactive egalitarianism” could work to reverse the trends toward gross inequality of wealth. “After 1940,” he says, “economic inequality abated, to the point where, by 1980, [it] was roughly the same as it had been in the 1770s.” But then came Ronald Reagan and the conservatives, throwing latter-day egalitarians on the defensive. “By the early 1990s . . . inequality of wealth distribution returned to the levels of the 1920s.”

Slavery’s Long Shadow

“Slavery and the Black Family” by James Q. Wilson, in *The Public Interest*,
1112 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Did slavery weaken the black family? W. E. B. Du Bois, author of *The Negro American Family* (1908), was sure that it did, and so was E. Franklin Frazier, author of *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939). After all, slavery denied slaves the right to marry, denied them the fruits of their own labor, and casually put family members on the auction block. But when Daniel Patrick Moynihan summarized such arguments in his famous 1965 paper, “The Negro Family: A Case for National Action,” the “roof fell in on him, and a

revisionist historical movement began,” notes Wilson, the distinguished political scientist now teaching at Pepperdine University.

In the eyes of the revisionists, slavery was not to blame for the high rate of single-parent families among blacks; contemporary racism and joblessness were. In *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (1976), historian Herbert Gutman, relying largely on genealogies he had constructed, argued that the black family emerged from slavery in good

shape, with two parents the norm.

But genealogy is not the same as family, Wilson argues. Every child has two parents; not every child lives in a two-parent family. Yet many scholars embraced Gutman's work as foundational. In *Fatherhood in America: A History* (1993), Robert Griswold claims that the black family remained intact until the 20th century, when blacks migrated in large numbers to big cities, where the lack of jobs forced fathers "to leave their families to find work."

"Recent research shows this argument to be wrong," says Wilson. "Based on a careful analysis of census data, historian Steven Ruggles concluded that single parenthood was two to three times more common among African Americans than among whites in 1880 [before the "great migration"]. The gap widened after 1960, but it was only a widening, not a new event." While urban life probably did encourage family breakdown, Wilson says, it was not the main factor. Analyzing cen-

sus data from 1910, University of Pennsylvania scholars have shown that black children in rural areas were roughly twice as likely as their white counterparts to be raised by a single mother.

The impact of patterns of family life further back in time, in Africa, is very difficult to gauge. In Africa, kinship networks were and are more important than marriage, and the strong extended family left a smaller role for fathers in child rearing. One anthropologist observes that in West Africa the question has been not so much "Are you married?" as "Do you have any children?" Slavery hardly encouraged black men to build nuclear families.

It is important to note, writes Wilson, that about half of all black families today are middle class and, as a group, have overcome "the legacy of slavery, at least with respect to income and family structure." Nevertheless, that pernicious legacy persists. In 1997, nearly 70 percent of children born to African American women had unwed mothers.

Batter Up!

"Bearing Witness to Blackball: Buck O'Neil, the Negro Leagues, and the Politics of the Past" by Daniel A. Nathan in *Journal of American Studies* (Vol. 35, No. 3), Cambridge Univ. Press, Edinburgh Bldg., Shaftesbury Rd., Cambridge, England CB2 2RU.

Thanks to documentaries such as Ken Burns's 1994 *Baseball*, and nostalgic tributes to legends such as Josh Gibson and James "Cool Papa" Bell, the Negro Leagues may be more celebrated now than at any time since they disappeared in the late 1950s. Nathan, a professor of American studies and history at Finland's University of Tampere, senses something fishy. He thinks the current nostalgic interest in the Negro Leagues is an attempt to rewrite history.

Some of the first professional baseball teams after the Civil War were integrated, and even the all-black teams of the time routinely played against all-white teams. But segregation started early. The National Association of Base Ball Players voted in 1867 to bar "any club which may be composed of one or more colored persons," and the National League, organized in 1876, "tacitly agreed to the same prohibition." All

was not lost, but "by the beginning of the 20th century there were no African Americans in the Major Leagues."

In 1920, Andrew "Rube" Foster formed the first successful all-black league, the Negro National League, but it was done in by the depression. A new Negro National League sprang up in 1933, followed four years later by the Negro American League. The Negro League all-star game often surpassed its Major League counterpart in attendance and profits, Nathan reports.

Until Jackie Robinson was signed to the Brooklyn Dodgers by Branch Rickey in 1947, breaking baseball's color barrier, Negro League players were excluded from the Major Leagues, and many great black players missed their chance for the kind of immortality achieved by the likes of Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb. Some who made it to the majors, such as Satchel Paige, arrived only in