NEA PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS:  
POLITICAL ECONOMY, RACE, AND MORALS  

Samuel L. Myers, Jr.

Long before economics acquired the apt designation as the dismal science, it was known as political economy. Its muses, though, were not known as political economists. Instead, they often responded to titles like “moral philosopher” and “professor of theology and jurisprudence.” For example, you might recall that the father of modern economics, Adam Smith, was a professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow when he penned his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.¹

Morality in the context of the heirs to political economy often referred to issues of the public good. The focus repeatedly was upon the role of government and the state in the regulation of private affairs. The private affairs of dominant concern to these early writers were not those that evoke passionate discourse among moralists today. Church going behavior, reproductive choices, use of drugs, and crime were not the core elements of discourse in political economy. Yet, in a manner, discussions that appear at best on the boarders of such conventional economic phenomena as prices, markets, trade and wealth, are very much in the early tradition of political economy. Thus, Jeremy Bentham, an early precursor to modern utility theory which underlies much of contemporary studies of consumer demand, expounded at length on crime and criminal policy. Adam Smith, moreover, devoted considerable attention in his famous lectures on jurisprudence to the role and financing of police and the militia.²

The theme of this paper is partially about morality in this classical political economy sense. On several aspects of public policy formation affecting blacks in America, private decisions come into conflict with public goals. The examples that emerge are notable ones of government
regulation of private affairs where there are substantial public consequences: family disruption, crime and drugs. But the intention is not to reconstruct Milton Friedman's line of reasoning in *Capitalism and Freedom*\(^3\) or his more recent *Free to Choose*.\(^4\) Nor is the intent to rant and rave about the horrible consequences for blacks and their communities of the break-up of the nuclear family, the rise of drugs and the escalation of crime and thus a call for government intrusion. Instead, the intention is to raise the question of how the appeal to morals and morality in public policy discussions often hinders the development of effective and rational policies. In this sense, the theme of this paper is about morality of the more familiar sort.

Three instances highlight an unpopular view about racial inequality in American life. This view suggests that racial inequality, from whatever original roots, is sustained and perpetuated by public policies hiding behind a mask called morality.\(^5\) The three instances pertain to how public policy has contributed to widening racial inequality or at least has not worked in the best interest of the black community when the policy objectives become ensnared in rhetoric related to the morals of the poor.

The first example has to do with the setting of alimony and child support payments, and the effect that the morals of mothers have on court awards. The argument in this first example is that the objective of keeping children out of poverty takes a back seat to the demand that errant spouses be punished for their immoral behavior. A second example concerns drug policies and the recent debate about the legalization of heroin, cocaine and marijuana. In this example the argument is that the opposition, particularly from the black leadership class, based on the immorality of drugs, is in direct conflict with the best interests of the black community which must continue to deal with the consequences of high profits and unlimited incentives of the drug trade. The third relates to the problem of job training for disadvantaged youth. Here the argument is that attempts to exploit the entrepreneurial talents of street-wise hustlers and dope-dealers in the inner city to enable them to become managers and owners of legitimate inner-city businesses have been hindered because of the moral aversion for providing assistance to criminals and other misfits.

These illustrations are overly simplified ones. Many doubts about direction of causation and functional dependence are likely to arise. The explanations may invoke disagreements and anger. However, they are intended to raise a concern about an underappreciated area of research. This is research on and models of policy makers and decision makers who affect the lives of the poor and of the disadvantaged.