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Review

**Coming Apart:
The State of White America, 1960-2010**

By Charles Murray
New York: Crown Forum
2012

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Many sociologists express distain for Charles Murray. They regard him as an unregenerate conservative, although he describes himself as a libertarian. This is a shame because, as Jonah Goldberg states, he is “arguably the most consequential social scientist alive.”

Murray, a political scientist, has certainly been influential with respect to social policy. His writings about the welfare system have clearly had more impact on legislative reforms than have those of any identifiable sociologist. As a result, he deserves a hearing. In his most recent book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, he takes a step beyond what he wrote in *The Bell Curve*. In that earlier work, he argued that intelligence was becoming more concentrated in the upper reaches of the social class spectrum. Thanks to the ubiquity of an educational system that, despite its continuing iniquities, generally rewards academic merit, intelligent persons with lower class roots have been provided an upward path, while those less gifted were left behind.

Now he is documenting the life experiences of those who make it to the top twenty percent in comparison with those trapped in the lowest thirty percent. What he finds is chilling. In category after category, the poor are suffering to a greater extent than previously. Although there is a tendency to believe that social dysfunctions are evenly spread out from the social apex to its sub-basement, this is misleading. Most of the worst manifestations of personal and interpersonal problems are clustered at the lower extreme.

Let us begin with an obvious one. Middle class marriages turn out to be far more stable than lower class marriages. Indeed, if one considers the prevalence of cohabitation among the poor, it is almost fair to say that marriage is a dying institution among the

socially less fortunate. Many such persons may dream of finding the perfect mate, but millions of them settle for something drastically inferior on the grounds that this is the best they will be able to manage.

Some social scientists question the validity of the traditional marriage; nonetheless the explosion of out-of-wedlock births that is characteristic of poverty is an unmitigated tragedy. As many social researchers have documented, children who grow up in a single parent household are more likely to suffer from a host of difficulties. Themselves less apt to marry, they also receive an inferior education, obtain third-class jobs, suffer more ill health, and become addicted to chemical substances. In the end, they have a difficult time achieving social mobility because they are less likely be provided with the tools for doing so.

Consequently, as Murray similarly documents, the poor have employment difficulties. Not only are they liable to be unemployed, but many do not even seek employment. Instead they drift into chemical dependency and crime. This is not a surprise. What is, is the extent to which many lower class men express pride in their lack of ambition and many lower class women take this attitude for granted.

Still, what surprised me most in Murray's extensive data sets is the decline of religion among the poor. Whereas impoverished immigrants once flocked to churches to listen to sermons urging them to follow the straight and narrow, and many sent their children to parochial schools that emphasized personal discipline, those days are over. Today's inner city churches and parochial schools are closing their doors. With fewer congregants, they can longer support themselves. Nor can they spread their messages of personal responsibility.

What this made me realize is that Melvin Kohn's observations about parental attitudes have come home to roost. Kohn's extensive survey researches demonstrated that while middle class parents value self-direction for themselves and their offspring, poor parents are likely to demand conformity from their young. The poor may not like being pushed around, and, in fact, resist it, but they inadvertently transmit a loathing of authority to the next generation. As a consequence, their children do not internalize a

dedication to upholding social standards. To the contrary, they require external constraints to keep them in line.

Within lower class households, discipline is usually maintained with a heavy hand. Physical punishments are not unusual, nor are verbal assaults rare. Historically, once they escaped the bounds of their restrictive upbringings, the children of deprivation frequently went wild. They challenged the social norms; hence they had to be kept from going too far by the threat of social sanctions. Many of these restraints came by way of religious warnings. Others derived from strict interpretations of legal standards. In any event, the discipline to which they were exposed frequently came from social, as opposed to internal, sources.

But, as Murray amply demonstrates, times have changed. We live in an era of kindness and social support. The days of a wrathful deity and unsympathetic judges are long gone. Today we believe in being nonjudgmental. The upshot of this compassion is there for all to see. *Coming Apart* may be interpreted as a litany of the costs of misguided understanding. Like it or not, an orderly society must maintain external sanctions, especially with respect to those inclined to violate its rules.

All of this is unfair, and for many will be unwelcome news. But sociology is supposed to be a science. It is supposed to use empirical means to study society, even when what is found is disconcerting. Maybe Murray is wrong. (Although I suspect he is not.) If he is, his critics must document where he went astray. Otherwise we will have to develop a strategy for coping with the disorder and misery of which he warns.

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