

SOX Families, Race, Poverty, Welfare

By nearly any measure, Patrick Moynihan's warning about the black family was right. Unfortunately, our response was to kill the messenger. We accepted the counsel of "experts" such as Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at John Hopkins University, who argued that it had yet to be shown that the "absence of a father was directly responsible for any of the supposed deficiencies of broken homes" and that the real issue "is not the lack of male presence but the lack of male income." National policy supporting the vision that fathers can be replaced by a monthly welfare check played a significant role in the erosion of the black family.

Today's rate of illegitimacy and single-parent households is unprecedented in black history. During periods of slavery, Jim Crowism, and codified racial discrimination, more black children lived in two-parent families than do today. That observation should give pause to "experts" who advance the argument that today's social pathology is a result of racism and poverty. If that is the case, how can they explain why many unwed black families (often 80 percent and higher) were two-parent at a time when there was much more racism, poverty, and fewer opportunities? The unambiguous bottom line is that the welfare state has done to the black family what slavery, Jim Crowism, and the rankest racism could never have done.

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Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

The Moynihan report is one of those rare documents that becomes more topical with each passing year. Its central insight—that widespread family disintegration represents a new source of social and economic inequality—is even more compelling today than it was in 1965. Even its language seems fresh: fatherless families, broken homes, illegitimacy, and (famously) a "tangle of pathologies."

Although there is much to admire in the report's contemporaneity, there is little to cheer. That the crisis of the family would become so deep and widespread in so short a period of time was nearly unthinkable in the 1960s. Few realized how profoundly the sex and divorce revolution, then only gathering steam, would change the way Americans think about and organize their most important family relationships and commitments. As a result, in the 1990s the problem of family structure transcends both race and class. It has become a problem of all American families.

Yet the problem cannot be captured simply by calculating the growing number

A Symposium Revisiting the Moynihan Report at Its Thirtieth Anniversary

of broken families. There is a cultural as well as a demographic dimension to family breakup. Culturally, marriage is declining as the foundation for childrearing and long-term parental investment in children. Once joined together, marriage and parenthood are splitting apart. Teenagers have grasped this idea as quickly as they have latched on to other culturally significant ideas. In some places in America, teenagers routinely flock to their friends' baby showers (and funerals), but never to a wedding. Writing of unwed teen parents in the fall issue of *City Journal*, Kay Hymowitz observes, "Marriage, as far as these kids are concerned, is gone, dead, an unword."

A rapidly entrenching culture of divorce and nonmarriage makes the problem of disintegrating families more intractable, less treatable with

conventional policy measures. But clearly there is growing consensus on some essential first steps: welfare reform, a campaign to reduce unwed teen parenthood, an effort to create jobs with decent pay and benefits. However, the policy consensus falters on one issue: divorce. There are political risks in an effort to bring down the historically high levels of divorce, since both the American middle class and opinion elites are implicated in and ambivalent about divorce trends. Yet along with the growing inequality of earnings, divorce is the great generator of diverging economic futures for middle-class families and their children. The problem will not go away if divorce holds steady. It will take the same kind of courage and prophetic insight exemplified by the Moynihan report to make the case for national action against divorce.

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Lee Rainwater

Rereading the Moynihan report, I am struck by how useful the story it tells is for understanding American poverty, and minority poverty in particular, in the 1990s. The numbers have changed—gotten much worse—but the forces that reproduce poverty are much the same.

There is also depression that after 30 years the policy process Moynihan proposed has made so little headway. A mythical Moynihan report is sometimes used to justify lurid fantasies about where our society is going, and to give a patina of scientific justification for policy proposals so harsh that they would get

no serious hearing in any other democracy.

It is important to understand that the report was the centerpiece of a year-long effort to bring into the Johnson administration a new way of thinking about social policy—complementing the report were an article in *Daedalus*, a memo of policy recommendations to the White House, an unprecedented speech at Howard University that Moynihan and Richard Goodwin drafted for the president, and an article in *America*.

In all of these Moynihan hewed to a central goal, clearly stated in the *America* article, to bring about the “adopting of a national policy directed to the quality and stability of American family life.” Only in this way could meaningful equality (of results, not just opportunities) be achieved. The situation of the Negro family presented the most egregious case of society’s failure to achieve this kind of equality. His warning then was prophetic: “The principal challenge of the next phase of the Negro revolution is to make certain that equality of results will now follow. If we do not, there will be no social peace in the United States for generations.” Who today can confidently foresee social peace in this country?

In his memo to the White House, Moynihan proposed policy initiatives that could begin the government’s effort to provide stabilizing resources to the Negro family. (In other writings he made clear that these initiatives would benefit other groups as well.) Jobs and the income they bring had primacy. Housing programs were required to enable an escape from the ghetto to the suburbs. Birth control programs

were sorely needed. Social programs should be better designed to hold families together. Very little of this agenda is to be found in our programs today. Rising earnings and inequality and stunted social programs instead have brought the poverty of white, black, and Hispanic families to new highs.

An effort today to renew the breakthrough in policy thinking that Moynihan started would undoubtedly look very different from his efforts in 1964–65—much has changed in American society since then. But the report continues to serve as an essential guide to how to think about what government might do to further the goals of equality and social tranquility.

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Charles Murray

A friend recently called to commiserate about the assault that has greeted the publication of *The Bell Curve*. A liberal Democrat and child of the sixties, she was especially troubled because she now understands she was part of the wrong side in a similar brouhaha 30 years ago. She told me about marching in a protest over the Moynihan report. She had shouted dissenting slogans, called Moynihan a racist, and derided his idea that the family was essential to a civil society. She was thinking back not just with the usual sense of what idiots we all were at that age, but with a deeper sadness that someone had been so right, and said so, when there was still time to do something about it—and the warning had been so completely ignored.

What was right in 1964 about blacks is right in 1994 about whites, and simple arithmetic—America has almost six times as many whites as blacks—makes the prospects for America much grimmer. As Pat Moynihan the social scientist surely understands, tinkering with the

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—Charles Murray

welfare system is not enough, and President Clinton’s plan is guaranteed to have no more than trivial effects. Effective reform is going to require radical change that can only be passed with the expenditure of substantial political capital by Democrats from urbanized states. How much influence does Pat Moynihan the prescient social scientist have with the senior senator from New York?

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Glenn C. Loury

By daring to suggest that dysfunctional family behavior among poor blacks constituted an insuperable barrier to economic equality, Moynihan elicited an emotional, ideologically charged response that permanently altered racial discourse in America. The now-familiar indictment, “blaming the victim,” literally was invented in reaction to Moynihan’s argument. A dear price was paid for this response, though not

by those who led the charge. In the years since, the social disruption that so alarmed Moynihan has continued apace. The intellectual rubble of that earlier period has yet to be fully cleared.

Remarkably, one still encounters the same line that was used to dismiss Moynihan 30 years ago—that acknowledging a behavioral basis to economic deprivation feeds stereotypes about blacks and provides grist for the racists’ mill. As if the facts about inner-city life, staggeringly evident to anyone with eyes to see, could be blunted by simply banning any discussion of them from polite society.

What in the 1960s was a question about black society has in the 1990s become critical for all Americans. Charles Murray has announced to much fanfare the coming of the white underclass. Having essentially written off the black community as a lost cause—with an illegitimacy rate near two-thirds nationwide, and even higher in the inner city—pundits, politicians, and scholars now come to contemplate what might be done to save the rest of America. The answer seems to be that we must place greater emphasis on “values.” And, while I am all in favor of this, I am less than sanguine that the fix will be so easy. It is quite unclear what, in practical terms, politicians talking about “values” can be expected to achieve. Nor can I have much confidence that Mr. Murray’s incentive-based arguments—cut public support and deny child support to unwed mothers—will reverse the trend.

People are not automatons; their behavior in matters sexual cannot be pushed around by manipulating their marginal tax rates. The problems of illegitimacy