

Belmont and Fishtown Part Ways

Social disparities go largely unnoticed

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

By Charles Murray

Crown Forum, 2012, \$27.00; 407 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

On the publication of Charles Murray's *Coming Apart*, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks wrote, "I'll be shocked if there's another book as important this year..." but after an initial flurry of reviews and critiques, no further attention has been given. Yet it tells a story about a radical change in American society in the past 50 years that seems to have passed notice, whether popular or scholarly. We have heard a good deal about the increasing inequality in earnings and wealth, but Murray focuses on another and perhaps more vital aspect of inequality, an increasing difference in social behavior between an upper middle class and a lower middle and working class, with potentially enormous consequences for American society.

Murray's earlier books—*Losing Ground* in 1984, on welfare policy, and *The Bell Curve* (with Richard Herrnstein) in 1994, on the significance of differences in intelligence as measured by intelligence tests—aroused controversy, because, implicitly or explicitly, they focused attention on black Americans, who play a disproportionate role in welfare policy, and as a group score lower than whites on IQ tests. Seeing the title *Coming Apart*, one might think he is again alluding to black-white difference, which is after all the great apartness in American history. But this book limits itself to white America. And what he tells us seems to have passed the notice of most sociologists writing on American society.

According to Murray, there has been a collapse in four key areas over the last 50 years of traditional and expected behavior in a good part of white America, the working class, as it once was called, the lower class, as it may be called. Murray contrasts whites who have less than a high school education and work in blue-collar, service, and low-level white-collar occupations, with whites who have a college education or more and work as professionals or managers. He calls the first group "Fishtown," after a real neighborhood in Philadelphia that has been the subject of a number of books, and the second "Belmont," drawing the name from the real Belmont, Massachusetts, a town adjacent to Cambridge. The contrasts that make up a good part of the book, despite reference to two localities, are of statistical assemblages, drawn from the census. Following Murray, I will refer to them as Fishtown and Belmont, dropping the quotation marks.

The two groups were quite similar in 1960 in what Murray calls the "founding virtues": getting married and having children in wedlock; work (Murray calls it "industriousness"); honesty, revealed in statistics in crime and imprisonment; and religiosity. But by 2010 things had changed. A 10 percent difference between Belmont and Fishtown in marriage rates in 1960 expanded to a 35 percent difference in 2010. In the census that year, only "48 percent of prime-age whites in Fishtown were married, compared to 84 percent in 1969." Related disparities arose in births out of marriage and in children living with a single parent—not much change in Belmont, a great change in Fishtown: almost 30 percent of white births are now nonmarital, up from just a few percent in 1960.

On work, Murray notes the great increase in the percentage of the population on disability payments, from under 1 to more than 5 percent of the labor force, and the growth in the number of prime-age males who are not in the labor force, contrasted with almost all in the labor force in 1960. On chart after chart reporting work behavior, we find stability in Belmont, with almost all males at work, a striking contrast to the large absence from the labor force, willed or unwilled, in Fishtown.

Although the scandal of mass imprisonment of blacks has begun to receive wide attention, Murray strikingly notes a fivefold increase in Fishtown prisoners, by definition all white, with no increase from the infinitesimal level of imprisonment in Belmont. The decline in religious behavior, measured by questions in surveys on attendance at services, has been similar in Fishtown and Belmont, but beginning from a higher level of disengagement in Fishtown.

These four indices to Murray are "the founding virtues" of "the American project"—also his term. They support that extensive civic engagement that astonished early visitors to the American democracy. But Murray reports that civic engagement has also declined in Fishtown, along with the founding virtues. Note the minimal act of voting in a presidential election: considerable stability over time, with more than 90 percent voting in Belmont, but a drop from 70 to 51 percent voting between 1968 and 1988 in Fishtown, with a modest rise in 2008. Murray labels one section "The Collapse of the Possibility of Community," taking from political scientists Francis Fukuyama and Edward Banfield the importance of trust for a healthy community, and showing from longitudinal surveys its reduction, far greater

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in Fishtown than in Belmont. The statement “People can generally be trusted” elicited the agreement of more than 75 percent in Belmont in 1970, contrasted with 45 percent in Fishtown. In 2010, 60 percent in Belmont still concurred, but Fishtown was down to 20 percent.

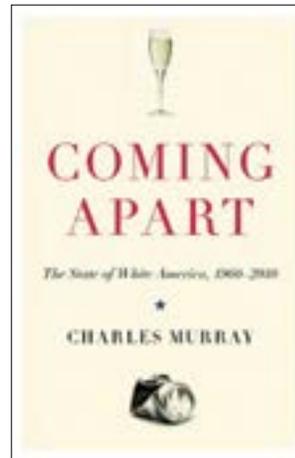
Murray thus draws a picture of Fishtown, working-class America, supplemented by ethnographic reports on the real Fishtown, that is not far short of the “underclass” that was so widely discussed 30 years ago, when it was thought that white working-class America was in good shape.

But while Murray describes this as a decline in “virtue,” might it be a decline driven by the huge changes in the economy during this period, specifically, the decrease in good union-wage-paying manufacturing jobs? And are we not back to the more familiar issue of a growing economic inequality as responsible for these and other changes? Murray rejects in advance this criticism of his analysis. He somewhat complacently points to jobs that are still available (janitorial, cleaning office buildings), which, he asserts, even at the minimal wage should enable marriage and raising children. The interactions among employment possibilities and earnings, and marriage and responsible childbearing, are complex, and are not to be resolved in Murray’s book—or in this review.

While the major focus of the book, and the news in it, is what has happened in Fishtown, Belmont has also changed greatly in 50 years, if not in the four virtues and civic behavior: Belmont, Murray argues, and in particular its higher levels (graduates from more elite colleges), has withdrawn from contact with the rest of American society. The two classes were once much closer: in resi-

dence, in work, in schooling, in culture. They are now much more separate. Murray emphasizes in particular the degree to which the better educated and professional have concentrated in certain neighborhoods, and how opportunities for the upper middle class of college-goers to interact with and know neighbors of lower classes have declined. The American democratic project is endangered by this growing separation, which Murray demonstrates both statistically and anecdotally.

And what is to be done? Murray is a libertarian, and he certainly has nothing to suggest for government’s role. He does urge Belmont to celebrate and argue for the founding virtues in



the shaping of children and must have had some role in creating the great divide he describes. But if Belmont should resist the plague, as he would name it, of nonjudgmentalism, in which almost any kind of behavior is excused and understood, should not the public school also

resist the prevailing nonjudgmentalism and try to restore some of the moral authoritativeness practiced in the past and that we see today in many successful charter schools? Would that help change the behavior of Fishtown and bring it closer to the norms of 1960?

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If I get good grades, you’ll send me to college.
If I go to college, I’ll graduate and get a job.
If I get a job, I might get fired. If I get fired,
I could go bankrupt and lose everything.
That’s why I didn’t do my homework!”**