

Review Essay

*The Other America Is Coming Apart**

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Published fifty years ago, Michael Harrington's *The Other America* provided a sweeping description of poverty in the United States. Harrington is given credit for awakening the nation to the plight of the poor and forwarding the idea that the federal government should become heavily involved in trying to help. His book is routinely hailed as one of the most influential of the twentieth century.

Published fifty years later, Charles Murray's *Coming Apart* is also destined to be a classic. Building on his previous work, Murray brings attention to the plight of the lower classes—in particular, frequently dysfunctional choices in an increasingly bifurcated world.

Examining the two books together provides insight into the problem of poverty in our own time. Harrington's work shined a spotlight on poverty when the problem was largely being ignored. Murray ably describes a set of immense, class-based social problems at a time when politicians are mostly ignoring those problems because they find them intractable and politically inconvenient. Harrington casually proposed government policy solutions—at a time when government intervention was modest. Murray writes more soberly about government, after five decades of a so-called war on poverty.

* Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Books, 2012). Despite the subtitle, the book is far more about class than race. Among other reasons, the focus on data on whites is an intentional effort to avoid racial distractions.

***The Other America* (Michael Harrington, 1962)**

Harrington laid out broad categories in describing poverty; for example, rural and urban, young and old.¹ For Harrington, the connections between poverty and race were messy—influenced internally by poor choices and undesirable elements of ethnic culture and externally by discriminatory attitudes and institutional problems.² He describes both “involuntary” and “voluntary” poverty. The former includes those struggling with addictions and mental illness. Some people choose poverty, more or less, including “urban hillbillies” and the “intellectual poor.” Others make bad choices—and many struggle with what has been called a “spiritual poverty,” which often accompanies or causes material poverty.³

Based on his own calculations, Harrington estimated that there were 40 to 50 million poor people, in a population of 160 million—far more than the government’s conventional measure had indicated. Whether his count was better or not, it is inarguable that the poverty rate is an arbitrary and flawed proxy for the state of the world it tries to measure. It measures reported cash income in a given year, while ignoring nonreported income, noncash benefits from the government, wealth and assets, and the dynamics of changing economic status over time.⁴

In any case, Harrington’s estimate certainly made the problem seem larger. That said, given solid economic growth in both decades, all estimates of the poverty rate decreased dramatically throughout the 1950s and well into the 1960s—ironically until the War on Poverty began in earnest.⁵ Harrington, however, questions whether economic growth really helped the poor all that much (163).⁶

How could so many people go largely unnoticed—at least until Harrington shined the light on them? “There are enough poor people in the United States to constitute a subculture of misery,” he wrote, “but not enough of them to challenge the conscience and the imagination of the nation” (12). This rings true, at least to some extent, given that the poor are not a particularly powerful interest group.

Public Policy and an Embrace of Government

Harrington provided solid and much-needed descriptions of poverty. His approach to public policy, though, was a combination of flailing about aimlessly and an eager embrace of facile policy prescriptions.

Harrington acknowledged what might be called *anecdotal* poverty: poverty caused by a myriad of difficult and largely unavoidable circumstances. He emphasized *systemic* poverty: the type that is allegedly due to the structure of the economic system itself. Thus, he found it desirable to reach for systemic solutions—most notably by relying on the federal government: “Physical and

mental disabilities are, to be sure, an important part of poverty in America ... [but these are] an individual ‘case,’ a stroke of bad luck.... The new poverty is something that cannot be dealt with by first aid. If there is to be a lasting assault on the shame of the other America, it must seek to root out of this society an entire environment, and not just the relief of individuals” (11).

Harrington embraced common panaceas to address poverty: welfare or guaranteed incomes, a higher minimum wage, and government job training. All of these were motivated by the best of intentions. Unfortunately, there was little discussion about disincentives in the book—at least for the poor. (He questioned the motives and incentives of the *nonpoor*—an appropriate angle.) Perhaps this is understandable, in part, because the Great Society experiment had not yet been run.

Harrington also made no reference to state and local government approaches. Perhaps in his day, this was seen as impractical, at least in the Deep South, but he never said so. Instead, one gets the impression that the omission stems from a monolithic faith in big, federal solutions. Looking back, this seems remarkably naïve. Then again, some people still reach reflexively for federal governance on issues that would arguably be handled better by the private sector or local and/or state government.

Still, Harrington was not all naïveté and good intentions. His description of unions was quite mixed: he casually embraced them at times but believed they were complicit in the acceptance of pensions, fringe benefits, and deferred compensation—all troubling outcomes to Harrington. He criticized farm policy (58) before it was fashionable to do so. He offered highly cynical observations about bureaucracy and social workers (110), ably recognizing their disincentives to actually better the situations of those whom they were serving. He recognized the divorce between theory and practice on government-run housing, noting that new slums had replaced old slums (148), and he criticized the destructive community built by segregating the poor into public housing (155).

Paternalistic and Politically Incorrect

The Other America is a slim volume and repetitive (although perhaps this was necessary because he was breaking relatively new ground). It is largely sociology and pop psychology with some political science and a dash of economics mixed in.⁷

Aside from his effort to describe the poor, Harrington’s central argument was that the poor have little or no power to affect their own lives. Ironically, the book does not contain a single word from a poor person. Amazingly, Harrington claimed the ability to describe the minds of the poor. For example, he posited that they

are “maimed in body and spirit” (11). At times, he seems heavily influenced by materialism, as material poverty largely defines a poor person.

The book was socially conservative in its worldview, overtly hostile to multiculturalism (to African-American culture especially), and paternalistic toward the poor. The language was condescending and critical of the culture of the poor and many of their innocuous choices. More importantly, it spawned an ideology that enabled policymakers and bureaucrats to control the lives of the poor.⁸

Harrington’s paternalism toward the poor (particularly African-Americans) would be unacceptable today. Sharing a story about Rep. Adam Powell (D-NY), Harrington concluded, “The story is funny enough, but at bottom it is made of the same stuff as Amos ‘n’ Andy: the laughing, childlike, pleasure-loving Negro who must be patronized and taken care of like a child . . . the incident is ultimately one more tragedy within the structure of the ghetto.”⁹

Harrington briefly referenced the troubles with family structure among the poor, even though they were relatively mild compared to now: “The family structure of the poor, for instance, is different from that of the rest of the society. There are more homes without a father, there are less marriages, more early pregnancy. . . . As a result of this, to take but one consequence of the fact, hundreds of thousands, and perhaps millions, of children in the other America never know stability and ‘normal’ affection” (16).

Of course, family structure would deteriorate markedly over the next fifty years, especially among the poor and those in the lower-middle class.¹⁰ What would Harrington say today? At least in part, we can look to Charles Murray’s recent book for the answer.

***Coming Apart* (Charles Murray, 2012)**

Charles Murray is the author of many important books on public policy and society.¹¹ Murray approaches the subject from economic and sociological angles, brings a lot of relevant data to the table, and is unafraid to tackle sensitive topics.

In *Losing Ground*—the book on welfare from the 1980s—Murray described how welfare changed the “rules of the game” for the poor, encouraging them to make decisions that were detrimental in the long-term. At the time, the book was highly controversial, but within a decade, it had become conventional wisdom, and welfare programs were overhauled in 1996.¹² In *Losing Ground*, Murray focused on African-Americans, given limits in the data, and received spurious criticisms for his approach. In *Coming Apart*, he avoids this problem by focusing on whites only.

Looking back on poverty before the War on Poverty began, Murray notes that measured poverty had fallen dramatically over the previous fifteen years—from 41 percent to 20 percent: “Poverty had been dropping so rapidly for so many years that Americans thought things were going well ... 95% of the respondents [to a Gallup poll] said they were working class or middle class. A great many poor people were refusing to identify themselves as lower class.... America didn’t have classes, or, to the extent that it did, [we acted] as if we didn’t” (8–9). In this way, Murray engages Harrington’s thesis but largely rejects it with respect to the 1960s:

Harrington said America’s poor constituted a class separate from the working class.... [But] at that time, the poor were not seen as a class, either by other Americans or in their own eyes. The poor were working class people who didn’t make much money.... Insofar as they thought about a lower class among whites, they had in mind people at the fringes of American life (124–25).

Then, looking at the dynamics over the last fifty years, Murray applies Harrington’s general thesis to today. He believes that American culture, society, and economy have evolved into three wildly different classes, with vast and growing differences between the lowest and highest classes. Movement between the classes is still possible but less prevalent. Whatever Harrington would say today, Murray has replaced him as the prophetic voice about today’s poor and lower middle class.¹³

The Top 20 Percent versus the Bottom 30 Percent

After providing a preview of his thesis, Murray describes those in the upper income classes. They live a markedly different lifestyle, including attendance at elite schools, limited TV watching, being older when getting married and having children, and stronger family formation and continuation. He argues that the key mechanism has been sorting and then matching through marriage in college—what he calls “cognitive homogamy”: breeding by cognitive ability. College choice has increasingly become a function of aptitude and wealth more than region. It follows that marriage and family—commonly decided at school or in the subsequent networking—would exacerbate those differences.¹⁴

This trend is exaggerated by “elite” colleges, and here Murray (54–57) presents some stunning data. Before World War II, elite colleges tended to draw students from a far narrower geographical region. This is unsurprising, given the high “transaction costs” of attending a school far from home. In 1926, the average IQ at Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale was 117—compared to 115

for the average college student. As late as 1952, the mean SAT verbal score at Harvard was 583, just above the national average. By 1960, the Harvard average had increased to 678. As a result, the average Harvard freshman in 1952 would have been in the lowest 10 percent of his class in 1960. Today, 10 schools get 20 percent of all students in the top 5 percent, 41 schools get half, and 105 schools get three-quarters. These are the educational 1 percent who will likely become the economic and/or political 1 percent in the future.

Then, Murray compares and contrasts the top 20 percent and the bottom 30 percent of income earners over the past forty years (154–61). “The other America” has reduced their labor force participation and employment, and measured “disability” has increased markedly (180–81). They place much less emphasis on marriage—both in the sense of less entry and more exit; they are more likely to remain single *and* to get divorced. This has resulted in a large and growing proportion of “nonmarital births” and relatively few children raised in two-parent homes.¹⁵

The academic literature on children who are born and raised in these settings is sobering yet unsurprising.¹⁶ Moreover, the effects are intergenerational: Parents often pass along their success or failure to their children. Murray warns that the implosion of marriage and two-parent families “calls into question the viability of white working-class communities as a place for socializing the next generation” (167).

Murray observes that “Belmont” (the top 20 percent, named for a wealthy Massachusetts town) talks the talk of the 1960s but walks the walk of the 1950s. In other words, they are liberal in their worldview, but they live like conservatives. Meanwhile, “Fishtown” (the bottom 30 percent, named for a working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia) is living out the stereotypical worldview of 1960s. The result is personal, familial, and cultural disintegration but not because of poverty *per se*. Poverty has been around forever—and the (relative) absence of material resources does not typically lead to such problems.¹⁷

Will We Be “Coming Back”?

Murray is even worried about Belmont. R. R. Reno sums it up nicely:

The neo-traditionalism that now exists in Belmont lacks moral energy.... Precisely because it has largely isolated itself from the rest of America, Belmont can get on quite well without the strict judgments of the old moral codes. Exclusive neighborhoods, private schools, and elite universities preserve an environment of sensible but restrained hedonism. A fierce focus on academic

success among the young and career success for adults builds habits of discipline that can function reasonably well without old-fashioned moral rigorism. And when things go wrong, therapists and counselors and other professionals are ready at hand. So why moralize?¹⁸

While Murray and Reno focus on the elite, something similar (although more moderate) could be said about those in the upper middle class. Why are such people moral, thrifty, honest, and so on—and how can they confidently pass along values to their children?

Reno also notes that Fishtown cannot be organized politically, and so, they are ignored or exploited easily enough. Beyond politics, “One would think that bad times in Fishtown would make Belmont anxious. But for the most part they do not. The collapse of functional working-class communities does not threaten the new elites. Not only have they segregated themselves, but they benefit from the social changes that make so many lower-class communities dysfunctional . . . the social dysfunction increases the need for expert intervention, supervision, and remediation. And who oversees all this? Elites. . . .”¹⁹

In part 3 of his book, Murray bemoans our society’s “loss of community” and believes this is a devastating loss, especially for those who struggle with a lack of nonmaterial resources. Then he closes with pessimistic and optimistic paths for the future. He seems persuaded by the pessimistic view—that the bottom 30 percent are perhaps beyond reach and that the elite are “hollow” and thus, “doomed” themselves (295). Nevertheless he does hold out hope that an awakening can occur (295–96).

Murray overlooks the strongest reason for optimism. By generalizing the two groups under study, he ignores the many exceptions within his categories—the solid members of both the top 20 percent and the bottom 30 percent. Additionally, he omits the vast middle half of the population where there are plenty of good, hard-working folk—the bread-and-butter of American society. Jonathan Rauch argues that these people “may in fact be the country’s connective tissue and social glue: people who shop comfortably at *both* Wal-Mart and Target, who follow football *and* like imported beer.”²⁰

Harrington’s book is a “classic,” but Murray’s book is a must-read if one is interested in poverty, inequality, and American society. For those who understand the limits of public policy, the importance of community, the sanctity of the individual, and the dignity of the human person, one can hope that many of the elites will awaken, that many in “the other America” will find a way to escape familial and social dysfunction, and that the solid middle will carry the day.

Notes

1. At least for the purposes of the book, Harrington was unconcerned with international poverty. He acknowledged its existence and severity but quickly put it on the back burner to focus on domestic poverty (1–2).
2. Harrington: “The Negro is poor because he is black ... but perhaps more importantly, the Negro is black because he is poor” (72).
3. See Kristen Kraakevik, “The Two Faces of Moral Poverty,” in *The Remedy for Poverty: Essays on the Moral Foundation of Effective Charity* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 1996).
4. For a detailed discussion of the proxy’s flaws, see chapter 1 of my book, *Poor Policy: How Government Harms the Poor* (Boulder: Westview Press; 1996).
5. It is a much longer discussion to wrestle with whether the stagnancy in the poverty rate was correlated or causal with the War on Poverty. It could be that economic growth naturally reduced “fixable” poverty and the beginning of the war has an unhappy coincidence with seeming failures to help the problem. That said, it is highly likely that dependence will tend to increase as subsidies for becoming dependent are made available. It is likely that *measured* poverty will increase when the most popular official statistics for poverty focus on earned income.
6. Here Harrington disagrees with the consensus. There is some debate about this in the literature. For a helpful overview and literature review, see the opening of Seth Norton, “Economic Growth and Poverty: In Search of Trickle-Down,” *Cato Journal* 22, no. 2 (2002): 263–75. Michael Cox and Richard Alm note that the conventional measures of income, economic growth, and poverty fail to accommodate vast improvements in the lives of everyone, including the poor (*Myths of Rich and Poor: Why We’re Better Off Than We Think* [New York: Basic Books, 2000]).
7. Harrington’s cynical discussion of unemployment insurance (for the nonpoor) is a notable exception (85): “It is a sort of state subsidy for the practice and study of the arts. Indeed, some legislators might be appalled to discover how many novels had been written on these funds.”
8. For an excellent chronicle of pre-1996 resentment toward the system, see Theresa Funciello, *Tyranny of Kindness: Dismantling the Welfare System to End Poverty in America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994). For an example of post-1996 concerns, see Celeste Watkins-Hayes, *The New Welfare Bureaucrats: Entanglements of Race, Class, and Policy Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
9. Harrington, 70–71. Thaddeus Russell argues that “anyone who invokes *The Other America* in the course of justifying the welfare state should be forced to answer for its chapter on African Americans. Harrington saw nothing of value in black culture,

but he was not a racist—he saw nothing of value in *anything* produced by poor people of any color....” See Russell, “The Paternalists’ Bible,” *Reason*, July 2012, available at <http://reason.com/archives/2012/06/08/the-paternalists-bible>.

10. Not surprisingly, the related questions have spawned an amazingly wide and broad literature. Daniel Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965) was an early, influential work. He focused on African-Americans, but the data in that community have worsened considerably since then, and the data indicating family breakdown, even among the overall population, exceed those for African-Americans alone in Moynihan’s day. Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) was an important work in the 1980s, wrestling with the extent to which welfare policies were contributing to these problems. Waldfogel et al., “Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing,” *Fragile Families* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 87–112, is a useful example of recent work.
11. Although far from his most famous work, my personal favorite is *In Pursuit of Happiness and Good Government* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989)—a provocative and relatively unknown book on thinking through what one is trying to accomplish with public policy. In addition to *Coming Apart* and *Losing Ground*, Murray’s other books are *A Behavioral Study of Rural Modernization: Social and Economic Change in Thai Villages* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977); *Beyond Probation: Juvenile Corrections and the Chronic Delinquent*, co-authored with Louis A. Cox Jr. (New York: Sage Publications, 1979); *Apollo: The Race to the Moon* with Catherine Cox (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989); *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* with Richard Herrnstein (New York: Free Press, 1996); *What It Means to Be a Libertarian* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997); *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); *In Our Hands: A Plan to Replace the Welfare State* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2006); and *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing American Schools Back to Reality* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008).
12. The specifics of the reform are largely anticipated in the most influential book on welfare in the 1990s, Marvin Olasky’s *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (New York: Regnery, 1994).
13. In a *New York Times* essay (“The Poverty of an Idea,” March 2, 2012), Harrington biographer Maurice Isserman compares Harrington and Murray but draws too fine of a distinction. Both authors talk about individual choices but emphasize broader influences—what could be construed as “a culture of poverty.” Murray focuses on the impact of public policy sins of commission; Harrington focuses on ethnic and class-based culture, as well as public policy sins of omission. Although Isserman writes as if Harrington were a fan of the poor, Harrington condescends and insults

them at times. In contrast, Murray extends more dignity to the human person, including the poor among us and apart from us.

14. Murray also points to other causes: the sexual revolution (broad availability of the pill, access to legal abortion, and changing social attitudes toward sex and gender roles), increased income, the growth of TV (and its impact on culture), and the increased value of IQ and education in a world increasingly driven by technological advance.
15. Fewer than 50 percent of these adults are married; the divorce rate is about 35 percent; 25 percent of their children are being raised by single moms; 30 percent of children will be living with both biological parents when their mothers turn forty; of those who drop out of high school, 60 percent of their children are illegitimate. Beyond the income class differences that Murray emphasizes, he also notes that these statistics are even more problematic among the less-educated.
16. See, for example, Isabel Sawhill and Laura Chadwick's December 1999 Urban Institute study, "Children in Cities: Uncertain Futures." Available at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/1999/12/poverty-sawhill>.
17. Building on his work in *Losing Ground*, Murray was an early prophet on "the coming white underclass" in a famous 1993 essay in *The Wall Street Journal* (October 29, 1993).
18. R. R. Reno, "The One Percent," *First Things*, March 2012, 4.
19. Reno, "The One Percent," 5.
20. Jonathan Rauch, "Two Americas, Growing Apart," *Reason*, June 2012, 47–50.