

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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28 March 2015

Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Prophet about the Family

Fifty years ago (1965), Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist, Assistant Secretary of Labor, and later one of the most important U.S. Senators of the 20th century, wrote a controversial but prescient report on the importance of the family for African-American children: *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action* (aka the *Moynihan Report*). It focused on the deep roots of black poverty in America and concluded controversially that the relative absence of nuclear families would greatly hinder further progress toward economic and political equality.

Moynihan argued that the rise in single-mother families was not due to a lack of jobs but rather to a destructive vein in ghetto culture that could be traced back to slavery and Jim Crow discrimination. As he wrote later, “The work began in the most orthodox setting, the U.S. Department of Labor, to establish at some level of statistical conciseness what ‘everyone knew’: that economic conditions determine social conditions. Whereupon, it turned out that what everyone knew was evidently not so.” Here are a few salient excerpts from the report:

“The United States is approaching a new crisis in race relations. In the decade that began with the school desegregation decision of the Supreme Court [1954], and ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the demand of Negro Americans for full recognition of their civil rights was finally met. . . .

. . . [But] three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment have taken their toll on the Negro people. The harsh fact is that as a group, at the present time, in terms of ability to win out in the competitions of American life, they are not equal to most of those groups with which they will be competing. Individually, Negro Americans reach the highest peaks of achievement. But collectively, in the spectrum of American ethnic and religious and regional groups, where some get plenty and some get none, where some send eighty percent of their children to college and others pull them out of school at the 8th grade, Negroes are among the weakest.

The most difficult fact for white Americans to understand is that in these terms the circumstances of the Negro American community in recent years has probably been getting *worse, not better*. Indices of dollars of income, standards of living, and years of education deceive. The gap between the Negro and most other groups in American society is widening.

The fundamental problem, in which this is most clearly the case, is that of family structure. The evidence — not final, but powerfully persuasive — is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling. A middle class group has managed to save itself, but for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has

all but disintegrated. There are indications that the situation may have been arrested in the past few years, but the general post war trend is unmistakable. So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself.

The thesis of this paper is that these events, in combination, confront the nation with a new kind of problem. Measures that have worked in the past, or would work for most groups in the present, will not work here. A national effort is required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure.”

Why is this still an important report fifty years later? Liberals at that time typically blasted the report as unfair and not helpful. But the truth is that the liberals were (and are) terribly unfair and biased when it came to Moynihan’s report. Moynihan cited slavery, discrimination and “three centuries of injustice” as the causes of black family disintegration. Who could argue with that conclusion? In fact, since Moynihan’s report, scholars have avoided studying the relationship between family structure and poverty, which seems absurd to me. Although Dan Quayle was ridiculed for arguing the same thing as Moynihan, it was William Julius Wilson who praised Moynihan and finally began serious research on the connection between family structure and poverty. As columnist Nicholas Kristof has recently shown, in 2013, 71% of black children were born to an unwed mother, as were 53% of Hispanic children and 36% of white children. Single parenthood is the new norm. Indeed, Sara McLanahan of Princeton and Christopher Jencks of Harvard write: “A father’s absence increases antisocial behavior, such as aggression, rule-breaking, delinquency and illegal drug use.” These effects are greater for boys than girls. It is time for Americans—liberals included—to acknowledge the role of the family—and the importance of the nuclear family— in fighting poverty, “as the primary transmitter of the social capital essential for self-reliance and betterment and as the primary indicator of social outcomes” (George Will).

Recently, famed sociologist Robert D. Putnam has added to our understanding of this social pathology with his new book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Inequality within American society, he argues, has profound consequences on children and is rooted in various interrelated trends: family instability, community dysfunction and the collapse of the blue-collar economy. As columnist Michael Gerson demonstrates, Putnam’s case-study approach in his book reveals something important: Children experience these broad social trends mainly as “the absence of committed, trustworthy adults in their lives.” One boy, David, is on probation and stated: “I never really had around-the-table-family dinners at all, so I never got to miss it.” Sophia writes of her mother: “The day after my ninth birthday, she was arrested down the street from here for prostitution. And she never came to see me. She was so close, [but] she chose prostitution and drugs over me.” Throughout Putnam’s books children consistently describe their lives as one of neglect, isolation, loneliness and broken trust. In addition, poor children live in neighborhoods and go to schools that reinforce this dysfunction—“atomized, indifferent, drug-ridden and violent.” Putnam sees a symbiotic relationship between family instability and poverty: “Poverty produces family instability, and family instability in turn produces poverty.” If America is ever going to change this dismal situation it must reinforce the

conviction that there really are no substitutes for stable families, functioning communities and a working blue-collar economy. As a culture, we seem to be ignoring the obvious, something which God declared from the beginning (see Genesis 2).

The Department of Labor website has the entire Moynihan report available for reading. Also, see, Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times* (12 March 2015); George F. Will in the *Washington Post* (13 March 2015); and Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (16 March 2015).