

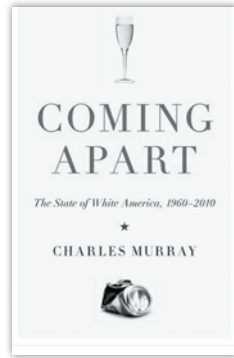
***Coming Apart:
The State of
White America,
1960–2010***

By Charles Murray

Crown Forum, 2012

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The United States is ‘coming apart at the seams—not ethnic seams, but the seams of class’ (p. 269). And, according to American social scientist, Charles Murray, it has been doing so for 50 years.

In his new book, Murray uses the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 as the symbolic point of transition in American society ‘leading to the formation of classes that are different in kind and in their degree of separation from anything that the nation has ever known’ (p. 11).

This story of class divergence is one of collapse and decline, at the heart of which lies the idea of ‘the American project.’ The project ‘consists of the continuing effort, begun with the founding [of the nation], to demonstrate that human beings can be left free as individuals and families to live their lives as they see fit, coming together voluntarily to solve their joint problems’ (p. 12). But this civic culture, which was once ‘so widely shared among Americans that it amounted to a civil religion,’ is now unraveling (p. 12).

Murray explores the reasons for the collapse and demonstrates just what is needed to restore this ailing civic culture. He uses four ‘founding virtues,’ lying at the heart of the American project, to frame his analysis of social change. The virtues are: industriousness (the determination to improve one’s lot); honesty (essential if a market economy is to flourish); marriage (the foundation for stable family and social life); and religiosity (the basis for moral virtue and the healthy functioning of limited government). ‘The success of America depended on virtue in the people when the country began and still does in the 21st century,’ Murray says (p. 143).

The first significant factor in social disintegration since the events in Dallas is the emergence of a new elite so isolated from the rest of American society that it casts into doubt questions the future of the American project. Murray defines the new upper class as the top 5% of Americans who run the country but live lives increasingly separate from mainstream America.

The new elite are rich and exceptionally clever; they breed among themselves and send their rich, bright children, in turn, to the same elite colleges where they themselves were educated. These homogamous practices confer not just financial advantage but also cognitive advantage. The new upper class also lives apart in what Murray calls the ‘SuperZips,’ suburbs in certain parts of the country that enjoy a high concentration of wealth and educational attainment. All these factors compound the danger that ‘the people who have so much influence on the course of the nation have little direct experience with the lives of ordinary Americans, and make their judgments about what’s good for other people based on their own highly atypical lives’ (p. 101).

Murray is a self-confessed libertarian (p. 234), and as such, doesn’t want to force the super elites to live differently. Rather, he wants them to rediscover for themselves the importance of the founding virtues and teach them to those most in need of instruction, a new lower class that comprises about 20% of the white population. It is to this class, whose social norms are disintegrating through neglect of the founding virtues, that Murray turns his attention next.

Murray sketches the new lower class using a fictional Fishtown where ‘nobody has more than a high school diploma [and] everybody who has an occupation is in a blue-collar job, mid- or low-level service job, or a low-level white-collar job’ (p. 146). Once again, he uses the frame of the founding virtues to analyse this class and concludes that high rates of male unemployment; children being raised in homes with one or two parents, neither of whom are married; criminal behavior; and religious indifference have combined to bring about a collapse of the social capital needed for the possibility of community.

‘Decay in the founding virtues is problematic for human flourishing’ (p. 266), Murray says. These virtues have a direct and strong relationship to self-reported happiness (p. 255), and he argues that they may already have been lost to the extent that American exceptionalism (freedom coupled with responsibility, the product of the cultural capital bequeathed by the founders) is threatened. ‘Discard the system that created the cultural capital, and the qualities we have loved about Americans will go away’ (p. 305).

Being the libertarian he is, Murray makes no case for government intervention to support the founding virtues. Indeed, one of his fears is that America will adopt the ‘welfarist’ policies of Europe and let bureaucrats fix things. This would be a mistake, he says, even though the new upper class might be comforted by the salve of paying higher taxes. ‘Taking the trouble out of life strips people of major ways in which human beings look back on their lives and say, “I made a difference.”’ (p. 283).

Rather, Murray seeks a return to the founders’ conception of limited government. At various points in its history, three or four religious Great Awakenings have swept across America. Now Murray proposes—or rather, pleads for—‘a civic Great Awakening’ to stir the new upper class in their SuperZips. His vision of an upper class civic awakening ‘starts with a question that I hope they will take to heart: How much do you value what has made America exceptional and what are you willing to do to preserve it?’ (p. 305).

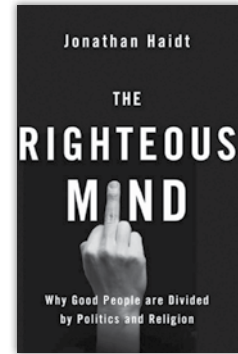
In *Coming Apart*, which, he says, is his ‘valedictory on the topic of happiness and public policy’ (p. 308), Murray builds a statistically detailed case for the renewal of the American project. Yet the book is more than an exercise in social science. It is a call to attend to the threat posed by a widening cultural divide in twenty-first century America.

Unless heeded, Murray cautions that the Jeffersonian experiment in ordered liberty, ‘unique among the nations, and immeasurably precious’ (p. 306) may yet fail.

Reviewed by Peter Kurti

***The Righteous Mind:
Why Good People are
Divided by Politics and
Religion***

By Jonathon Haidt
Pantheon Books, New
York, 2012
US\$18.97, 419 pages
ISBN 9780307377906



The *Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* is an important book that is also fun to read. Drawing on the latest discoveries of evolutionary psychology, author Jonathon Haidt investigates where our most fundamental moral ideas come from, and why we cling so tenaciously to our version of what is right when we get into arguments with people whose political or religious beliefs differ from our own. The sub-title suggests we should accept that political and ethical positions radically different from our own still have moral validity, although it seems to me that the book inadvertently demonstrates the superiority of conservative ethics over socialist or libertarian ones (Haidt, as a man of the left, can’t quite bring himself to acknowledge this, and I suspect many readers of *Policy* might be reluctant too!).

The first part of the book is fascinating. It shows how core elements of human morality appear to be grounded in instinct, not reason. We react first and rationalise our reaction afterwards. Even when we find it difficult to offer a logical explanation for a gut feeling that something is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, we feel it deep in our soul, so much so that we are often willing to sacrifice our own interests to stop other people from doing the wrong thing, or to punish those who do. Humans apparently are naturally righteous.

Philosophers have tried to explain morality logically, deriving rules from a few basic axioms (e.g. that something is wrong if it harms others). But they have got things the wrong way around. Our brains are already wired to tell us what is good and bad, right and wrong. We learned this in the course of hundreds of thousands of years of individual and