

William McKenzie: Our splintering culture

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Charles Murray is a social scientist who doesn't look like he would traffic in radical ideas, the kind that would upend conventional wisdom. The graduate of Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology spends most of his days working as a scholar in Washington, D.C., for the conservative American Enterprise Institute, where thinkers rub elbows with each other. Murray also has a passion for data. The author has spent countless hours tearing apart Census Bureau reports, Gallup polls and General Social Surveys to develop a theory that explains America's divisions differently from the way the tea party and Occupy movements do.

Murray contends in his just-released book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* that the real problem plaguing America is a serious class divide that is eating away at the notion of a common culture. Sure, we have problems with runaway government spending, as the tea partiers point out, and runaway salaries of the rich, as the Occupiers argue. But what's really tearing America up, he writes, is that the nation's new upper class and new working class are pulling in different directions *culturally*.

We will remain a military and diplomatic superpower, the controversial libertarian asserts. Our economy will remain competitive globally because of our human capital. But if the social trends aren't reversed, he concludes, the "American Project" will end because of a splintered culture.

Writes Murray:

"The American Project ... consists of the continuing effort, begun with the founding, 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. The polity that was based upon that idea led to a civic culture that was seen as exceptional by all the world. That culture was so widely shared among Americans that it amounted to a civil religion. To be an American was to be different from other nationalities, in ways that Americans treasured. That culture is unraveling."

Murray brought his counter-reformation idea to Dallas this month, speaking to a National Center for Policy Analysis audience. Before the lunch, we talked about his book — it has sparked an

uproar among the intelligentsia — and its peculiar subtitle. Why write a book about just white America?

Because Anglos form the bulk of our population, he said. He didn't use information about minority groups to make his point because he didn't want critics to say the divide is a racial or an ethnic one. The stress being placed upon America is about class, he contends.

Even if you factor in data about Latinos, African-Americans and Asian-Americans, which he does at the last, those numbers don't change much about the divide between the upper and lower classes. "The trends I describe exist independently of ethnic heritage," he concludes.

Of course, money is one thing that separates the classes. That is what is getting the Occupy movement so angry. Murray uses data to argue that the classes also differ significantly, more troublingly, in their approaches to family, vocation, faith and community.

That hasn't always been the case, he claims. He uses population surveys from the early 1960s to show that although the classes may have long been separated by income, they have not always been so separated culturally, such as in their approach to marriage and divorce.

Murray uses two fictional towns to make his case. "Belmont" represents the upper-middle classes of 1960 and 2010. As in the real Belmont suburb of Boston, that's where you find business executives, professors, scientists, lawyers and other white-collar workers. All adult Belmonters have at least a college degree.

"Fishtown" is the home of the working classes of 1960 and 2010. As in the real Fishtown area of Philadelphia, that's where you find electricians, plumbers, machinists, as well as service workers and lower-level white-collar types. No one in Fishtown has more than a high school degree.

Murray then assigned most white Americans ages 30-49 into one of the two cities based on actual socioeconomic data. He uses the contrast in that data to illustrate his argument that America is coming apart culturally.

For example, in the early 1960s, Belmont and Fishtown residents watched similar TV shows, held the same views about out-of-wedlock births and viewed work similarly. They also had similar patterns of religious adherence. Residents of one town would easily run into residents from the other.

Not so today, Murray concludes. Here are two quick examples:

In 1960, 94 percent of Belmont residents and 84 percent of Fishtown residents were married. Not much of a gap. By 2010, Belmont's marriage rate had dropped slightly, to 83 percent, but

Fishtown's had plummeted to 48 percent. In 50 years, the attitudes toward marriage had widened sharply.

In 1962, nearly the same percentage of children in Belmont and Fishtown — 99 and 96 percent, respectively — lived with both birth parents. By 2004, the numbers had blown apart. In Belmont, 84 percent of kids lived with both birth parents. In Fishtown, just 37 percent did. This divergence, Murray suggests, puts the two communities in different family cultures.

As that information highlights, *Coming Apart* is heavy on data. In previous works — such as his controversial 1994 book on intelligence and class structure, *The Bell Curve* — critics charged Murray with manipulating information to fit his arguments.

Not being a social scientist, I can't go toe-to-toe with him on data. Perhaps some other scholars will emerge to paint a different picture. But much of his thesis makes sense intuitively, especially the part about the classes not commingling; whereas the rich once rubbed elbows with everyone else, today they tend to cluster in “super Zip codes,” where everyone is in the 99th percentile of wealth and influence.

Dallas' super Zips are a prime example: 75225 (Preston Hollow) and 75205 (the Park Cities) are not really alongside neighborhoods with many working-class homes. They instead are surrounded by more neighborhoods that approach their level of wealth and education.

Murray cites this layering effect as one of the prime changes between 1960 and today. The nation has always had Belmonts, but they once weren't so cordoned off by other Belmonts. It didn't take long to go from Belmont to Fishtown.

I grew up in a Belmont neighborhood in Fort Worth. We had the professionals, managers and executives that Murray describes as characteristic of the upper-middle class. Just a few blocks away was the equivalent of Fishtown. Blue-collar families largely made up those neighborhoods, often working at the General Dynamics plant. So did lower-level white-collar families.

We didn't live miles apart. We lived blocks apart, if that.

The families from those neighborhoods shopped at the same stores, went to the same gas stations and sent their kids to the same schools. (To illustrate my point, Lee Harvey Oswald briefly went to the high school I later attended.)

Schools' role in those shared traditions was critical. Fort Worth had few private schools in the early 1960s, unlike today. We all swam in the same sea together. It was a wonderful democratic experiment.

With minor exceptions, you weren't defined by how much money you had or who your family was in Fort Worth. You played sports together, you shared lockers, you sat cheek-by-jowl in the lunchroom. And you formed friendships based on factors other than money or class.

In fact, some of my most enjoyable memories were of big weekend football games where kids from different backgrounds would gather and play. On other weekends, we would go fishing or hunting together. Yes, a Belmonter family would own the farm or ranch, but you would find blue-collar and white-collar pals running around together.

That's less likely today. Kids in Belmont are much more likely to attend a private school. That's certainly true in my old Fort Worth neighborhood, and it's true here in Dallas.

I'm not opposed to private schools. I briefly attended one in elementary school. Each family has to do what's best for their children.

But one of the reasons I'm passionate about improving public schools, including my kids' school, is that they are one of our best hopes for mixing people together. All the fussing over school reform, whether that be implementing better ways to evaluate teachers or strengthening middle schools, is worth it for reasons that go beyond academic outcomes. The reforms are needed to create campuses that attract people from many different points on the socioeconomic spectrum.

In another way, a strong public school system is the best hope to crack the increasing separation of the classes. Murray argues persuasively that the new upper class is increasingly separated from the new working class because the former is the product of generations of elite education.

He presents ample data to affirm his point: Well-educated folks marry well-educated folks. They produce children who are usually well-educated, too. Those smart kids marry other smart kids.

Two or three generations of that pattern, which often comes from people attending quality private schools and elite colleges, and you get upper-class residents with little idea of what life is like for the working class.

Conversely, two or three generations of working families not being able to attain a top-line education will lead to less earning power for them and their offspring. They will live in a universe far removed from the elite.

Yet if you have strong public schools, especially in big cities like Dallas, students from working families will have a shot at an education that lands them in a good college or decent job. That's certainly true for students in Dallas' top high schools, such as Townview's Science and

Engineering Magnet and its Talented and Gifted Magnet. They are on a par with any high school in the country. However, the same cannot be said for enough of Dallas' other high schools.

Murray doesn't talk about public schools in his book, but in our interview, he concurred with their importance.

He grew up in Iowa, where he, too, went to a public school that brought together kids from different backgrounds. He and his wife raised their children in Burkittsville, Md., a town he describes as more Fishtown than Belmont. Their kids went to public schools.

Murray says he and his wife chose Burkittsville so their children wouldn't grow up in a hothouse of affluence. In modern Washington, D.C., it's hard to find many working-class neighborhoods next to upper-class ones.

It's the same quality I find so appealing about living in Oak Cliff. Yes, my family lives in a Belmont neighborhood, but working-class neighborhoods are only blocks away. What's more, our local elementary school reflects that mixture.

Perhaps that approach won't work for everyone, but people from both sides of the class divide need to find more ways to mix it up. As Murray said in our interview, the swirling together of people from different backgrounds leads to a fuller, richer cultural life.

If you are looking to Murray to provide a way to do that, you will be disappointed. He wants to simply start a national conversation about our cultural divide.

At one level, I understand that. But I don't buy into his provocative argument that upper-middle-class families shouldn't shy away from defending their views on marriage, work, religion and community. He urges them to spark a civic Great Awakening, much like earlier cultural revivals that swept across America in the 1700s, 1800s and 1900s.

If values are true, they are worth defending no matter who holds them. But I have a hard time seeing how a revival led by the upper class is going to work so well. What are they supposed to do, knock on doors and say, "By the way, I've got a lot of money and a lot of good values, and you should start appreciating them"?

His approach almost surely would lead to deep Fishtown resentments and a false sense of superiority in Belmont Land. Rather than bring the classes together, it's more likely to further drive them apart.

A better approach is for communities to build up their cultural capital through creating or strengthening shared institutions. Some have responded to Murray by suggesting we need a national service project. To me, there's no better place to start than with our public schools.

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