

**Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010**,  
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**Preach What You Practice:  
Charles Murray on Our New Class Divide**

**Russell K. Nieli**

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Several years ago I was working as a preceptorial assistant to a young visiting professor (let's call her Nicole) who had come to Princeton from Rutgers to teach a course in American political thought. Nicole was an outspoken feminist with left-of-center views on most things including marriage and family issues. I don't remember what the occasion was, but in one of her lectures she explained that the American family had changed very radically over the past few decades and that now there were many alternatives to the traditional arrangement of a father and mother living together with their biological children. Blended families, single parenthood, divorced couples with joint custody of their children, and several other nontraditional family forms, she explained, are now common, with the Ozzie and Harriet household representing an ever shrinking proportion of American families. Because of this new pluralism, she said, it was wrong to prioritize the traditional family or think it better than the many alternatives. Nicole posed an illustrative question: "How many of you here at Princeton have grown up in a traditional husband-wife family without divorce, stepchildren, or a single parent?" She asked for a show of hands.

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**Russell K. Nieli** is a lecturer in the Department of Politics at Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544; russniel@princeton.edu.

In asking the question Nicole obviously thought that many of the Princeton students, possibly a majority, would not raise their hands. I suspect she obtained such a result in posing the question before other audiences. After the anticipated hand count she probably intended to say something like, “Look at all of you who didn’t raise your hands. See how common the nontraditional family is today.” But a big surprise was in store for the Princeton visitor. Immediately after posing the question a sea of extended hands went up in the lecture hall and one had to look very hard for those not joining in the general affirmation. Perhaps 85 percent of the hundred or so students present indicated that they had been raised in a traditional two-parent family. Nicole was stunned and struggled to regain her composure, utterly bewildered over the result of her query. Though I liked Nicole and got along well with her, I must admit to a bit of *Schadenfreude* derived from my long-standing contempt for feminist shibboleths. (I managed, however, to keep a poker face.)

Aware that I knew the Princeton scene much better than she did, Nicole asked me after class to explain the stunning results of her informal Princeton poll. “Why did all those students raise their hands?” she asked. I gently explained to her that the strict admission standards at institutions like Princeton and other Ivy Leagues tend to weed out students from troubled family circumstances. There is a good deal of social science research, I said, which shows that children from traditional, two-parent families raising their own biological children tend to do better on a host of indicators, including academic performance, than children raised under circumstances of divorce, single-parenthood, or stepfamily situations. I cited one particular study by a Cornell researcher that found an extraordinarily low rate of divorce and single parenthood among the parents of Ivy League students. Most students at Princeton, I explained, come from families that approximate the Ozzie and Harriet—or better, Cliff and Claire Huxtable—model, and have grown up with married parents, both of whom usually have had four or more years of college education. For a host of reasons, I went on, students from such backgrounds do much better in school and on standardized tests than those from other backgrounds, and they usually live in neighborhoods where most of their friends and schoolmates have grown up under similar circumstances. Such students, I said, tend to dominate the student body at the more selective colleges and universities like Princeton.

I was thinking about this episode with Nicole while reading Charles Murray’s latest book on the cognitive partitioning of American communities. *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* is vintage Murray that elaborates on themes presented in two earlier works, *The Bell Curve* (co-authored with the late

Richard Herrnstein, 1994) and *Real Education* (2008).<sup>1</sup> Its major contention can be easily stated: over the last several decades a high-achieving, elite-college-educated upper-class has developed in America that has not only become ever more successful in terms of income, family cohesiveness, and capacity to pass on its financial and educational advantages to its offspring, but also has become increasingly isolated, culturally and geographically, from blue-collar America, especially from those with no more than a high school education.

To avoid the kinds of complications that so distorted public understanding of *The Bell Curve*, and to make clear that the focus of the book is on education, culture, and class-based isolation rather than on race, Murray confines most of his empirical investigation in *Coming Apart* to whites. White America, he shows, is “coming apart” in the sense that as it has become increasingly wealthy and influential, the cognitive elite has become ever more isolated and withdrawn from the rest of society, at the same time that the white working class, especially its lower end, has become more disorganized and removed from traditional social responsibilities and family values. With graph after graph Murray documents this increasing class isolation and up-and-down class pattern on various social indicators, though he deliberately refrains from giving detailed policy advice—believing that bringing this troubling situation to a generally uninformed public is an important enough goal for one book.

### Revenge of the Nerds

Remember the old joke: “What do you call a nerd ten years after he graduates from high school?” Answer: “Boss!” The first part of Murray’s *Coming Apart* is dedicated to illustrating the truth contained in this old witticism, and in showing how, over the past several decades, America’s most academically gifted students have not only managed to become quite wealthy, but generally choose one another as marital partners and cluster together in the same neighborhoods among well-educated people like themselves.

These developments, Murray explains, are driven in large part by the increasingly high-tech and cognitively demanding nature of modern economies and the premium they place on abstract reasoning ability and high IQs. Nowadays, being smart really pays off in terms of earnings potential—the nerds have gotten

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012); Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); and Charles Murray, *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America’s Schools Back to Reality* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008).

their revenge. Having a nice personality, good work habits, and good people skills still pays off in a number of fields—sales is a good example—but many of the most remunerative jobs in the modern economy demand high-end brain power for which there is no substitute. Murray quotes Bill Gates in response to a question he was asked about Microsoft's most worrisome competitors: "Software is an IQ business. Microsoft must win the IQ war, or we won't have a future. I don't worry about Lotus or IBM, because the smartest guys would rather come to work for Microsoft. Our competitors for IQ are investment banks such as Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the huge increase in the market value of brain power, several other changes in American society have occurred that have affected the way in which the new upper class differs from its predecessor. Among other factors, these changes involve what Murray calls the new college "sorting machine." Simply stated, the elite schools today (which Murray says can be defined as the top twenty-five universities and twenty-five liberal arts colleges according to the *Barrons* and *U.S. News & World Report* rating systems) have much higher admissions standards than they did in the first half of the twentieth century when they mainly catered to the children of the wealthy. "Before World War II," Murray writes, "most of the freshmen in an elite college were drawn from the region's socioeconomic elite—from the Northeast for the Ivy League, the West Coast for Stanford and USC, and the South for Duke and Vanderbilt. Some of those students were talented, but many were academically pedestrian" (54).

Murray cites a 1926 study that showed that the average IQ of the students at the most prestigious universities—including Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Columbia—were only slightly higher than the IQ of college graduates across the country (117 versus 115). In the decades following World War II, however, things changed very rapidly, with a huge expansion in the enrollment in the less competitive colleges accompanied by ever rising academic requirements for entrance to the relatively small number of the highly selective institutions. The result was a kind of cognitive segregation within the American college system, one that reproduced itself after college in the occupational and housing arena as well.

"The segregation of the college system," Murray explains,

now means that the typical classroom in a third-tier public university is filled with students who are not much brighter than the average young

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<sup>2</sup>Murray, *Coming Apart*, 46. Further references to this work will be cited within the text.

person in the nation as a whole, whereas the typical classroom in an elite school has no one outside the top decile of cognitive talent, and many who are in the top hundredth or thousandth of the distribution....The cognitive pecking order of schools is apparent to everyone—to employers looking at applicants' résumés, to parents thinking about where they want their children to go to college, and to high school students thinking about how to best make their way in life. (pp. 58–59)

This pecking order, says Murray, is not lost on the students themselves when they leave college to marry and raise a family. “Back in the days when Harvard men and Wellesley women were more likely to be rich than to be especially smart,” he writes, “this meant that money was more likely to marry money. In an era when they are both almost certainly in the top [percentiles] of the IQ distribution, it means that very smart is more likely to marry very smart” (64). And the smart-who-marry-smart are likely to seek out neighborhoods with people like themselves, producing what Murray calls “a new kind of segregation.” An example of this is suggested in a quotation from the *Washington Examiner* journalist Michael Barone: “On my former block in Washington DC were my next door neighbor (Princeton ‘57 and Radcliff ‘66), the folks next to them (both Harvard ‘64) and the people across the street (Yale ‘71 and Yale Law ‘74), plus me (Harvard ‘66 and Yale Law ‘69). Just a typical American neighborhood, in other words” (84).

Murray devotes a good deal of his analysis in *Coming Apart* to showing the relative economic and educational homogeneity in what he calls the “SuperZips”—clusters of the wealthiest zip codes in which the adults almost all have a four-year college degree or better and many have gone to the most selective colleges and universities in the land. The rich, of course, have always clustered together in affluent areas, but today’s upper class differs from that of the past, Murray suggests, in being smarter and better educated, more numerous, and more spread out across the country in larger numbers of affluent enclaves. And because of their control of the media, educational organizations, scientific establishments, institutions of high finance, and the like, their impact on the general culture, Murray believes, is much greater than the wealthy of old. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, says Murray, the rich were very small in number and concentrated around a few, mainly Northeastern cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Lacking the sheer brain power, communication skills, and networking abilities of today’s upper class, their cultural impact was quite limited, especially in comparison to the

labor unions, churches, and urban political machines of the day. All this has changed, Murray's analysis suggests, and not always for the better.

### **Harms of the Current Segregation**

Students at Princeton sometimes complain that they live in a bubble, very much isolated from mainstream America. Most, however, don't seem to mind the isolation. At other elite colleges, I am told, students react in a similar fashion. The isolation of the nation's cognitive elite, says Murray, gets even greater once they graduate, marry people from similar college backgrounds, advance in their very high paying occupations, and eventually settle down to raise families in places like the Georgetown section of Washington, DC, McLean, Virginia, Brookline, Massachusetts, Chicago's North Shore, or New York's Upper East Side. This social isolation of the elite is driven, Murray says, not by malevolence or class hatred, but by the natural human desire to converse with and be around people with similar experiences as oneself.

"The human impulse behind the isolation of the new upper class," he writes,

is as basic as impulses get: People like to be around other people who understand them and to whom they can talk. Cognitive segregation was bound to start developing as soon as unusually smart people began to have the opportunity to hang out with other unusually smart people. . . . If the most talented remain wealthy, they will congregate in the nicest places to live, with nicest defined as places where they can be around other talented, wealthy people like them, living in the most desirable parts of town, isolated from everyone else. (pp. 53, 120)

Murray tries to drive home the general ignorance of the educated elite regarding those educationally and economically beneath them via a self-administered readership test, on the assumption that most *Coming Apart* readers will be members of the educational elite—or their close cousins. Here are some of the test's questions:

- Have you or your spouse ever bought a pick-up truck?
- Have you ever had a close friend who was an evangelical Christian?
- Have you ever had a close friend who could seldom get better than Cs in high school?
- Since leaving school, have you ever worn a uniform?

- During the last month have you voluntarily hung out with people who were smoking cigarettes?
- Have you ever worked on a factory floor?
- Who is Jimmy Johnson? (pp. 103–105)

Having administered these questions informally to colleagues and friends, Murray says that those who have grown up in upper-middle-class neighborhoods answer most of the questions negatively (and don't know that Jimmy Johnson is the NASCAR superstar) and thereby reveal their extreme class isolation. The isolation, of course, cuts both ways: those in the lower-class neighborhoods don't know much about what life is like on Park Avenue or in Georgetown. But the new upper-class ignorance about other Americans, says Murray, "is more problematic than the ignorance of other Americans about them" (101). It is, after all, the upper class of the cognitive elite who make the most important social decisions. "It is not a problem if truck drivers cannot empathize with the priorities of Yale professors," Murray writes. "It is a problem if Yale professors, or producers of network news programs, or CEOs of great corporations, or presidential advisers cannot empathize with the priorities of truck drivers," because "[a] new upper class that makes decisions affecting the lives of everyone else but increasingly doesn't know much about how everybody else lives is vulnerable to making mistakes" (101, 100).

### **The Growth of a White Underclass**

The description of the new upper class that Murray presents in *Coming Apart* will come as little surprise to most of the educated readers of his book. Many have gone to college with such people and know what life is like in communities like Scarsdale, Palo Alto, and Princeton. The condition of the white working class and its neighborhoods, however, is not as well-known to Murray's typical reader, and many will find Murray's statistics-laden description of the decline in white working-class life, especially its less educated segment, disturbing if not shocking. The lower end of the white working class, Murray shows, is displaying many of the same distressing traits usually associated with the black and Hispanic underclass. Whether one looks at rates of marital dissolution and single parenthood, out-of-wedlock births, crime, unemployment, and many other negative social indicators, blue-collar whites who have no more than a high school education are having a rough time of it, Murray's data shows.

To use the title of Murray's earlier book about the black underclass, they're "losing ground" and displaying levels of personal and family disintegration that are in the sharpest contrast to the ways of the new upper class. To cite just one indicator: in 2005, nine out of ten white children whose mothers were forty years old and members of the college-educated upper class still lived with both biological parents. The comparable figure for those whites with working-class mothers who had no more than a high school education was less than four in ten (271). Out-of-wedlock births and single parenthood, while it has grown across educational and class divides over the past forty years, is still overwhelmingly a problem of the less educated lower and lower-middle class, Murray shows.

Such a development has ominous consequences. For whether one is talking about school problems and dropping out, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, emotional illness, or many other social ills, those raised in intact families—having a biological mother and biological father present—are statistically much better able to avoid these social harms than those raised in other kinds of family structures, with those raised by never-married women statistically having the worst outcomes (158). The lower end of the white working class is experiencing many of the same problems, and for many of the same reasons, as lower-class urban blacks, with family structure being a critical factor in each case. "The growth in births to unmarried women has been a social catastrophe," Murray declares (298). "Differences in the fortunes of different ethnic groups persist, but white America is not headed in one direction and nonwhite America in another. We are divisible in terms of class" (278).

As I explained to the visiting professor from Rutgers, well-educated upper-class parents in intact, two-parent households are particularly good at preparing their children to be high achievers in school. Murray attributes this superior school performance in part to the genetic transfer of IQ and academic talent—the academically gifted are more likely to have academically gifted children. But the new upper class also has adopted styles of child rearing and even prenatal practices that give their children substantial advantages in terms of later school performance. "The children of the new upper class," Murray writes,

are the object of intense planning from the moment the woman learns she is pregnant...She does not drink alcohol or allow herself to be exposed even to secondhand smoke during her pregnancy. She makes sure her nutritional intake exactly mirrors the optimal diet... She gains no more and no less than the prescribed weight during her pregnancy.



She breast-feeds her newborn...The infant is bombarded with intellectual stimulation from the moment of birth, and sometimes from the moment that it is known that conception has occurred. The mobile over the infant's crib and the toys with which he is provided are designed to induce every possible bit of neural growth within the child's cerebral cortex. (p. 39)

Murray continues: "The lengths to which some parents will go to maximize their child's chance to get into a prestigious college are apparently without limit...It is not urban legend, but documented fact, that some parents send their children to test-preparation schools for the entrance test to exclusive preschools....One of the major preoccupations of upper-class parents during their children's teenage years, the college admissions process, is almost entirely absent in mainstream America" (39–41). While Murray sees such intense concern for the cognitive development of one's child as generally a good thing, "the downside is that new-upper-class parents tend to overdo it" (40). Anyone who has read Amy Chua's best-selling *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which describes the extreme pressure placed on Chinese American youth to develop their academic and musical talent, would certainly agree with Murray on this score.

### **What Is to Be Done?**

Murray deliberately avoids major policy recommendations in *Coming Apart*, correctly perceiving that such recommendations would detract from his major purpose to demonstrate the huge class divide that has been invisible for so long. He does, however, permit himself one major indulgence that focuses on the new upper class. What we need, says Murray, is for the new upper class—which has managed so well to maintain relatively stable family relationships, work hard, stay out of jail, avoid smoking and obesity, and socialize its children for educational success—to preach to the lower classes what it practices. But instead of seeing itself as a successful role model for traditional values, the new upper class, Murray charges, has lost confidence in itself as an educating and civilizing force because of its adoption of relativism. "Personally and as families," Murray writes of the upper class, "its members are successful. But they have abdicated their responsibility to set and promulgate standards" (294).

Murray here seems to agree with the famous dictum of the Harvard-educated black scholar W.E.B. DuBois that the most intellectually gifted and socially advanced of any people must be the ones called upon to elevate the character and moral fiber of the rest.<sup>3</sup> “In the absence of some outside intervention,” he writes, “the new lower class will continue to grow. Advocacy for that outside intervention can come from many levels of society...but eventually it must gain the support of the new upper class if it is to be ratified. Too much power is held by the new upper class to expect otherwise” (285).

Within this context Murray calls for a “civic Great Awakening” among the new upper class whereby it recognizes how dangerously detached it has become from the new lower class and how important its concrete engagement with the lives of those who never went to college is to America’s well-being. Murray decided to practice what he preaches and preach what he practices by moving his family twenty years ago from Washington, DC, where he no doubt could have afforded to live in a SuperZip, to a small town in Maryland populated mainly by local farmers and blue-collar workers. There is no alternative, Murray believes, than for the new upper class—DuBois’s Talented Tenth—to help set the tone for community standards and actively participate in a common life with those less privileged.

It would have been nice if Murray complemented his call for a new civic Great Awakening with a parallel call for a more traditional religious Great Awakening. But in Max Weber’s phrase, Murray is “religiously unmusical” (he describes himself as an agnostic), and perhaps he thought sounding such a call would be interpreted as inauthentic humbug. Murray seems to realize, however, how important religious revivals have been throughout American history in counteracting drunkenness, debauchery, lawlessness, family disintegration, and other antisocial developments. No one who studies the effect upon lower-class life of inspiring preachers such as John Wesley and George Whitefield in eighteenth-century England, of the frontier revivalists in nineteenth-century America, or of popular preachers like Billy Graham and Fulton J. Sheen in early post-WWII America can fail to be struck by the differences such people have made in the lives of so many. Combining a

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<sup>3</sup>“The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.” W.E.B. DuBois, “The Talented Tenth,” September 1903, available at <http://teachingamericanhistory.org>.

civic and a religious Great Awakening, Murray would no doubt agree, would have a powerful effect in halting the trend toward civilizational decline documented in *Coming Apart*. A bottom-up religious revival, combined with a top-down infusion of the traditional personal and family values often practiced by the new upper class, would have a transformative effect on American society and family life.