

BEAT THE DEVIL.

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All in Their Family



There's probably no newspaper in the corporate mainstream that has not, at one time or another, whacked the black poor on the head with the bludgeon of Senator Pat Moynihan's views: the black family's "tangle of pathology," the "internal" nature of the black poor's problems, hence the need for self-help by the black poor and for merciless tough-mindedness on the part of whites.

The notion that poor people bring their suffering upon themselves is certainly a lot older than Senator Moynihan, but it's hard to think of another North American over the past quarter-century who has given the rich and their agents so much assistance in the task of keeping it respectably at the forefront of their minds. Anyone wanting to review the promotion and durability of the Moynihan thesis at the all-important level of editorial page, news column and TV discussion can now turn to Carl Ginsburg's excellent *Race and Media*, to be published this summer by the Institute for Media Analysis (143 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012, \$6), in whose literature I am listed as an adviser. What follows is drawn entirely from his monograph.

Moynihan was at the Labor Department when he and his team drafted "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" and injected it into the nation's bloodstream in 1965, at precisely the moment the propertied class needed to be let off the hook. Think about poverty, the report said, and you have to think about the black family. No meaningful change is possible until that family is strengthened "from within." In other words, Pauper, heal thyself!

Moynihan's thesis first crept into executive discourse on June 4, 1965, when President Johnson spoke at Howard University. "Negro poverty is not white poverty," Johnson told his audience. "There are differences . . . radiating painful roots into the community and into the family and nature of the individual." Moynihan had apparently sent his report to Johnson's assistant Bill Moyers, who urged it as the basis for Johnson's speech. This, as we shall see, was not the last time Moyers pressed Moynihan's thoughts upon the public. Tom Wicker's story next day on the front page of *The New York Times* praised the speech hotly, as did a *Times* editorial on June 6 and as did Mary McGrory in *The Washington Star*. *The Washington Post* said with ominous vagueness, "Implicit in his discussion is the fact that the government cannot reach all these sources of maladjustment, except in a remote way."

Notice the extraordinary rapidity with which these "liberals," prompted by Johnson's aides, grasped the point. In the months that followed, the chorus swelled. "Promoting self-help," *The Wall Street Journal* announced in late July, "must realistically appear as a large part of the ultimate answer." In early August, *Newsweek* was invoking Moynihan's famous phrase "tangle of pathology" apropos the black family and saying of the "Negro family problem" that "its very intimacy has excluded it from the public dialogue on

civil rights; it reaches too deep into white prejudices and Negro sensitivities." (Translation: all that racist talk about shiftless blacks is true; pass the word along.)

Then came the Watts riots, in which blacks in Los Angeles rose against the oppression of a city that had been among the most segregated in the country. And there, in the hour of crisis, was the Moynihan report being hailed by Evans and Novak: "He [Moynihan] showed that broken homes, illegitimacy, and female-oriented homes were central to big city Negro problems." Note also the amazing durability of the pundit population. Wicker, McGrory and the Satanic Duo are still going strong. Take an equivalent gaggle of mid-sixties corporate leaders and you'd surely find them long since departed to meet the Grand Inquisitor.

Although Moynihan was the object of political attack, raptures in the press were undiminished. In July 1966, Thomas Meehan described his brain flatteringly in *The New York Times Magazine*: "One is in the presence of an extraordinary intellect, perhaps the most notable characteristic of which is his ability to come up with ideas that are remarkable for their simplicity," such simplicity prompting Meehan to the utterly delightful conclusion that "the real cause of the American Negro's troubles is not so much segregation, or a lack of voting power, but the circumstance that the structure of the Negro family is 'highly unstable and in many urban centers . . . approaching complete breakdown.'" Or, as the Jesuit magazine *America* put it more brusquely early in 1966, in communities displaying the characteristics of the Negro family alleged by the report, "crime, violence, unrest, disorder . . . are not only to be expected, they are very near to inevitable. And they are richly deserved." So much for the sons of Saint Ignatius. It is a useful exercise, in thinking about the report's reception, to imagine how things would have gone had its thesis been promulgated in white South Africa.

Sliding, with time, into Nixon's camp, Moynihan sharpened his message, urging that black have-nots be treated with "benign neglect" and honoring the haves as he did so in a memo to Nixon "leaked" to the press in the spring of 1970: "We have almost deliberately obscured the extraordinary progress, and commitment to progress, which the nation as a whole has made, which white America has not abandoned, and which increasingly black America is learning to make use of." From here the leap was not far to the theory that integration had achieved "irreversible" momentum, and therefore did not need any further encouragement from the nation's government or courts.

Having thus taught the ruling orders to blame the victim, Moynihan was propelled into his Senate seat in 1976 by *The New York Times*, nicely ensconced against the day of the Second Coming of his report in the Reagan years, when its comforting properties were once more in urgent demand.

After All We Did for Them

Amid the ravages of the 1982-83 recession in Reagan's first term it did not escape the attention of news editors that

there were a lot of needy and desperate people about. By 1982 black unemployment approached 20 percent. The reasons for this were as obvious as the misery such numbers implied. Reagan's agenda, scarcely secret, was to lower the costs of production and redistribute wealth upward.

At the end of 1983 the *Baltimore Evening Sun* studied black families for three months and confided to its readers that "state and local officials describe the breakdown in black family structure as one of the biggest and most perplexing problems confronting the city." Nowhere, in any of the articles, was there a mention of economic crisis, corporate policies, management agendas or their effects on the poor. In the fall of 1984, with matchless effrontery, Moynihan descended into the valley and shot the wounded: "At long last," he told NBC News, "a new generation [of blacks] is coming along which says this is our problem and we are going to face it. And good for them."

As the 1980s advanced, so did the economic oppression of the poor, particularly the black poor. By 1987, while Reaganites extolled the breadth of general economic "recovery," black unemployment still stood at 13 percent; in 1965, the year of the report, it was 8.1. One out of every three blacks was poor. The median earnings of full-time black male workers fell 10 percent between 1979 and 1987. In the same period more than half of all new full-time jobs paid poverty wages (\$11,610) for families of four. With this acceleration in misery came a corresponding rise in resentment among the haves. George Will observed that "millions of blacks are victims of many irresponsible blacks." Twenty years after Watts, from the towers of a downtown reared by dollars withheld from any urban initiative for the poor, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a glowing feature about the virtues of self-help, replete with quotations from the conservative black economist Glenn Loury, a great favorite of the haves, calling for subminimum wages for teen-agers and for enterprise zones, thus, as Ginsburg remarks, aiming to solve a situation caused by exploitation by imposing further exploitation.

The New York Times took up the theme, in a front-page article by Lena Williams on June 15, 1986, headlined "Blacks Debating a Greater Stress on Self-Reliance Instead of Aid." In a nation that has not one black C.E.O. in the top thousand corporations, Williams took the trouble to find a group of unidentified blacks asking themselves "whether racism was the cause of some of the problems confronting poor blacks, whether government aid programs had exacerbated the situation by reducing incentives to work and to keep families intact, and whether blacks themselves had to bear some of the blame." "Noticeably," she said, "Mr. Reagan has not become a focal point in the most recent discussions. Some black social scientists and political observers see that as a good sign." During this period you could read huge articles about the homeless that never once thought it fit to mention that Reagan had cut housing subsidies.

Today more black men are in jail than in college. The number of blacks attending college stands at 26 percent, down from 33 percent in 1976. College-educated black men have an unemployment rate four times greater than their white peers. In this painful hour Moynihan's constructs

have been more potent than ever, and in January of 1986 got their most ecstatic reiteration in a CBS documentary by Bill Moyers, Moynihan's salesman to Lyndon Johnson.

Moyers's evocation of the "tangle of pathology," visited in this case on some black people in a poor section of Newark, was received by the haves with wild enthusiasm. The documentary, much of it eliciting from teen-agers detailed accounts of their sex lives, honed in resolutely on "personal responsibility." *The Boston Globe* called it compelling and quoted from the Moynihan report. In *The New York Times*, John Corry praised it for examining a "culturally unpopular topic." This theme of the courage of Moynihan and his epigones in grasping nettles, speaking the unspeakable, etc. is common to many articles, despite the obvious fact that the themes of the report were very popular with the dispensing classes, and that a courageous approach would have been to say that the condition of the poor and of many black Americans in particular was due to capitalism and the political agenda of the overclass. ("Underclass," an essentialist category, like underworld, became very popular in the Reagan years. "Overclass" somehow never caught on.)

It's Just the Way They Are

By 1988, Pete Hamill was writing in *Esquire* that "there is very little now that whites can do in a direct way for the maimed and hurting citizens of the Underclass." In February of 1989, Morton Kondracke wrote in *The New Republic* that "the crisis of the underclass is so great that probably nothing short of a spiritual renewal in black America would really solve the problem." (Calls by Jesse Jackson for such a spiritual and political renewal had earlier excited Kondracke to torrents of abuse.) In *The Washington Post* in April, Richard Cohen called for a "war" in the inner city and denounced the "pathetic lassitude" of "the underclass" which militates against "the dignity of honest work, the chance to move up the ladder." Why the appeals to war, now symbolized in South Central Los Angeles by police battering rams? What's dignified about cleaning toilets in downtown hotels? Where's the ladder and the robust black middle class?—largely a myth fostered by government to delude white journalists that all blacks can make it if they only try, along the lines of *Stand and Deliver*, reassurance against the reality of class as destiny. In fact, as Ginsburg points out, "blacks have been more 'self-reliant,' by any measure of social adaptability, having survived *despite* government and corporate policies aimed at perpetuating their impoverishment."

After the rape of a white woman in Central Park by black and Latino youths, Edwin Yoder wrote in *The Washington Post* that their actions could not be explained by "environmental factors." Yoder preferred "the theological alternative to sociological or economic determinism." Thus do we come to Original Sin and Noah's drunken curse on the children of Ham. Maybe in his hours of community service among the poor, Oliver North can further expound the resonances of Holy Writ to such black families as have survived the Moynihan-fueled onslaughts of his former employer.



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