



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 39  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 10

---

September 2012

**Review of *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*.  
Charles Murray. Reviewed by Rebecca Joyce Kissane.**

Rebecca Joyce Kissane  
*Lafayette College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

**Recommended Citation**

Kissane, Rebecca Joyce (2012) "Review of *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*. Charles Murray. Reviewed by Rebecca Joyce Kissane.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 39: Iss. 3, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3689>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol39/iss3/10>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

## Book Reviews

Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (2012). New York, NY: Crown Forum. \$27.00 (hardcover).

Over the last couple of decades, scholars have extensively documented the rising levels of wealth and income inequality in the United States. With the economic recession and the Occupy movement, popular accounts of the divide between rich and poor abound. Joining this chorus is Charles Murray's *Coming Apart*, in which Murray aims to "induce recognition of the ways in which America is coming apart at the seams—not seams of race or ethnicity, but of class" (p. 12). Murray argues that a "new upper class" and a "new lower class" diverge in terms of their behaviors and values, restricting (until his last chapter) his discussion of this cultural divide to Whites. As Claude Fisher and colleagues acknowledged in *Inequality by Design*, which systematically dismantled Murray's previous book, *The Bell Curve*, Murray's work is "not easily ignored." Like *The Bell Curve*, *Coming Apart* has garnered much critical commentary. This attention is undeserved, as the content of the book offers little that is new.

Drawing heavily on Brooks' *Bobos in Paradise*, Part One of the book focuses on the new upper class—those highly educated, mostly liberal, latte- and boutique beer-sipping, NPR-listening, organic food-eating elites who are married, raise their children according to what Hays might call "intensive methods" (Murray fails to acknowledge Hays' book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, or Lareau's book, *Unequal Childhoods*, on parenting models and ideologies), work industriously, and are civically-engaged. These elites are disconnected from those in the lower classes—both spatially and culturally—and are ignorant of what current life is like at the bottom, living in "SuperZip" bubbles where their neighbors are similarly hardworking and cognitively gifted. Accordingly, Murray retreads *Bell Curve* territory.

Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, September 2012, Volume XXXIX, Number 3

Part Two centers on the new lower class, after a lesson on America's "founding virtues" (i.e., marriage, industriousness, honesty, and religiosity). Murray constructs two fictional neighborhoods, upper-class Belmont and lower class Fishtown (based on real neighborhoods near Boston and in Philadelphia respectively) to highlight trends from 1960 to 2010. "Fishtown" families are largely female-headed, and women have children out-of-wedlock to gain status or to establish independent households. The men are not only absent from their children's lives but idle. Crime is relatively high. Lastly, social capital is low—in large part (as Murray infers based on General Social Survey data and his read of Putnam's *Bowling Alone*), because families, even "believers," are less likely to go to church now than in the past.

Part Three explores why Murray thinks this matters. In essence, civic life in disadvantaged areas (but not in wealthy neighborhoods) is dead, the founding virtues are in decline, and people are unhappy. Murray worries that the new upper class has lost its "confidence in the rightness of its own customs and values" and needs to "preach" the virtues to others (p. 289). "Nonjudgmentalism" must end.

As in his other work, Murray's "data" are often suspect. The 1960 starting point for charting moral decline is never adequately defended. He uses anecdotes or hypothetical scenarios as support, often stating that other data do not exist (collecting his own data never seems to be an option). Moreover, Murray posits causal relationships when only correlations exist throughout the book, and some of the quantitative data employed lack validity. For example, he explains that he was unable to find data on "the state of personal integrity" and so relies on data on bankruptcy and crime as proxies for honesty. This is absurd. Numerous studies on moral behavior exist. Recent work by Piff even demonstrates that the upper class is more prone to unethical conduct. None of this research makes it into the book.

Murray does get many things right. There is a growing divide between the haves and have nots, and America is highly residentially-segregated. Yes, rates of out-of-wedlock births are higher among the lower class, and single mothers have a difficult time raising children without a second income

and a second set of supervising eyes. Yes, poor neighborhoods are often characterized by criminal activity and low levels of collective efficacy. *None* of this is news.

Murray largely discounts the larger structural changes in the economy as contributing to the fate of the lower class and their retreat from the "founding virtues." He quickly dismisses macroeconomic forces causing declining real wages for less educated men. Absent are discussions of spatial mismatch, discrimination, and access to a decent education, factors that might constrain even the "cognitively-gifted" in the lower class from ever realizing their potential. Altogether, he chooses to "focus on what happened, not why" (p. 12) and fails to discuss research that unpacks why we see many of these worrisome trends. How can one suggest a solution when one does not understand the causes?

*Rebecca Joyce Kissane, Department of Sociology & Anthropology,  
Lafayette College*

Shareen Hertel & Kathryn Libal, (Eds). *Human Rights in the United States: Beyond Exceptionalism* (2011). Cambridge University Press. \$99.00 hardcover; \$36.99 paperback.

The chapters in this volume exhibit a uniformly high quality, and, moreover, span a wide spectrum of human rights, discussed below. In appended materials, the editors helpfully include The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. There is a consistent emphasis on praxis.

The editors and authors of this volume make and clarify the important link between progressivism and human rights. D. Q. Thomas proposes in the Foreword that the broad perspective of human rights is a framework for an alternative and affirmative brand of progressive American politics; progressives can finally come out of the cold. What then are the challenges that progressives face? A few include the following: (1) transforming our criticality into a positive agenda; (2) recognizing that a limitation of our Bill of Rights is that most articles are cast as negative rights ("Congress shall make no law...")