

Coming apart - The state of white America
Charles Murray

Murray's valedictory ends on a note of optimism. But the book doesn't support optimism.

The last chapter, entitled "Alternative Futures," sounds a note of optimism. Although we need is for America's elites to recognize the problem, come to their senses, and set things straight. Right. As if Murray has not been futilely expanding this message for the past 40 years. He cites Robert Fogel's "The Fourth Great Awakening" as an inspiration for his optimism. America has overcome crises of the spirit in the past, after we lost first the Puritan spirituality, then the secular sense of mission which fueled our independence, then the crisis of the depression which was answered by the New Deal and the welfare state. Fogel argues that today's crisis is a want of meaning in our lives. Murray believes we can reestablish it.

Murray says that there are only about four fundamental personal characteristics undergirding a happy life. The ones he names are two character traits: honesty and industry, and two societal connections: meaningful relationships with one's fellow man, and a satisfying marriage. He provides another, overlapping list of four elements that have historically defined American society which he calls the four founding virtues: industriousness, honesty, marriage, and religiosity. He goes into some length presenting sociological surveys that demonstrate the importance and the interconnectedness of these characteristics to personal happiness, and their importance to the well-being of society. If only we could recover them, all would be well.

The backbone of his book is a comparison between two hypothetically constructed communities, Fishtown and Belmont. They are based on real places, predominantly white neighborhoods of Philadelphia and Boston respectively, with incomes at the 8th and 97th national percentiles. They exemplify the directions taken by subsets of white America as we are, in the words of his title, "Coming Apart." In constructing his abstract communities he excludes minorities and people outside the age range of 30-49. He goes on to describe how these communities have evolved over the past half-century.

Fortune has put me in a good position to judge the accuracy of his characterization. I am a few months older than Murray and spent my 25 year marriage in Bethesda, one of the Belmont like suburbs of Washington DC, not far from Murray himself, with a wife who was born in the actual Fishtown and some of whose family remained spiritually anchored there. That gave me time on both sides of the tracks. Moreover, I started out that way – in a blue-collar neighborhood close to Berkeley, where my classmates and intellectual peers were definitely Belmont types.

One of the things I enjoyed about the book was Murray's 20 questions to help an Overeducated Elitist Snob (OES) such as almost everybody who's going to be reading this book determine how well, if at all, they know the "real America" where 80 percent of white people live. By virtue of my blue-collar neighborhood and my Army service, experience is that younger men simply don't have, I scored a respectable 41 on his test, placing me well in the category of those with the most experience with the

real America. The shock was how low you can go on his scale... how totally out of touch my Bethesda ex-neighbors could be with the country their governing. I knew this intellectually, but Murray brings it home.

Back to the story, in 1960 Fishtown was a very Catholic neighborhood in which the men worked, the women stayed home, and the kids went to Catholic school. My ex-wife was one of them. What they considered to be social problems were excess drinking, quite a bit of it, fistfights and a bit of philandering. Young people, however, knew what was expected of them. They got married, before or after becoming pregnant, and provided families for kids. It was a moral expectation that was generally observed. People had responsibilities and took them seriously. They did not accept welfare, they answered the call when they were drafted, and they participated in church and civic organizations.

Fishtown in 2010 is a very different place. People simply don't feel an obligation to either work or get married. There are many never married people, and many out of wedlock children. A lot of the guys are just bums – don't work, don't want to work, don't want to get married, and waste their time watching television. An inordinately large number have figured how to game the system by qualifying for Social Security disability. Their attitude is that work is for chumps. Quite a few of them have drinking and drug problems, but Murray does not consider these disabilities to be nearly as important as the lack of any of the four foundations in their lives. No more religion, no social connections with the community, either no marriage or an unsatisfactory marriage, and no vocation.

Murray, a longtime libertarian, claims that intrusive, European-style government has taken away the need for these four virtues and undermined the people who attempt to practice them. Kids don't need a father if the government provides money and social workers. Men don't need work if the government gives them handouts. Social connections aren't important if there's nothing really to be done improving the place.

Murray claims that the state of affairs in Belmont is much better. People work hard, get married, stay married, are resolutely and obsessively concerned with their children, and are involved in community. More than that, counterintuitively, they are more involved in church than are the people remaining in Fishtown. They may not believe the dogmas, but they understand the social value of belonging.

What has changed in Belmont is the conviction that the set of virtues they practice really ought to be preached. Belmont now believes totally in moral relativism. If somebody else doesn't want to remain married to his kids' mother, doesn't want to work, or spends all of his money on drink and drugs and all of his time watching TV, they're not going to be judgmental. That's somebody else's life.

Another thing that has changed in Belmont is their acceptance of lower-class culture. A Belmont mother will not prevent her daughter from dressing like a hooker, using gutter language picked up from rap music, or swearing like a sailor. There is not a sense that "Belmont girls don't do that." Also out the door are old-fashioned morality, the idea that you shouldn't seduce girls when they're drunk, cheat on tests, or tell the clerk at McDonald's if he gives you too much change. People just don't have a sense of

seemliness anymore. Kids can wear the most outrageous clothes, and their parents can take the most outrageous bonuses from their companies, and rich people can take inappropriate and undeserved handouts from the government without blushing in the slightest.

Murray makes a few huge oversights. Race is one. White people are everybody's least favorite ethnicity. We get called anti-Semites and racists, and are constantly backpedaling in the face of accusations from Hispanics and overwhelmed by the sheer intellect and industry of the Asians. Even in the unlikely event we were to resist in the ways he advocates, society would still sweep us along its unfortunate path. Another oversight is education. All sectors of society are being worse educated year-by-year, Belmont, Fishtown, and most especially the black and Hispanic groups he doesn't mention. The educational system seems dedicated, whether by design or sheer ineptitude, to destroying religion, fostering dependence on government, and stultifying personal industry and ambition. Oh, and it goes out of its way to denigrate anything in American history of which white people might be proud.

My Puritan forefathers hoped to establish a country in which the four founding virtues – industry, honesty, religion and marriage – might flourish. It worked for a few centuries, but now appears to be hopelessly broken. I do not think it is possible within any country. Murray himself relates Toynbee's description of the way in which every great empire contains the seeds of its own destruction. I would advocate that each individual leave countries out of the equation as they seek the best future their family. Find a community – Mormons would be a good place to look – where civic virtues are still in evidence. Find a way to educate your family – homeschooling looks good – to shield them from the propaganda and the mediocrity of the public system. Find a religious community of like-minded people. And do not be afraid to look the world over to find these things – America may no longer be the place.

The purpose of life is to while away the time between birth and death as pleasantly as possible, and the purpose of government is to make it as easy as possible to while away the time as pleasantly as possible – the Europe syndrome.