

Class in America

Tim Wilson reviews a new book that undermines the idea of America as a classless society.



Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010

By Charles Murray
Crown Forum, 2012, 416 pages



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One of the great strengths of American society has been its social mobility. But according to the American Enterprise Institute's Charles Murray, that social mobility and the connection between average Americans and a new uber-intellectual and financial elite is breaking down, undermining the 'American Project'.

In *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, Murray analyses key trends that have shaped the last 50 years of his country. Traversing the trends that have emerged in America since the day John F Kennedy died—a symbol of the end of the era of innocence—Murray's conclusion exposes the consequences of an increasingly libertine culture.

There are two key contributions that Murray makes. First, his research focuses on the experience of 'white' America. In doing so he ignores the traditional analysis of race-based comparisons of American society.

Second, he broadens the intellectual discussion about inequity in society. Traditionally, analysis between the plight of the 'have nots' and the 'haves' has focused on incomes and any rising or narrowing disparity between them.

Murray takes a different approach. He's chosen to focus on the consequences of disparity of incomes as only part of a broader understanding of the diverging lifestyles of Americans. Incomes are only one cause. Other key drivers have evolved since the 1960s that have undermined an overriding culture and shared experience of American life.

According to Murray one of the clearest broken shared experiences of Americans has been the decline of cultural codes. In 1960 the media portrayed one shared American lifestyle. Marriage was the only relationship norm. Men worked. Women didn't. Abortion was neither a choice, nor existed. Homosexuality only existed in a hidden world that occasionally got past censors.

Murray argues the new upper class ghettoise themselves in 'the nicest places to live', which are 'places where they can be around other talented, wealthy people like them, living in the most desirable parts of town, isolated from everyone else'.

And through self-perpetuation they are 'increasingly isolated ... accompanied by growing ignorance about the country over which they have so much power', undermining the foundations of American exceptionalism.

They also then enter into relationships with people in a similar position, resulting in a

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And the standard of living of almost all Americans was the same. Rich people owned five-bedroom houses with two bathrooms. Average Americans owned a three-bedroom house with one bathroom. Murray argues that even for those that had money in the 1960s there were not many avenues to spend it, and culturally ostentatious displays of wealth were frowned upon.

Another trend has been one that is widely accepted as a positive change—the meritocratic acceptance of students into elite Ivy League universities. Previously enrolments were based on a parent's bank balance, not a student's capacity. Changes around the middle of the 20th century placed merit ahead of wealth.

THE RESULT OF THESE TRENDS?

According to Murray, a new, self-perpetuating American upper class has evolved and it has captured control of social, cultural, economic and political institutions.

narrowing of the intellectual gene pool. Murray argues that 'it's not just that college graduates are likely to marry college graduates, but that graduates from elite colleges are likely to marry graduates from elite colleges'.

The consequences then become intergenerational, with the perpetuation of their influence through their children—who come from privileged and intellectually stimulating backgrounds. That makes them most likely to repeat their parents' experience.

Murray calls these 'nicest places to live' Super Zips—zip codes where the level of education and income of its inhabitants bears no relationship to that of the average American. Unsurprisingly, Super Zips dominate large parts of Washington DC and its related suburbs, and other major cities including New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle.

Super Zips are almost entirely a

RICH VS POOR IN USA: COUNTY COMPARISON

Highest-income (per capita)

- 1 \$174,672
Kenilworth, Illinois
- 2 \$104,920
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
- 3 \$104,908
Belle Meade, Tennessee
- 4 \$104,667
Woodside, California
- 5 \$102,511
Indian River Shores, Florida

Lowest-income (per capita)

- 1 \$5,213
Buffalo County, South Dakota
- 2 \$6,286
Shannon County, South Dakota
- 3 \$7,069
Starr County, Texas
- 4 \$7,463
Ziebach County, South Dakota
- 5 \$7,714
Todd County, South Dakota

➤ SUPER ZIPS ARE ALMOST ENTIRELY A PHENOMENON OF THE NORTH EASTERN AND WESTERN SEABOARD STATES WHERE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS ARE BASED

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phenomenon of the North Eastern and Western seaboard states, where political, economic and cultural institutions are based. Super Zips do exist throughout the rest of the country, but are much smaller in concentration, and they almost entirely exist around state capitals or major economic centres.

Unsurprisingly, the concentration of Super Zips also reflects that the new American upper class is dominated by a surprisingly small group of people in positions of authority. Murray rightly points out that the number of people who control and contribute to American culture through newspaper column inches, elected representation, executive office, senior professional positions, or bureaucratic authority is very small.

Around 64 per cent of Super Zips are represented by what he calls 'doctrinaire liberals' who are

stridently of the US liberal ilk, with only three per cent being simply liberal. By comparison 'doctrinaire conservatives' are only ten per cent, with a further nine per cent being simply conservative. Everyone else is simply moderate.

And the intensity of their politics is also disproportionately influential—those outside the new upper class are increasingly less likely to be engaged in the political process.

Not that the new upper class is pure of heart. Perhaps one of the most valuable insights Murray provides is despite the bias to American-style liberalism, the new upper class has a disinterest in civic virtue. It partly justifies their bias to American liberalism, because paying taxes and obliging government is an easy way out of engaging with society.

The foundations of the American Project are based on an obligation of civil engagement, which makes

this trend extremely destructive. 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'.

In short, upper class Americans value and practice industriousness, are honest and don't engage with crime, and value marriage and stable relationships. Importantly, those in the new upper class are also much more trusting, while trust is decaying amongst those with a lower socioeconomic profile. Murray demonstrates that these four key indicators are significant contributors to people living an enjoyable life.

By comparison, lower class Americans prefer security over industriousness, live in dishonest communities demonstrated through high crime rates and have become

disengaged from marriage and the nuclear family. Such behaviour also reinforces the self-perpetuating opportunities of the new upper class.

Coming Apart provides a powerful narrative of the changes in American society. Murray has hard data behind what any reasonable sociopolitical observer should have identified for themselves: well-paid, inner-city professionals with a disproportionately left-wing political world view are completely disconnected from the experience of the vast majority of salaried people who live in the suburbs and the issues that matter to them.

But there are gaps. For a more complete picture Murray needs to explore the world of non-salaried, self-employed individuals who don't form the new American upper class. Their experiences would provide a further insight into the changing experience of American life.

For conservatives, this book is

red meat. It provides intellectual ammunition to argue for an overriding and unifying culture for America.

For US liberals *Coming Apart* highlights the consequences of the society they have promoted. If Murray's analysis is correct, a 'progressive' culture destroys social cohesion and inflicts the worst pain on those most vulnerable.

For libertarians Murray's analysis gives grounds for pause. Libertarian criticism of government intervention on conservative or progressive grounds is based on the unintended consequences of policy. But Murray's conclusions argue there are unintended consequences of libertine culture, that undermines the cultural, political and economic systems designed to perpetuate it.

Coming Apart won't have the last word on the subject. But it should start a conversation. **R**