

Review of *Freedom Is not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama* by James T. Patterson, Basic Books 2010

For *First Things*

By Glenn C. Loury, Merton P. Stoltz Professor of the Social Sciences, Brown University, June 11, 2010

James T. Patterson, the Ford Foundation Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University, is the author of numerous distinguished works on American social and political history. He won the Frederick Jackson Turner Award in 1966 for his treatise, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939*; and he was awarded the 1997 Bancroft Prize in American History for his sweeping narrative, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*. In addition to producing scholarly works on the history of congressional politics and American foreign policy, Patterson has also been an astute chronicler of anti-poverty efforts in modern America. I can still recall how much I learned when, as a young scholar in the early 1980s then developing what would become a life-long interest in American social welfare policies, I first encountered his wide-ranging and still quite readable study, *America's Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century*.

In his most recent book, *Freedom Is not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama*, Patterson returns to this familiar terrain of American social policy in order to study the legacy of a highly controversial 1965 policy memorandum. Along the way he also provides an engaging if cursory political and intellectual biography of that memorandum's ambitious and resourceful author. The author in question was none other than the late four-term United States Senator, former United Nations Ambassador and Harvard University Professor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The policy memo at issue was a stunningly candid assessment of the troubled state of family life among lower-class black Americans at mid-twentieth century which Moynihan circulated -- confidentially, he had hoped -- within the Johnson Administration just as the War on Poverty was being launched and the major legislative battles of the civil rights revolution were being won. The "confidential" report did not remain that way for long. After the predictable leak, a very public controversy over it flared-up during the summer which continued into the fall of 1965, and which had reverberations that have lasted until the present day.

To understand why the public's reception of a mere policy memorandum was so politically momentous, it suffices to quote briefly from the opening paragraphs of *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*:

"The United States is approaching a new crisis in race relations... In this new period the expectations of the Negro Americans will go beyond civil rights. Being Americans, they will now expect that in the near future equal opportunities for them as a group will produce roughly equal results, as compared with other groups. This is not going to happen. Nor will it happen for generations to come unless a new and special effort is made. There are two reasons. First, the racist virus in the American blood stream still afflicts us: Negroes will encounter serious personal prejudice for at least another generation. Second, three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment have taken their toll on the Negro people. The harsh fact is that as a group, at the present time, in terms of ability to win out in the competitions of American life, they are not equal to most of those groups with which they will be competing ... The fundamental problem... is that of family structure. The evidence — not final, but

powerfully persuasive — is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling. A middle class group has managed to save itself, but for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated... So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself. The thesis of this paper is that these events, in combination, confront the nation with a new kind of problem. Measures that have worked in the past, or would work for most groups in the present, will not work here. A national effort is required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family structure.”

One sees the problem immediately: a high-level government official (Moynihan was an Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of Labor at the time) is caught baldly stating that the expectations for equality of Negro Americans (to use the language of that time) are bound to be disappointed -- not merely because of racism but, more fundamentally, because the fabric of social life in the black ghettos lay in tatters. For many of a liberal political bent at the time, this kind of talk was simply unacceptable. How dare a white man say these things? Where did he come off? And, most crucially, what would happen to the ability of reformers to coax more equalitarian policies from a country's recalcitrant governing elites if rhetoric like this was allowed to issue from precincts in or near to the White House? Moynihan had to be made an example of. And so he was.

A firestorm of protests from black leaders, liberal journalists and civil rights activists greeted the public release of his policy document. By calling attention to the instability of family life in poor black communities, Moynihan was said to downplay the importance of racial discrimination. By citing raw statistics showing a dramatic rise of unwed births to black women, and by ascribing this trend in part to cultural as well as to structural factors, Moynihan was said to “blame the victim” for her plight. (Indeed, the now familiar phrase was literally invented in response to Moynihan's Report by William Ryan – a sociologist and one of Moynihan's fiercest critics – who later published a widely noted book of the same title.) By rehearsing the old arguments of distinguished (black) sociologists such as W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier – to the effect that the institution of chattel slavery had decimated gender relations among the slaves with profound consequences for black peasants in the American South that reached into the twentieth century – Moynihan was said to be a flat-out racist.

In what might today be understood as a bout of political correctness run amok, productive public discussions of the status of “the Negro family” became impossible to sustain. This was the 1960s, after all. Civil rights victories over implacable Southern opposition were fresh in everyone's mind. Cities were burning during a series of long, hot summers. And, in tonier precincts, ‘radical chic’ had become the fashion of the day, with the moral authority of racism's victims going unquestioned.

So, the rebuttals of Moynihan's argument flowed freely: There was nothing inherently good about two-parent families, and nothing inherently wrong with single motherhood, it was said. Those citing weakness in black family life wanted merely to change the subject – from discussing what's wrong with America to talking about what's wrong with black people – it was alleged. Moynihan – a died-in-the-wool liberal Democrat whose principle policy recommendation in that Report had been to expand public employment opportunities for black men – became for many the personification of anti-black sentiments dressed-up with a Harvard pedigree. Those willing to defend him, even while disagreeing with his analysis, were very hard to find in the media, in the civil rights establishment, or in the Democratic Party. So intense was the negative reaction that a White House conference

planned for later that year – where the ‘case for national action’ was to be seriously explored – had to be scuttled instead.

There was only one problem: the Daniel Patrick Moynihan of 1965 had been right about the Negro family – both in his diagnosis of its condition, and in his forecast of the likely implications: The plain fact is that conventional family relationships in the black ghettos have pretty much collapsed. What is more, looking across the social landscape today, nearly a half-century after Pat Moynihan’s dire warning, it is clear that nothing approaching equality of results for the bulk of the black American population has been, or soon will be, achieved. More speculative, but still entirely plausible, is the conclusion that these two undeniable facts about our nation’s social life are closely connected to one another – with the former being a primary reason for the later.

But, the possibility that this Harvard professor might have had a point was simply dismissed out of hand by most observers in 1965. Critics were much more interested in what they supposed to be his motives than in the acuity of his analysis. Accusations of ill will flew fast and furiously. A period ensued, lasting nearly two decades, during which scant critical assessment of the crisis in black family life would be undertaken, and no policy response would be fashioned. The story is by now a familiar one, even to the casual student of American social policy: discussion of the internal cultural dynamics that might underlie black poverty in America must be left to those with ‘standing’ to talk about such matters; or, failing that, such discussion must be avoided altogether.

Patterson, ever the master historian, artfully retells this story in great detail. After a brief recounting of Moynihan’s early life and professional ascendancy, he provides a useful account of the genesis of that Report, its unhappy reception, and the ensuing political fallout. He goes on to trace out the more recent history of social criticism and political advocacy concerning the American family. He surveys the culture wars among intellectuals in the 1980s, the intense political debate over welfare reform in the 1990s, and the somewhat more liberated public discourse about black family life of the present day. Along the way he pays close attention to the scholarly and the popular literatures on the subject; and, he repeatedly emphasizes Moynihan’s prescience by documenting the ever rising rates of unwed childbearing and single-parenthood -- among black Americans, to be sure, but in the broader national population as well.

Though Patterson avoids directly saying so, fiercely negative reactions to Moynihan’s Report were a brand of intellectual thuggery on the Left of American politics that became all too familiar from the late 1960s onward. Smug in their certitude, the thought police in the universities, at liberal editorial pages, in the foundation boardrooms and even in government, in effect, censored public discourses on crime, affirmative action, school desegregation, voting rights, anti-discrimination enforcement, urban renewal, welfare policy and much more. Ironically, it became dangerous to one’s reputation even to celebrate the success of the civil rights revolution by noticing the emergence of a new black middle class. Such critics of Moynihan and his ilk had their way for a time. Their signature tactic was to accuse the politically incorrect of being racists. A willingness even to entertain certain forbidden hypotheses – e.g., that forced busing could cause white flight; that proliferating criminal violence among blacks might retard urban development; that affirmative action programs could stigmatize their beneficiaries – came to be seen as evidence of a lack of fidelity to certain ‘progressive’ values. Reliance on *ad hominem* argument grew more commonplace: “What kind of person would say such a thing?” became the question. And, the list of unsavory characters said to be polluting our public discourses lengthened. To Moynihan’s name on this enemies list were added the likes of Edward Banfield (for his reflections on urban decline), James Q. Wilson (for worrying in public about rising crime rates), Nathan Glazer (for noticing that affirmative action discriminates against white people),

James Coleman (for exposing the limits of school desegregation efforts); Abigail Thernstrom (for questioning racial gerrymandering); and Charles Murray (for suggesting that welfare payments could create dependency among long-term recipients, especially for the black poor.)

I am not here saying that all of these writers were correct in every detail, or that the policies they championed are ones I would necessarily endorse. Indeed, I have publicly disagreed with many of them over the years in my own critical writings on American social policy. What I am saying is that, like Moynihan himself, all of these relatively conservative social critics made cogent, intellectually and historically important arguments which were rooted in often quite astute social observations, and which deserved to be taken seriously, though they were usually dismissed out of hand. What is more, all of these critics have, in one way or another and to varying degrees, been vindicated by the subsequent evolution of events.

The furiously negative reaction in the mid-late 1960s -- from the liberal Left and from prominent black leaders -- to Moynihan's report, and the suppression of the issue of family structure and interpersonal behaviors amongst the poor, was a disaster -- both politically and sociologically -- for the newly liberated black masses. It reflects what must be seen in retrospect as one of the great failures of that period of American social history. Patterson, often quoting Moynihan's own reflections that were expressed in his numerous retrospective essays, recalls Lyndon Johnson's bitterness (and Richard Nixon's cynicism) over the intellectual inflexibility of these liberal critics. There can be no doubt that the black poor were hurt, not helped, by such bitter resignation and shrewdly manipulative cynicism in the White House. But, worse yet, it now seems clear that these were the surface manifestations of a deeper, more debilitating political injury.

Just look at the history of social policy in the past quarter-century. The liberals won most of the battles in the decade or so after 1965, but they have surely lost the wars. In my view, the black poor have paid the terrible price for this folly. Not that Moynihan was right in every detail of his analysis, nor that he was above criticism or without foibles and vanities. But, he was right about the big questions, and it needs to be acknowledged that his political values were progressive to the core. Moreover, it must be said in all honesty that Banfield, Coleman, Wilson, Thernstrom, Murray, Glazer and others (this list could be considerably lengthened) were also often right about the larger themes of the late-twentieth-century American social policy debate: negative unintended consequences from progressive social interventions; limits of liberal reforms to create genuine equality; the importance of social order and the irreplaceable role in maintaining it of the traditional institutions of civil society. Events have consistently borne them out. More importantly, gifted and instinctive politicians -- from Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton -- have moved social policy consistently, and with considerable popular support, in the directions advocated by these critics of the liberal orthodoxy.

Unfortunately (from my perspective, anyway), these conservative critics who have trod the same path as Pat Moynihan through the thicket of politically correct liberalism have not always shared the late senator's progressive political commitments. Much to Moynihan's chagrin, it was Charles Murray's ideas more than his own that emerged victorious in the welfare reform debates of the 1990s. Likewise, Jim Wilson has exerted far more influence on anti-crime policy than any of his detractors, with staggering results in terms of the extent of incarceration in the lower ranks of American society. Nat Glazer's criticisms of affirmative action will seem friendly to the policy when compared with some recent federal court opinions; and Abby Thernstrom's critique of racial gerrymandering in the interest of guaranteeing the voting rights of black Americans may yet come to rule the day. (Mark my words; you heard it here first!)

Generally speaking, the ostracized and demonized neoconservatives who gathered around *The Public Interest* magazine in the late 1960s and through the 1970s have swept the table in the public debates. Meanwhile, Lyndon Johnson's "Second Reconstruction" has proved to be an utter failure, if understood in the terms Johnson himself invoked in his fabled speech at Howard University in 1965 – a speech that Moynihan had a large hand in writing, and that ended with Johnson voicing the civil rights battle cry, "We Shall Overcome." With a third of black children living in poverty, with over one million black men in prison or jail, with a three-year average deficit in acquired reading skills for black youngsters relative to whites by the end of adolescence, with more than two out of every three black babies being born to an unwed mother, with hard-core ghettos in Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Oakland, St. Louis, Houston, New Orleans, Baltimore and dozens of other American cities continuing to fester in their marginality and hopelessness – with all of this wreckage so readily at hand, it is rather clear that we Americans have not yet "overcome."

No, freedom is definitely not enough. Good sense, even temper, openness to criticism, intellectual honesty and faith in the good intentions of those with whom one disagrees – these things are also necessary if the legacy of America's shameful racial past were ever to be superseded. Now, thanks in part to a bygone generation of self-righteous and feckless liberals, we face the prospect that it never will be.

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