



***Coming Apart: The State of White
America, 1960-2010***

(Crown Forum, 2013, 432)

By Charles Murray

A Book Review by

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*A*ccording to Murray, there have been socio-economic classes in America since its beginning. The main difference between the early 1960s and now is divergence on core behaviors and values among different socioeconomic classes in America. In the early 1960s, the civil rights movement was the biggest domestic issue. However, with the emergence of a new upper class and a new lower class, divergence has been increasing between the white new upper class and the white lower class in America. Sadly, the divergence continues to increase in our working, community, religious and educational environments.

The most important reason why such divergence between the classes exists is that people who are labeled as “elite” or “new upper class” have been gaining power through running of

many institutions in America. Those “elites” who work in government positions are concerned with only their own tastes, preferences, cultures, core behaviors, beliefs, politics, and lifestyles, and are ignorant of others from different socioeconomic groups, especially the lower income class. In essence, “the new upper class” in America have isolated themselves from the rest of the people, i.e., those with diverse backgrounds.

According to Murray, another reason to increase the separation between lower class and upper class is that people from upper class could make “a lot more money in 2010 than they had made in 1960” and that wealth enable them to “isolate themselves from the rest of America in ways that they formerly couldn’t afford to do” (Murray, 2013, p. 49).

Cognitive segregation therefore is one factor increasing the separation between upper class and lower class, because with the higher-tech economy in a more complex business world, employers choose to hire those with high cognitive abilities and “more and more of the best students want to go to the elite schools. . . eager to maintain their status” (Murray, 2013, p. 58). There is the dominance of the upper-middle class in elite schools because the admissions process continues to give preference to the children of the affluent.

According to Murray, the feasibility of the American project has historically been based on the four founding virtues (honesty, industriousness, marriage, and religion); and that the four founding virtues have been changing in white America from 1960 to 2010. Murray quoted Francis Grund’s words that “Americans have unbounded respect for the law” to explain the virtue of honesty in America. He also stated, “American industriousness fascinated the rest of the world” (Murray, 2013, p.135). Marriage in America “was the bedrock institution of society” (Murray, 2013, p. 138). Religion facilitates the use of a taste for freedom as the first of their

political institution in America. Murray thinks that these founding virtues are central to American citizenry.

I think virtues that might be missing are generosity, unselfishness, empathy, and understanding others. I think those virtues could be also considered American founding virtues, because in my opinion, unselfishness is synonym with generosity, and empathy is built on understanding. Both groups of virtues are important to build a caring, loving, and respectful community and societies in America. It seems to me that American whites are the dominant group and they also account for the majority of the elite group, just as Murray stated, including the “honorable white” (Asian). The upper-middle class only focuses and lives in their own cultures but ignores the rest of people with diverse backgrounds. This mentality and behavior, to me, is due to lack of understanding and empathy of others. By giving others understanding, empathy, and generosity, the world would be a lot more beautiful and peaceful place to live. Therefore, I think generosity, unselfishness, empathy, and understanding should be added to the founding virtues in America.

I agree with Murray that there is a collapse of confidence in codes of honorable behavior and that there is an increase in unseemliness in the American upper-middle class. As Murray said earlier in this book, the socioeconomic segregation had been increasing during the late twentieth century, and what makes America come apart is class, rather than race or ethnicity.

Furthermore, if this unseemliness continues, the trend will be that there will be growing lower class, and the upper-middle class will be getting richer. There will be more collapsing of the honorable core values for the upper-middle class, who consequently will be driven more by money. The offspring of the upper-middle class will get more and more “ignorant of the world

outside their bubble” (Murray, 2013, p. 299). He also argued that if the divergence into these separate classes continues, it would end what has made America great!

About the Author

QianQian Yu has published and presented papers in the AERA and CIES conferences. Her research interests are equality of education and international business cultural studies.