

Savage Discovery: The Moynihan Report

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The Labor Department publication, *The Negro Family* (usually called "The Moynihan Report" in reference to its presumed chief author), has had an enormous impact on public discussion about the Negro in America. It contains frightening statistics about broken Negro families, illegitimate Negro children and Negro welfare recipients, and these have been seized on by jour-

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nalists who proclaim in loud voices what the Moynihan Report states very quietly: Negro family instability is a basic cause of the Negro inequality and "pathology" that are reflected in unemployment statistics, census data and the results of sociological research.

In view of this influence, it is important to make public the serious shortcomings of the report that a careful analysis uncovers. Briefly, it draws dangerously inexact conclusions from weak and insufficient data; encourages (no doubt unintentionally) a new form of subtle racism that might be termed "Savage Discovery," and seduces the

reader into believing that it is not racism and discrimination but the weaknesses and defects of the Negro himself that account for the present status of inequality between Negro and white. The document can be criticized on three levels: first, the methodological weaknesses; second, the manifest misstatements; and, finally, the naive error of interpreting statistical relationships in cause-and-effect terms; that is, of stating that, since A is associated with B, it follows that A causes B.

Among the methodological weaknesses is the use of such material as census data without apparent

awareness either of its deficiencies or, more important, of the existence of other well-known or well-estimated data within whose context this material must be considered. The outstanding example of this failure is a highly sophomoric treatment of illegitimacy.

Illegitimacy looms large in the Moynihan Report, in the text and in the illustrations. Only 4 per cent of the relatively dull tables but fully 22 per cent of the large and dramatic charts and graphs concern illegitimacy, which shines through the report as the prime index of "family breakdown." This is one of the main beams in the hypothetical structure being put together. In an oversimplified way, the implicit hypothesis goes like this: the values of Negro culture (produced by centuries of slavery and mistreatment, to be sure) are such that there is little commitment to the main components of family organization — legitimacy, material stability, etc. The implicit point is that Negroes tolerate promiscuity, illegitimacy, one-parent families, welfare dependency, and everything else that is supposed to follow.

The authors of *The Negro Family* take at face value Census Bureau statistics that record illegitimacy rates for whites at about 3 per cent, for Negroes at about 22 per cent. More careful consideration, in the context of other well-known facts, would reveal not so much a careless acceptance by Negroes of promiscuity and illegitimacy, as a systematic inequality of access to a variety of services and information.

If we do not attribute the 7-to-1 difference in illegitimacy rates to Negro family instability as a sub-cultural trait, what does account for these differences? Here, very briefly, are a few pieces of additional data:

Reporting. Illegitimate births are significantly underreported, and are more underreported for whites than for nonwhites. This is true, first, because reporting is dependent upon discriminatory white sources. Second, white illegitimate births occur more often in private hospitals, are attended by sympathetic—and white—doctors, and involve the cooperation of social agencies, all of which work consciously to help the white unmarried mother conceal the fact of illegitimacy.

Shotgun marriages. A large portion of first-born children are conceived "illegitimately," with the parents marrying before the child's birth. Such marriages are less frequent among Negroes because of the man's financial insecurity.

Abortion. It is estimated that more than 1 million illegal and unreported induced abortions are performed each year. Authorities agree that one-fourth to one-half of these are performed for unmarried women, and that the overwhelming majority of abortion patients are white. Abortions alone account for most of the differences in the census illegitimacy figures.

An attempt to calculate the "illegitimate conception" rates — an awkward but interesting term — would probably show that for whites it would be 12-15 per cent, for Negroes 25-30 per cent. The differences are clearly not so striking: the ratio drops from 7 to 1 to 2 to 1.

Contraception. Access to contraceptive information and services is also unequally distributed in favor of whites. The extent of inequality is not known, but if the differential were as low as 2 to 1 in favor of whites, we would be able to conclude that "illegitimate intercourse" — if we may push the terminology this far — is about the same among Negroes and whites.

In any case, it is not necessary to introduce a complex and highly speculative hypothesis about the malformation of the Negro family by slavery and post-Reconstruction semi-slavery—that is, the sins of our grandfathers. The facts are more easily explained as the results of straightforward discrimination—that is, the sins of ourselves and our contemporaries.

Aid for Dependent Children and Adoption. When they wring their hands about Negro family life, the journalists who have seized on the Moynihan Report are most fascinated with illegitimacy, but their next favorite is its presumed consequence: the number of Negro mothers receiving AFDC support. How, we may ask, does a Negro mother with an illegitimate child "get on" AFDC? First, of course, she must decide to keep the child; how does she make this decision? The answer is remarkably simple: she is rarely called on to make the choice. The services of adoption agencies and maternity homes are mostly for white mothers, who account for about 90 per cent of agency adoptions of illegitimate children, and probably an even higher proportion of independent adoptions. Again to oversimplify: white illegitimate babies get adopted, their Negro counterparts "go on" AFDC. And again we are faced with contemporary discrimination

—our sins, not the sins of our grandparents.

To summarize, the reported rates of illegitimacy among Negroes and whites tell us nothing at all about differences in family structure, historical forces, instability, or anything else about which the authors speculate. From the known data, we can conclude only that Negro and white girls probably engage in premarital intercourse in about the same proportions, but that the white girl more often takes Enovid or uses a diaphragm; if she gets pregnant, she more often obtains an abortion; if she has the baby, first she is more often able to conceal it and, second, she has an infinitely greater opportunity to give it up for adoption.

The treatment of illegitimacy data in the Moynihan Report is one example of inexpert methodology. A more general defect is the subtly irrational presentation of correlational data to imply a cause-and-effect relationship. The method of argument is, first, to present data about "family breakdown" among Negroes — separation, illegitimacy, broken homes, female household heads, etc.—and then to juxtapose statistics about the "tangle of pathology" among Negroes. In the manner of a propaganda document, the report allows the reader to make the cause-and-effect connection on the basis of his own prejudice. Little or no actual cause-and-effect data is presented.

Of the total of 125 different blocks of information presented—forty-seven tables, eighteen charts and sixty pieces of data in the text—more than 80 per cent is purely descriptive, retailing stale and well-known sociological facts. Only nine pieces of information (a scant 7 per cent of the total) relate to the conclusions drawn by the authors. Of these nine, six are reports of studies showing a relationship between broken homes and delinquency, and one is drawn from the 1960 census to show that children with both parents present in the home are—not unsurprisingly—less likely to drop out of school. The final two pieces of evidence show that the tested IQs of children with fathers in the home are higher than those without fathers in the home.

This is the sum total of evidence from which the authors draw such sweeping conclusions as:

At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is



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the deterioration of the Negro family. It is the fundamental source of weakness of the Negro community at the present time.

Unless this damage [the deterioration of the Negro family] is repaired, all the effort to end discrimination and poverty and injustice will come to little.

Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American. . . . The cycle can be broken only if these distortions are set right. In a word, a national effort toward the problems of Negro Americans must be directed toward the question of family structure.

Confronted with such enormous conclusions based on such tiny scraps of evidence, an uncharitable response would be "irresponsible nonsense!"; the most charitable possible verdict would be "not proved."

Of the other thirteen pieces of data in which evidence of relationships is presented, two are somewhat tangential, showing that poor people have larger families than rich people, a fact that has not heretofore been very well con-

cealed. The other eleven show relationships between: unemployment and broken families, unemployment and illegitimacy, income level and illegitimacy, and unemployment and public assistance under the AFDC program. These, too, are well-known relationships and anyone with a tolerable command of social statistics could add a whole set of additional correlations: unemployment and infant mortality; income level and dilapidated housing; broken families and number of tuberculosis cases, etc., etc. What these cool correlations mean, when translated from census data to the lives of human beings, is that poor people tend to live in slums, to be oppressed and exploited and mistreated, and to experience enormous amounts of social, economic, mental and physical suffering as a result. A disproportionate share of the poor are Negro and they experience a vastly disproportionate share of this suffering. It would be far more reasonable to conclude not that "family instability" leads to a "tangle of pathology" but that poor Negro families—that is, half of all

Negro families—are bitterly discriminated against and exploited, with the result that the individual, the family and the community are all deeply injured.

It is not possible to comment on this smug document without pointing out a few errors of fact. The first—"conditions in Harlem are not worse, they are probably better than in most Negro ghettos"—is followed, predictably, by data about high illegitimacy rates in Harlem to suggest apparently that even in Harlem, the very paradise of ghettos, the Negro family is falling apart.

Another stupefying statement in the report is: "It is probable that, at present, a majority of the crimes against the person, such as rape, murder, and aggravated assault, are committed by Negroes." To support this statement the authors quote *arrest* and *conviction* rates, which are notoriously different from rates of crimes committed. It is well known that Negroes—guilty and innocent alike—are more readily arrested, and convicted, than whites. To conclude from the data offered that Negroes commit the majority of significant crimes is an inept piece of interpretation.

Another fantastic error deserves to be quoted: "The white family has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability. By contrast, the family structure of lower class Negroes . . . is approaching complete breakdown." Such a statement reflects a double standard: if we were to use the authors' indices of family stability, principally divorce and illegitimacy, we should have to say that both white and Negro families—American families in general—are "crumbling." White divorce rates have zoomed almost 800 per cent in less than 100 years and white illegitimacy has increased more than 50 per cent in the last twenty-five years—a rate of increase greater than that of Negroes.

What we are confronted with, in fact, is another example of the authors' ineptness—the careless tying together of such vague concepts as "family stability" with a few specific measures of family composition. No sophisticated social scientist would rest a broad concept on such crude and simplistic measures. That the family is an extremely complex institution is al-

most too well known to require restatement. Its structure and function vary in subtle ways, over time, and from one culture to another. If we were to adopt *The Negro Family's* narrow and wholly inadequate framework for evaluating family stability, we could raise an equally sensational storm about the urban family falling apart when compared with the farm family; or the modern family when compared with the family of our grandfathers' day. Which may suggest why it is unwise to take a few pieces of census data and draw forth portentous conclusions about "the fabric of society" and "family structure" and "structural distortions in the life of the Negro American." It takes more than a desk calculator to make such judgments.

Evidence of improvements in American race relations is to be found all the way from Birmingham lunch counters to national television commercials. As yet, however, the change has had little impact on the life of the average American Negro. He remains badly housed, badly educated, underemployed and underpaid. The terms of the discourse change, but the inequality persists; and we spend more time in explaining this inequality than in doing something about it.

The explanations almost always focus on supposed defects of the Negro victim as if those—and not the racist structure of American society—were the cause of all woes that Negroes suffer. The Moynihan Report, following this line of thinking, singles out the "unstable Negro family" as the cause of Negro inequality. But the statistics, as has been suggested, reflect current effects of contemporaneous discrimination. They are results, not causes.

The new ideology, accepted now even by some liberals, would make it seem that unemployment, poor education and slum conditions result from family breakdown, "cultural deprivation," and lack of "acculturation" of Southern rural migrants.

To sustain this ideology, it is necessary to engage in the popular new sport of Savage Discovery and, to fit the theory, savages are being discovered in great profusion in the Northern ghetto. The all-time favorite "savage" is the promiscuous mother who produces a litter of il-

legitimate brats in order to profit from AFDC. Other triumphs of savage discovery are the child who cannot read because, it is said, his parents never talk to him, and the "untenantable" Negro family (apparently a neologism for "unbearable") that is reputed to throw garbage out the window.

If we are to believe the new ideologues, we must conclude that segregation and discrimination are not the terrible villains we thought they were. Rather, we are told the Negro's condition is due to his "pathology," his values, the way he lives, the kind of family life he leads. The major qualification—the bow to egalitarianism—is that these conditions are said to grow out of the Negro's history of being enslaved and oppressed—*generations ago*.

It is all an ingenious way of "copping a plea." As the murderer pleads guilty to manslaughter to avoid a conviction that might lead to his being electrocuted, liberal America today is pleading guilty to the savagery and oppression against the Negro that happened 100 years ago, in order to escape trial for the crimes of today.

The theme is: "The Negro was not initially born inferior, he has been made inferior by generations of harsh treatment." Thus we continue to assert that the Negro is inferior, while chastely maintaining that all men are equal. It is all rather painful, as well as fallacious. For the fact is that the Negro child learns less not because his mother doesn't subscribe to *The Reader's Digest* and doesn't give him colored crayons for his third birthday, but because he is miseducated in segregated slum schools.

The Negro is more often unemployed because he is last hired and first fired—not because his mother preferred a succession of temporary lovers to a permanent husband. Whenever we move toward full employment, the Negro is employed, usually, of course, at the bottom of the status ladder. When workers are needed badly enough, the supposed lack of skills of the Negro suddenly becomes less inhibiting. This was shown during the war, when it was more important to have someone operating the lathe, even if Negro, than it was to preserve the myth of Negro inability.

And the squalor of the Negro family's home in the Northern slum requires no farfetched explanations

about Southern rural background. In the first place, most of these families are not recently from the South and few are rural. In the second place, the condition of the housing is more easily explained by the neglect of slum landlords, and the crowding caused by the criminal shortage of decent low-income housing.

It is tempting, when faced with a complex problem, to wallow in the very chaos of complexity rather than to begin the task of unraveling and analyzing and, ultimately, of acting. It is obviously true that the Negro suffers from a never-ending cycle of oppression not only from generation to generation but, in the case of many individuals, from medically uncared-for birth to premature death. Each condition has its labyrinth of causation, and we soon discover that the Negro family of six in the three-room apartment has been placed there not only by the greedy slumlord and the barbarous realtor but also and equally by the venal housing inspector, and even by the noble woman leagued with her sisters in voting for a "progressive" zoning ordinance in her trim suburban town.

But to move from the recognition of infernal complexity to the refuge of damnably inaccurate simplicity is surely heresy. Much has to be done. All of it is difficult, tangled and anxious-making. Still it must be done; there's no escape in the world of sociological fakery.

Time after time, the Negro has had to deny in action the myths and lies that have been constructed to soothe the conscience of his oppressor. He had to deny his supposed docility, first by hopeless revolts against his slave-master, and then by fighting in blue uniforms by the hundreds of thousands; his lack of interest in education by almost magically expanding the few dollars he could lay hands on to send his sons through high school and his granddaughters to graduate school. He had to deny the myth of apathy both by the organized brilliance of a Woodlawn organization in Chicago and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi, and by the unorganized bursts of blind energy that we called riots in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Harlem and Rochester.

If we persist in creating a new

set of myths to justify the *status quo*, calling on the sociologists and their friends to give us the ammunition of "family disorganization" and "cultural deprivation," the Negro will doubtless destroy these too. But when we've started to move toward ending the myths that have bound us so long, to end the racism that has truly caused a "break-down" in our community and our nation, why turn back?

Obviously, if we stop discriminating tomorrow, great damage will remain—damage ranging from mis-education that is at best partly reversible, to hatred and bitterness that may be unalterable. This damage calls for correction and compensation. But we must be clear what we mean by "compensatory programs" and we must face direct-

ly what we are compensating for. Compensation *should* mean that we give back what we took away. For the millions of grown and half-grown Negro Americans who have already been damaged, we must make up for the injury that we did to them. This is what we must compensate for; not for some supposed inherent or acquired inferiority or weakness or instability of the victim whom we injured.

What, then, is to be done? The young Negro man who dropped out of school or, worse, graduated from high school with a seventh-grade education, represents a specific example of damage done—in *his* lifetime, in *our* lifetime. The damage must be corrected to the greatest extent possible, by re-education, by

training, by any means that become necessary. If a result of the demoralizing experience of growing up Negro is that a man does not in fact have the skills to obtain available work, he cannot be written off and relegated to a life of welfare subsistence. And it is almost as cruel to go through the motions of furnishing him irrelevant skills for imaginary jobs.

But the first order of business remains, now and in the near future, to bring a real end to real discrimination and segregation. These are the major causes of the conditions which the Moynihan Report so easily labels "family instability," and the "tangle of pathology." We must not forget to end discrimination or all our good works will amount to very little.

Conviction or Convenience

The Trap of the Great Society

Richard F. Hamilton

What will the Great Society look like? What are its likely characteristics? What, to quote President Johnson, who in turn was quoting Paul Goodman, will be the quality of life? Domestically, the two major aims of the Great Society are the end of want and the end to formal and informal inequalities of opportunity. It is striving for the realization of liberal goals, not just, as in the past, to make *ad hoc* responses to the more grievous problems as they arose. In this respect, the Great Society would break with most of the previous history of the world, a history in which want and inequality have been the dominant events.

There are no technical impediments to successful accomplishment of this resolve. Some West European countries have, in fact, already done away with poverty and slums. Want could be eliminated from this country right now with transfer payments of roughly \$10 billion. A more adequate solution, one reducing the need for such payments by going to the roots of the

poverty problem, is possible within a relatively short period.

But though the technical means for achieving the Great Society are available, the context in which any change will occur is one which may make success very difficult. The fact that both goals—the end of want and of unequal opportunity—are high on the scale of values of most Americans (or, at least, are central to their interests) means that the party in charge of this transformation will have an overwhelming edge over any opposition. Where that opposition, as with the Republicans, is a minority to begin with and split into factions, one of which is obtuse, short-sighted and intransigent, the advantage will be that much more decisive.

The opposition is in a hopeless plight. The conservative Republicans cannot win under any circumstances. On the other hand, a Republican program that presented a serious challenge to the Great Society party would permanently alienate the obtuse intransigents, whereas a compromise agreeable to both factions would never attract a majority of the electorate. Thus split, the moderate Republicans would begin the campaign with only about one-fourth of the elec-

torate behind them. It would take an extraordinary set of conditions to convert a second fourth of the electorate needed for an electoral victory.

Even demography works against the Republicans—Democrats have larger families, and nowadays they live almost as long as Republicans. Previous nonvoters who enter the electorate come in for the most part through the Democratic door.

Up to the summer of 1964, the elites (outside the South) gave solid support to the Republicans. In the fall of that year the monolithic character of this bloc collapsed. The full implications of traditional Republicanism became clear only when it had a candidate of "its" choice. The response was defection or silence. This meant more than just the votes or support of a few thousand wealthy men, their wives and retainers. It meant that many of the newspapers and magazines at their disposal also defected or were silent. The instrumentality which over the years sustained perhaps one-quarter of the total Republican vote was also lost to them. The integration of elite Republicans into the Democratic ranks or, more precisely, into the ranks of elite Democrats, has not received sufficient comment. From 1961 until

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