

LOSING GROUND TWO YEARS LATER

Charles Murray

Introduction

Losing Ground appeared in the fall of 1984. It was an election year, and the two presidential candidates held a debate on domestic policy. The word "black" was hardly mentioned. The "poor" were a topic, but only because of the "fairness" issue. Ronald Reagan's position was based on his proud and correct assertion that his administration was spending more on social welfare than any administration in history.

During the intervening two years, the debate on social policy has changed dramatically. Perhaps most important (at least as a first step), it is no longer necessary to defend the proposition that a problem exists. Everybody now agrees that an underclass is out there, is large, and requires attention, whereas in 1984 we were still thinking mainly in terms of people who were victimized by the economy or by other structural forces beyond their control. There is now recognition that, whereas it may be true that half the people who ever go on AFDC are off the rolls within two years, it is also true that half of all the caseload at any given time, consisting in recent years of more than 10 million adults and children, is in the midst of a spell that will last eight years or longer, and that this constitutes a serious problem of dependency (Bane and Ellwood 1983, Table 1, p. 11). There is now recognition that even in boom years, there are more than a million healthy, working-aged males, not students, who do not work a single day during the course of the year plus a few million others who are barely in the job market, and that this constitutes something more troubling than simple "unemployment."¹

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¹See, for example, Bureau of Labor Statistics (1984, Tables C-17, B-17).

In 1986, unlike 1984, the problem of illegitimacy is being confronted openly. One no longer hears people talk complacently about blacks having extended families. Fewer people are saying that the two-parent family is a parochial custom of the middle class. Instead, we are now into the post-Moyers era, when it has become acceptable to recognize that when 80 percent of all live births are to single women, as they are in some poor black communities, the consequences are destructive not only for the children, not only for the single parents, but destructive of the very life of the community.²

In accepting that a major problem exists, the debate has changed for the better. But in other ways, the sense of *déjà vu* is discouraging. For example, we are now being told of a new wave of solutions. Workfare is suddenly fashionable. Liberals and conservatives are at last agreeing that people ought to perform some work in return for the assistance they receive. Child support is suddenly fashionable. Let the fathers be held accountable for the children they sire; let the parents of teenage mothers be held accountable. All around the country, state governments and localities are said to be experimenting with these bold new approaches.

I am not sure this represents progress. Putting on the evaluator's hat that I wore for most of my career, I am willing to predict what will happen. A few early successes will be documented primarily through breathless media accounts. Then the evaluations will start coming in, and it will turn out that, aside from a few Hawthorne effects, little has changed. The debunking cycle is already underway. It is being reported that Massachusetts' "ET" job placement program for AFDC mothers is not really the massive job-generator that Governor Dukakis has trumpeted, but has instead ridden the tail of a full-employment economy and may actually have slowed progress in getting welfare mothers into the labor market (see, for example, Brookes 1986 and Couch 1986). Workfare experiments in Baltimore and San Diego "are showing marked success," the *Washington Post* tells us, but the actual changes revealed by the evaluations are so marginal that they are significant only statistically (Rich 1986).

The next step of the cycle will be to examine the reasons for lack of success. The evaluators will round up the usual suspects—inadequate funding, untrained staff, problems with supervision, certain design flaws. But as attempts are made to solve these problems, it will become increasingly clear that the problems are not idiosyn-

²The figure of 80 percent has been reported for Central Harlem by the New York Department of Health, and Harlem is by no means a homogeneously poor community.

cratic, but built-in. There is no such thing as the error-free implementation that will finally vindicate the program concept.

Worse yet, we will find once again that what we want and what we get from social programs will turn out to be mirror images. "What we want" with workfare and the rest of the new solutions is to bring people back into the mainstream of American society. We want them to become productive, independent citizens. "What we get" is a new game that we have set up for poor people. With workfare, the prize is a benefit. The state says, "To get this prize, you have to do some work unless you are exempt because of conditions A, B, and C." If he (or she) fails, and ends up having to do that work, he is doubly stigmatized. The middle-class folks drive by as he rakes leaves in the park and rejoice that at last some of those welfare loafers have to do a little work. His friends from the neighborhood drive by and laugh at him for having so little savvy, so little self-respect. Or consider child support. The child support laws being considered do not demand that the man support his child no matter what or face criminal penalties. Rather, the man will have to support his child unless he is *unable* to do so—which constitutes a looming incentive for the man to be visibly unemployed at strategic moments and to keep his visible earnings below the minimum set by the program.

I am suggesting we are about to witness a replay of the history of CETA and WIN. The government will set up a game that anyone with a little imagination and pride can beat. We will not socialize people into the world of work. We will socialize people into the world of the scam and the con.

There is also a sense of *déjà vu* in the optimism. The enthusiasm for the new ideas is oddly reminiscent of the early days of the War on Poverty. This time, I hear people saying, we have figured out how to do it right. What will happen when that optimism is dashed? Who will be blamed? Will the program designers finally decide that they are up against some basic misconceptions about how human beings function and about the constraints on state interventions? Will they persevere with another wave of ideas?

Because so much of the attention to the underclass has been de facto attention to the black underclass, I am concerned about still another possibility, a dangerous reaction that will see a coalition of the old racism and a virulent new kind. The old racists will see themselves confirmed in all their prejudices. When yet another set of attempts to help the poor (read, blacks) has failed, racist explanations that in recent years have been muted will become louder and more explicit. They will be augmented, in these, my worst fears, by the apologists who have for years insisted on seeing every special

difficulty that blacks face as the explanation for their condition. The apologists must have *something* to blame—it cannot be the fault of their policies—and I worry that as none of the new cures work, the apologists will be increasingly attracted to a modification of the racist explanation. I see them deciding that blacks are so different from whites (for social and historical reasons, I am sure they will insist, not genetic ones) that a single standard for black and white behavior is unrealistic.³ The current directions of the debate over social policy indicate a potential some years from now for an explosive new form of racism in this country.

The debate about social policy has indeed changed over the last two years, in some ways that I welcome, in others about which I am skeptical, and in still others that frighten me. This leads to the question of what social scientists might contribute. How can we push the dialogue along, increase our understanding of the forces at work, and perhaps eventually come to grips with the nature of real solutions. Let me suggest four themes that we should keep in mind whether we are Keynesians or classical liberals, partisans of John Rawls or Robert Nozick.

Concentrate on the White Underclass

We badly need studies of white poverty, white unemployment, white welfare recipiency, and white illegitimacy. One reason is to fill a scholarly gap—we know surprisingly little about specifically white behavior, especially compared with the extensive literature about blacks. A second reason is that whites are a much less complicated population than blacks. By looking at white dynamics, we may strip away the overlay of considerations that attach particularly to blacks. The third reason is the salutary purpose of letting whites know that the phenomena now associated with blacks are predominantly phenomena of socioeconomic class, not of race.

I have made an initial contribution to this effort by examining illegitimacy by race and socioeconomic class in the state of Ohio, the only state (to my knowledge) that publishes illegitimacy data by both race and locality.⁴ To summarize the results very briefly, variance in illegitimacy rates appears to be highly lawful. Just two independent variables—percent of the population below the poverty line, and

³The long-term effects of affirmative action may contribute to this process, as I have argued elsewhere. See Murray (1984b).

⁴See Murray (1986). Several states publish illegitimacy data by race and county, but “county” is too large and socioeconomically heterogeneous as a unit of aggregation to be usable.

percent of the adult population with four or more years of college—explain fully 67 percent of the variance in white illegitimacy rates and 79 percent of the variance in black illegitimacy rates.⁵

Furthermore, the strength of the relationship (as measured by the regression coefficients) was great. To put it in concrete terms, the white illegitimacy rate in affluent, highly educated Shaker Heights was less than two percent of all live births—lower than the national rate for whites in the 1940s. The white illegitimacy rate in economically depressed, ill-educated Portsmouth was 25 percent of all live births—about the same as the rates among blacks in the early 1960s that prompted Pat Moynihan (1965) to write his famous report on the breakdown of the black family.

The results from Ohio do not explain away the entire difference in black and white illegitimacy rates. Blacks and whites continue to show different baseline rates even after controlling for poverty and education. But this is only another way of saying that much work still needs to be done after far too many years in which we neglected class as an explanatory construct in our analyses of illegitimacy. Publicizing the Ohio results is a step in the right direction of turning our attention away from race and toward class-oriented explanations that so obviously deserve investigation.

Open the Black Box of Causation

The debate about *Losing Ground* has in large part been a debate about causation. How do we tease from the data what is causing what? At this point, we must concentrate on getting inside the causal black box, developing and using much better data than any that we have available now.

The nature of the problem is illustrated by the Ohio data on illegitimacy. The two independent variables—poverty and education—“explain” much of the variance, but explain not a bit of the causal dynamics. All we know is that poverty and poor education cannot be “causing” illegitimacy in any simple fashion. If they were, and this were a long-standing relationship, then illegitimacy would have been falling as the country became so rapidly less-poor and better-educated during the 1960s. “Something else” as a causal dynamic is being captured by poverty and education. What is it?

In answering such questions, social scientists have been relying too obsessively on quantitative techniques in general and the econometric tradition in particular. We must become more wary of the

⁵Data refer to towns of 25,000 population or larger.

fallacy of the tool which says that, given a hammer, everything else becomes a nail. Given a statistical analysis package, the way to understand causation does not necessarily become numerical.

An alternative technique in exploring causation is to spend a lot more time talking to people. I am reminded of my first exposure to social science research in Thai villages nearly 20 years ago. I kept seeing researchers develop elegant survey research instruments, carefully adapted (it was thought) to the subtleties of Thai village culture—and none of them seemed to work very well. And yet, after the clipboards had been put away and we were sitting on the porch of a villager's hut talking away the evening, the same villagers would discuss the same topics intelligently, articulately, and forthrightly. Why, I asked myself, were we doing things the hard way?

We are doing things the hard way as well in our attempts to understand the complicated relationship of social policy to the behaviors of the underclass. I am not a methodological Luddite, and would not have us discard our quantitative tools nor try to imitate journalism. On the contrary, quantitative methods are uniquely powerful for answering certain questions and can be used to inform (if not resolve) almost any question. I am arguing instead for synthesis. An example of what I have in mind is suggested by the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a longitudinal data base of immeasurable value. On the next wave of interviews for the PSID, why not hire a few good ethnologists to interview a subsample of 100 persons who were welfare-dependent in 1970, spending several hours with each respondent to capture a qualitative account of what has happened to the family during the last 16 years? It makes no difference whose theory is supported by the overall results. The diagnostic value of the individual cases is bound to be enormous. Combining the ethnographic data with nearly two decades of survey data, we would have the raw material for genuinely pathbreaking work.

A synthesis of qualitative and quantitative data would also permit us to deal with a problem that I refer to as "epistemic error."⁶ Epistemic error is the gap between the construct one wishes to measure and the operational measure that is available. Consider the construct called "welfare dependency" as an example. The construct as we commonly use it has nothing to do with literal "dependency on public assistance for income." That is, we do not for most purposes wish to include the paraplegic living on a disability check as "welfare dependent," even though he is getting all of his income from the government in the form of welfare. On the other hand, it may be (though

⁶See Blalock (1968) and Costner (1971) for early discussions of this issue.

not necessarily) that a person who works full-time but lives in a subsidized apartment is importantly "welfare dependent." The referent of the construct called "welfare dependency" is a state of mind as much as it is an economic plight. "Welfare dependency" acquires its importance *as a construct* because it denotes a process whereby people of latent intelligence, imagination, and initiative are in some way debilitated because of welfare or some constellation of effects facilitated by welfare. *Welfare dependency is, in other words, an extremely subtle, complex construct.* To say that we are even close to capturing this construct with any of the variables we are presently using seems to me naive. I am not criticizing any particular operational definition of welfare dependency. I am saying that all are necessarily weak, and we will realize that only when we inform our quantitative data with qualitative windows on the way people live their lives.

Let me suggest also that social scientists pay more attention to qualitative data as an exercise in humility. We are quick to dismiss the testimony of people who work in the field as "anecdotal." There are reasons to be wary of such data, it is true. But we too often go to the opposite extreme and assume that such data are worthless and that it makes no difference what a consensus of practitioners may be. If their perceptions contradict the results from our structural equation models, I have heard colleagues conclude, then it must necessarily be that the models are right and the practitioners wrong. The hubris of this attitude about the insights of practitioners is particularly misplaced among that not inconsiderable number of social scientists who have gone from kindergarten to a university faculty without ever spending more than a summer's vacation in the real world. James Q. Wilson (1983, p. 4), referring to his research experiences in the world of crime and law enforcement, once wrote that "[w]hen police officers or prosecutors refer to you as a 'sociologist,' they are not so much describing your profession as repudiating your views." It is worth our while to think about why it should be that so many practitioners in so many fields hold the views of social scientists in contempt.

Open Up the Models

The third theme is a plea to broaden the scope of our models. The behaviors we associate with the underclass are often seen in isolation. We try to explain unemployment by variables relating to the job market or we try to explain illegitimacy by variables relating to welfare, and too often run up against a dead end. A broader focus is likely to enrich our analyses. Glenn C. Loury (1986) has used the

recent large-scale survey of inner-city minority youth (conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research), one of the best and most wide-ranging of such surveys, to make this point.⁷ No one thought to include in the instrument whether the young single male respondents were living with a woman and, if so, what contribution this living arrangement made to their housing, food, or cash expenses. No one thought to ask whether the single male respondents had children. A study of one of the most critical problems of the underclass, chronic male unemployment in the inner-city, failed to explore its connection with another of the most critical problems of the underclass, welfare among single inner-city mothers. Having myself designed instruments that omitted a crucial item, I can empathize with the researchers. Nonetheless, our tunnel vision is occasionally startling.

Let me take another, perhaps less obvious example of how we should broaden our models. One of the explanatory constructs for chronic unemployment is lack of "job-readiness." Another explanatory construct is "lack of education." They are seldom linked. The former is generally thought to occur because of faulty socialization by the family and peers; the latter is generally thought to contribute to unemployment via its relation to job skills. Why not construct a model and design research instruments incorporating the hypothesis that one of the inadvertent functions of education in the "old days" was socialization to the job setting? Independently of *what* you learned (which would feed into the job-skills relationship with employment), you had to "go to work" (attend classes) every day whether you felt like it or not; had to deal with the teacher as the subordinate in a strict supervisor-subordinate relationship; and had to do tedious work. You got used to the kinds of things that would, among other things, make you "job-ready." A model of the causes of chronic unemployment could make a real contribution by exploring the hypothesis that a principal consequence of the educational reforms in the 1960s and 1970s was to end, or radically diminish, the socializing function for a population of youngsters who subsequently had problems adapting to the basic requirements of a job.

Perhaps the most important new area that our models must incorporate involves what I called "status rewards" in *Losing Ground* (chap. 14). Status rewards are all the ways in which we are reinforced by the approval and respect of the community. If the community says with approval of the man with a menial job that "he takes care of his own," then having a menial job has rewards that must be measured

⁷See Freeman and Holzer (1984) for a summary of the findings of the NEBR study.

in addition to a simple calculation of income. If the community says of the same man that he is a chump working for chump change, then a menial job has penalties that must be measured. Both the reality and the sources of these changes in status rewards urgently need investigation. We know that status rewards and penalties have enormous influence on the professional and social behavior of university faculty members. We also have a fair idea of the sources of these rewards and penalties. Why are social scientists so uninterested in the effects and dynamics of status rewards on poor people?

Rethink the Dependent Variables

The fourth and last of my themes for the reform of social science's exploration of the underclass has to do with the dependent variables we use. For the most part, we have measured "progress" in social policy according to changes in dependent variables that measure aggregate economic intake. The usual assumption has been that more money is better, regardless of its source. Thus we debate whether the poverty measure should include in-kind benefits; but hardly anyone has suggested that the poverty measure we use for the national debate ought to *exclude* all welfare, cash or in-kind. The rationale for excluding welfare income is obvious. If the national debate centered on pretransfer income, it would necessarily center as well on our progress (lack of it) in achieving the original goal of the War on Poverty, to make the working-aged dependent independent. But, except for my own plaintive remarks in *Losing Ground* (pp. 64-65), I have yet to see anyone suggest that the pretransfer measure is the crucial one.

There are also noneconomic dependent variables that deserve much higher priority. For example, if you were poor tomorrow, what would be your priorities for the reform of social policy? I do not mean your priorities if you were transformed into an illiterate inner-city black with whatever values you impute to such people; rather, what if you, with your values and attitudes were made poor. Imagine yourself an immigrant, for example, trained as a lawyer in Lithuania but forced by lack of marketable skills to sweep floors in America.

I suggest that your priorities might have very little to do with access to food stamps or to subsidized housing or to any other aspect of the income transfer system. Instead, your greatest concern might very well be safety. You would deeply resent the drug pushers in your neighborhood and the apparent inability of the police to keep them out. You would be crippled in your everyday life by the precautions

you would have to take and the anxiety you would feel for your spouse and children.

You would want safety for broader reasons as well. It is difficult to interact with neighbors—to control a community and its standards, as the “good folks” otherwise naturally tend to do—if the community is fragmented by the disorganization of rampant crime. It might well be that the “social program” you most enthusiastically advocate would be the construction of a very large prison and the election of some very tough judges and prosecutors.

Another priority if you had children would likely be education. Your demands would be modest—not for more computer-aided instruction, not for a fancier gym, but for a school that teaches basic courses rigorously in an orderly atmosphere; for a school that makes good on the expectations that you instill in your children before you send them to kindergarten. It is such a simple task. For millenia, societies have known how to educate children who want to learn. We are spending more than enough to accomplish this. At the same time that policymakers worry about dropouts and delinquents—the children who for whatever reason are not ready to learn—should it not be an appropriate top priority for the reform of social policy to provide education to those whom it is so easy to educate?

I am suggesting that we define the dependent variables of social policy, the measures for assessing whether poor people are progressing or losing ground, in terms of our own values, in terms of what we would want if we were poor. This is no more revolutionary than to suggest that a large proportion of the people who live in the inner cities and in other poor communities are not members of an underclass. There is nothing broken *in them* that needs fixing. Their values and their behaviors are admirable. But they have systematically if unintentionally been punished by a social policy that has catered to other poor people who were thought to be in greater need of our help. One of the best and most practical things we can do is to provide for these citizens the same basic services that we value for ourselves. In the process, we may also—inadvertently, as seems inevitable in social policy—set in motion a reconstruction of poor communities that will do more to help members of the underclass than any “helping” program we have been able to devise.

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