

## “Pat Moynihan Thinks about Families”

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It is a distinct honor to be here back at Harvard for the first time in many years to talk about a subject that is so dear to my heart, the work and thinking of one of my oldest and best friends, Pat Moynihan. We knew each other for 40 years. I helped bring him to Harvard. I lamented when he left but was relieved to learn that he was leaving only to become a United States Senator from the state of New York.

In March, 1965, Pat Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor for public policy research, finished an internal memorandum, of which fewer than 100 copies were printed, designed to guide the Johnson Administration in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It was leaked to the press. No one quite knows by whom, but the best suspicion points to middle managers in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare who, I think, felt offended that the family problem would be raised outside of their jurisdiction. When this report was leaked to the press, to quote Charles Dickens, “it was the best of times, it was the worst of time.” It was the best of times in the sense that the Civil Rights Act had just been passed in 1964, finally setting in motion an effort to redress the legal and political difficulties under which African Americans had labored so long in this country. But it was the worst of times because in 1964, there were riots involving blacks and whites in both Rochester and Philadelphia. In 1965, shortly after the report was leaked to the press, there was the Watts riot in Los Angeles and the next year in 1966 there was a riot in Cleveland.

Moynihan's report provided the inspiration for Lyndon B. Johnson's address to Howard University in June of 1965, but, as Pat later remarked, it was perhaps the last peacetime speech LBJ ever gave because the war in Viet Nam had engulfed and ultimately destroyed his administration.

When the report appeared, it received a great deal of criticism--criticism that in my view reflects either an unwillingness to read the report or an unwillingness to think about it in a serious way. William Ryan, writing in *The Nation* magazine said that the Moynihan Report was "a new form of subtle racism" because "it seduces the reader into believing that it is not racism and discrimination but the weaknesses and defects of the Negro, himself, that accounts for the present status of inequality."

These were sharp words and totally at odds with what Moynihan wrote in the report, a matter on which I will dwell briefly in a moment. Many people stepped forward and endorsed the release of the report or the reading of the report, and that included Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. But soon the left in American politics was seized with an anti-Pat Moynihan passion. James Farmer at CORE and the leaders of many of the main-line Protestant churches began to denounce it and urged that the report be repudiated. There was to be a White House Conference on Civil Rights to be presided over by the President.. A planning meeting was called, which I attended, and there the prospective executive director of the White House Conference on Civil Rights, Berl Bernhard, stood up and said with a wide smile on his face, "I have been reliably informed that no such person as Daniel

Patrick Moynihan exists.” And when the conference was in fact held, the report was absent, Pat was not invited, and the subject was never mentioned.

Now we skip ahead 20 years to 1985. On this occasion, Pat Moynihan was invited to give the Godkin Lectures at the JFK School at Harvard. He was now a senator. He gave in 1985 a speech very similar to his 1965 report, updated with new statistics but making essentially the same argument. He received a standing ovation. His remarks were widely praised in the press. Editorials complimented him on his insightfulness. Why the difference between 1965 and 1985? I don't think it's because Harvard University or the mass media liked senators better than they liked obscure assistant secretaries of labor. And I don't think it's because his critics had become converted to his cause. But perhaps one of the reasons was the following. In 1965, one-quarter of African American children were born out of wedlock. In 1985, one-quarter of *white* children were born out of wedlock.. When white readers realized that the problem was not confined to another race, but was the problem of a nation and of a culture, they decided that this was a serious issue.

There had never been a decent reason for rejecting Pat's argument. If you read the report, you realize he never blamed the victim. Quite the contrary, he blamed slavery. He did not ignore segregation; instead, he called attention repeatedly to segregation in the occupational, residential, and educational markets, and said that African Americans were the victims of the segregation. He did not ignore urban life nor ignore the enormous strains placed on recent migrants to cities.

Rather, he pointed out in detail the effects of urbanization. He did not ignore unemployment; he emphasized unemployment, but said that unemployment now had to be understood in a somewhat broader context. It was a tragedy that so many African Americans were unemployed but the cure for this unemployment must address not simply the availability of jobs or only the training for jobs, but the culture in which employment occurs. He believed, that the fundamental problem facing African Americans is “the crumbling”, of the black family in urban ghettos and the root cause of this was slavery.

During the 40 years I knew Pat, we met endlessly, talked at great length, and drank a lot. During all of these conversations, his preoccupation with the status of the family was always at the forefront of his concerns. This was understandable for personal reasons. He was a Catholic. He was also the product of a broken family, raised by a mother who had been abandoned by her husband.. He never deviated from the view that the family was the core of culture. He did not deviate in part because he knew what it meant to him personally to have become the victim of a broken family.

His critics attempted their views by arguing that slavery was not such a bad thing at all. One writer said, slavery provided its victims with “a remarkably stable base for living.” Stephanie Koontz said that unmarried black women had “healthy, not pathological qualities.” Historian Herbert Gutman argued that the black family was not, in fact, harmed by slavery. Robert Fogel, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics, said in his book on slavery said that it was in the rational interest of slave

owners to take care of their slaves because, after all, these slaves were property and without cultivating and improving it the property would depreciate in value.

We know that all of these arguments were in important respects wrong, and that they must have been wrong. How could a vicious system of oppression in which blacks were not allowed to sue, own property, marry, or conduct their own religious experiences; who; could be sold on a slave block at a moment's notice, how could such a system that lasted for nearly three centuries have any effect other than to weaken their culture? This problem was especially acute in small ones because their, male blacks would often be sent out to work in other locations. The possibility of them enjoying even the company of female slaves, much less the prospect of living together in something approximating marriage, was close to zero. Stephen Ruggles and others have examined the level of marriage formation during those years when some Census data was available at the city level. He discovered that in this period, single parenthood was three times more common among black than white families. Even Herbert Gutman's own book, widely quoted by him and others as a criticism of the Moynihan report, we discover that his data support the same conclusion. Single parent families were roughly three times as common among African Americans as among whites. Orlando Patterson said in his book, Rituals of Blood, that slavery mean "that a black man could not offer a black woman security, status, name, or identity". This did not end with the end of slavery, because following it came a period of pseudo-slavery in which African Americans became sharecroppers, living on property they did not own, working for people other than themselves and having

little or no opportunity to retain savings so as create the prospects of a decent life for their children.

Moynihan in his report was not entirely clear on what effect single parent families would have on persons experiencing them. But Sara McClanahan, and Gary Sandefur in their 1994 book on the single parent family analyzed four longitudinal data sets: the PSID, the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, High School and Beyond, and the National Survey of Families and Neighborhoods and Households. They found the effect of low income, poverty, and single parent status on the behavior of children. They concluded that it harmed the children and boys more than girls. The boys were twice as likely to drop out of school and much more likely to be idle on the street corner than were boys in two-parent families. The daughters were twice as likely to become unmarried teenage mothers that were those in intact families.. In trying to explain this difference, McClanahan and Sandefur suggested that income differences make an important contribution, perhaps explaining at least Of course, it is very difficult, except statistically, to separate income effects and family effects because family status profoundly affects your income and income status profoundly affects your opportunities for being married. Those who said that this problem could be solved because unmarried women would live with their grandmothers or with stepfathers were confronted by the findings from McClanahan and Sandefur showing that having a grandmother or a stepfather present made little difference.

These changes were not limited to black Americans, they were true of white Americans as well. The only difference between black and white Americans is that there was a higher percentage of black Americans facing this problem.., In Pat's view, that was largely the result of slavery. If you look around the world, you will discover that this problem of out of wedlock births has become a phenomenon that afflicts almost all of the Western world. The growth in the proportion of children living with a single parent has grown rapidly in Canada, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

There is a problem in analyzing these facts, and it arises from the following difficulty. About 95% of the good social science research in the world, and probably also 95% of the bad social science in the world, is done in this country. As a result, we examine ourselves much more fully than other countries examine themselves. I spent a week in Sweden, for example, trying to uncover what information was available about the behavior of children, controlling for the usual independent variables, that were raised in single parent families or that were raised by unmarried parents. The answer was the Swedes didn't know. My guess is that in many other countries, they don't know either. This creates a problem. How important is marriage as opposed to cohabitation?. Suppose a man and woman are not married, suppose the woman has a child, suppose the biological father of the mother remains in residence and the two raise the child as if they were married, but they are not. Does this make a difference? Possibly.. Suppose that the biological father does not remain there, but other relatives participate. Does this make a difference? In some

cultures it may, in this culture it does not. We do not know the answer for these larger questions as we gaze around the world.

Families do not exist in isolation., As Rob Sampson has pointed out in the studies he has done for the Chicago Project, families live in neighborhoods, and the characteristics of neighborhoods may often affect the behavior of individuals within those neighborhoods. Neighborhoods with a high proportion of single parent families have more murders and robberies even after adjusting for race, income, age, density and size. Indeed, as I read one of Rob Sampson's papers, he seems to suggest that it is the presence of single parent families, not differences between blacks and whites, that explains most, if not all, of the difference in black and white rates of criminality.

You might wonder what Pat Moynihan thought should be done. He didn't know. He and I talked about this endlessly. He came up with several possibilities, some of which he liked, some which he did not. Welfare reform was tried in 1996 with a bill introduced by President Clinton. Pat Moynihan opposed this bill vigorously on the floor of the Senate because he read an Urban Institute study that erroneously led him to believe that welfare reform would increase dramatically the level of childhood poverty. In fact, there was a flaw in the Urban Institute study. Welfare reform was passed and it did not lead to an increase in childhood poverty. On the other hand, it did not lead to an increase in marriage, and there is a very simple explanation for this. The Rand Corporation has done a study in California as to how its social service agency dispenses welfare and it turns out that it is relatively

easy to persuade working level officials in a welfare department to tell a woman applying for welfare that her first task is to look hard for a job, and if she is unable to find a job to come back and fill out the application for welfare. That they can manage to do, but it is very difficult, if not impossible, to tell the same worker to tell an applicant to get married and she cannot to come back. Asking for marriage in a large American bureaucracy is much harder than asking for work. We might, of course, deal with this problem by increasing the cultural support for marriage and increasing the level of shame attached to unwed parents, but how do we do this? Churches might, but governments don't produce shame; indeed, they rarely produce culture.

Could we rely on family allowances? Pat loved this idea and talked about it endlessly throughout his life. A family allowance means that, as in most European nations, the government pays an additional income supplement to families that have children, and he thought America should embrace the European ideal. In time, we did, though quite slowly. It is called the Earned Income Tax Credit. Created in 1975, it now goes to 21 million Americans and costs about \$35-\$36 billion a year. It is an additional payment to poor married parents when they have a child. The problem is that between 1975 and roughly two years ago, while the Earned Income Tax Credit was spreading widely, the proportion of black and white families producing children who lived only with one parent went up.

Towards the end of his career when Pat was asked in what do you think the government should do about it? He answered in what I think is one of his most famous phrases. He said that "if you think a government program can restore

marriage, you know more about the government than I do.” And nobody knew more about the government than Pat Moynihan.