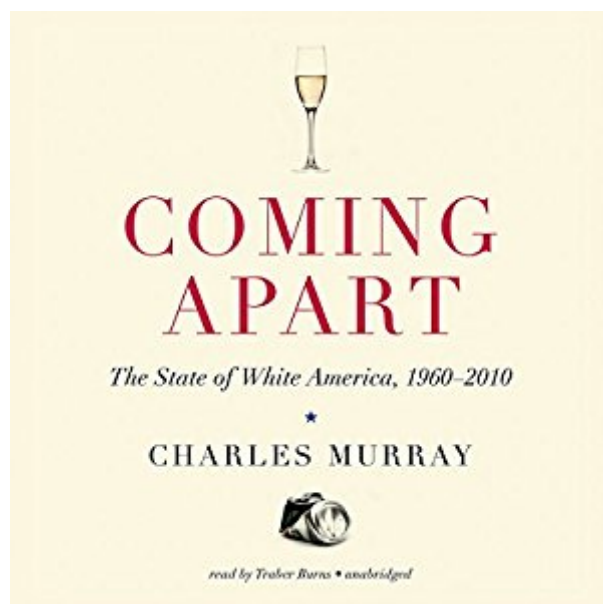


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Coming Apart: The State Of White America, 1960-2010



Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *Losing Ground* and *The Bell Curve*, this startling long-lens view shows how America is coming apart at the seams that have historically joined our social classes. In *Coming Apart*, Charles Murray explores the formation of American classes that are different in kind from anything we have ever known, focusing on whites as a way of driving home the fact that the trends he describes do not break along lines of race or ethnicity. Drawing on five decades of statistics and research, *Coming Apart* demonstrates that a new upper class and a new lower class have diverged so far in core behaviors and values that they barely recognize their underlying American kinship—a divergence that has nothing to do with income inequality and that has grown during good economic times and bad. The top and bottom of white America increasingly live in different cultures, Murray argues, with the powerful upper class living in enclaves surrounded by their own kind, ignorant about life in mainstream America, and the lower class suffering from erosions of family and community life that strike at the heart of the pursuit of happiness. This divergence puts the success of the American project at risk. The evidence in *Coming Apart* is about white America. Its message is about all of America. Charles Murray is the W. H. Brady Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. He first came to national attention in 1984 with *Losing Ground*. He received a bachelor's degree in history from Harvard and a Ph.D. in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He lives with his wife in Burkittsville, Maryland.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The last chapter, entitled "Alternative Futures," sounds a note of optimism. All that we need is for

America's elites to recognize the problem, come to their senses, and set things straight. Right. As if Murray has not been futilely expounding this message for the past 40 years. He cites Robert Fogel's "The Fourth Great Awakening" as an inspiration for his optimism. America has overcome crises of the spirit in the past, after we lost first the Puritan spirituality, then the secular sense of mission which fueled our independence, then the crisis of the depression which was answered by the New Deal and the welfare state. Fogel argues that today's crisis is a want of meaning in our lives. Murray believes we can reestablish it. Murray says that there are only about four fundamental personal characteristics undergirding a happy life. The ones he names are two character traits: honesty and industry, and two societal connections: meaningful relationships with one's fellow man, and a satisfying marriage. He provides another, overlapping list of four elements that have historically defined American society which he calls the four founding virtues: industriousness, honesty, marriage, and religiosity. He goes into some length presenting sociological surveys that demonstrate the importance and the interconnectedness of these characteristics to personal happiness, and their importance to the well-being of society. If only we could recover them, all would be well. The backbone of his book is a comparison between two hypothetically constructed communities, Fishtown and Belmont. They are based on real places, predominantly white neighborhoods of Philadelphia and Boston respectively, with incomes at the 8th and 97th national percentiles.

Charles Murray has never been one to shy away from a volatile subject. As a result, he has been able to make startling arguments on topics that are rather taboo in the modern intellectual climate. With the *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (A Free Press Paperbacks Book), he argued that intelligence, which is partly innate, is more important to social success than socioeconomic status. In *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950*, he ranks the cultural value of different civilizations and assesses the west as by far the greatest. It's clear from his work that Murray does not suffer from delusion--he is no quack. And the content of his arguments is engaging for anyone who is open-minded and willing to consider arguments from new perspectives. Here, Murray explains that white America has grown increasingly divided along class lines. There is a clear moral case being made here. The lower class is falling into illegitimacy, crime, and poverty while the upper class is excelling in education, career, and family. The main cause is simple: primarily, a devaluation of white middle class values brought on by increased intervention by the government. This intervention takes the form of welfare support, in which the government gives incentive for people to break apart families and avoid work.

Meanwhile, the upper class is left alone to prosper in its highly technical fields.

"Coming Apart" offers a very effective analysis of the diverging economic prospects and social values of American society since 1963. I should say first off that many people seem biased against this book because of the controversy surrounding Murray's prior book, "The Bell Curve." Murray has taken great pains in this new book to avoid the issue of race, focusing specifically on white Americans. I could find nothing offensive or even politically incorrect regarding race in this book. The author's main premise is that over the past 4+ decades, America has divided strongly into two classes, that he illustrates with fictional town names. "Belmont" refers to the cognitive elite: The top 20% with college or graduate degrees, who hold jobs in knowledge-based occupations. And "Fishtown" refers to the working class: The bottom 30% with at most a high school diploma and (if employed) working in blue collar or low wage service jobs. Murray demonstrates quite effectively (using statistics) that the people who make up "Belmont" have become more industrious and more traditional in their attitudes toward marriage, family and community, while the people in "Fishtown" are living in communities that are basically falling apart and where traditional nuclear families are becoming harder and harder to find. While the book bases its arguments on solid statistics, I have two primary complaints. First, it does not always do a good job of distinguishing cause and effect. For example, the author points out the working class men now choose to engage in much more "leisure" and less work. He then conjures up a vision of a typical male, who all bent out of shape because he doesn't have the opportunity his grandfather had at the GM factory, turns down a \$12 per hour job driving a delivery truck.

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