Lower-class behavior in our cities

ASSIGN BUSTER

essay: lower-class behavior in our citiesessay, 1927?, 10? By his own lights, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, ambassador, senator, sociologist, and itinerant American intellectual, was the product of a broken home and a pathological family.

He was born in 1927 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, but raised mostly in New York City. When Moynihan was 10 years old, his father, John, left the family, plunging it into poverty. Moynihan™s mother, Margaret, remarried, had another child, divorced, moved to Indiana to stay with relatives, then returned to New York, where she worked as a nurse. Moynihan™s childhood” a tangle of poverty, remarriage, relocation, and single motherhood” contrasted starkly with the idyllic American family life he would later extol.

My relations are obviously those of divided allegiance, Moynihan wrote in a diary he kept during the 1950s. Apparently I loved the old man very much yet had to take sides ¦ choosing mom in spite of loving pop. In the same journal, Moynihan, subjecting himself to the sort of analysis to which he would soon subject others, wrote, Both my mother and father” They let me down badly ¦ I find through the years this enormous emotional attachment to Father substitutes” of whom the least rejection was cause for untold agonies” the only answer is that I have repressed my feelings towards dad. As a teenager, Moynihan divided his time between his studies and working at the docks in Manhattan to help out his family. In 1943, he tested into the City College of New York, walking into the examination room with a longshoreman™s loading hook in his back pocket so that he would not be mistaken for any sissy kid. After a year at CCNY, he enlisted in the Navy, which paid for him to go to Tufts University for a bachelor™s degree.

He stayed for a master™s degree and then started a doctorate program, which took him to the London School of Economics, where he did research. In 1959, Moynihan began writing for Irving Kristol™s magazine The Reporter, covering everything from organized crime to auto safety. The election of John F. Kennedy as president, in 1960, gave Moynihan a chance to put his broad curiosity to practical use; he was hired as an aide in the Department of Labor. Moynihan was, by then, an anticommunist liberal with a strong belief in the power of government to both study and solve social problems. He was also something of a scenester. His fear of being taken for a sissy kid had diminished.

In London, he™d cultivated a love of wine, fine cheeses, tailored suits, and the mannerisms of an English aristocrat. He stood six feet five inches tall. A cultured civil servant not to the manor born, Moynihan” witty, colorful, loquacious” charmed the Washington elite, moving easily among congressional aides, politicians, and journalists. As the historian James Patterson writes in Freedom Is Not Enough, his book about Moynihan, he was possessed by the optimism of youth. He believed in the marriage of government and social science to formulate policy.

All manner of later experiences in politics were to test this youthful faith. Moynihan stayed on at the Labor Department during Lyndon B. Johnson™s administration, but became increasingly disillusioned with Johnson™s War on Poverty. He believed that the initiative should be run through an established societal institution: the patriarchal family. Fathers should be supported by public policy, in the form of jobs funded by the government. Moynihan

believed that unemployment, specifically male unemployment, was the biggest impediment to the social mobility of the poor.

He was, it might be said, a conservative radical who disdained service programs such as Head Start and traditional welfare programs such as Aid to Families With Dependent Children, and instead imagined a broad national program that subsidized families through jobs programs for men and a guaranteed minimum income for every family. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, as an adviser to President Nixon, promoted a guaranteed minimum income for all families, in part to help unravel the tangle of pathology he had famously diagnosed in his report on The Negro Family. August 25, 1969. (Associated Press)Influenced by the civil-rights movement, Moynihan focused on the black family. He believed that an undue optimism about the pending passage of civil-rights legislation was obscuring a pressing problem: a deficit of employed black men of strong character. He believed that this deficit went a long way toward explaining the African American community™s relative poverty.

Moynihan began searching for a way to press the point within the Johnson administration. I felt I had to write a paper about the Negro family, Moynihan later recalled, to explain to the fellows how there was a problem more difficult than they knew. In March of 1965, Moynihan printed up 100 copies of a report he and a small staff had labored over for only a few months. The Moynihan Report: An Annotated EditionThe report was called The Negro Family: The Case for National Action. Unsigned, it was meant to be an internal government document, with only one copy distributed at first and the other 99 kept locked in a vault. Running against the tide of optimism

around civil rights, The Negro Family argued that the federal government was underestimating the damage done to black families by three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment as well as a racist virus in the American blood stream, which would continue to plague blacks in the future: That the Negro American has survived at all is extraordinary” a lesser people might simply have died out, as indeed others have ¦ But it may not be supposed that the Negro American community has not paid a fearful price for the incredible mistreatment to which it has been subjected over the past three centuries. That price was clear to Moynihan. The Negro family, battered and harassed by discrimination, injustice, and uprooting, is in the deepest trouble, he wrote.

While many young Negroes are moving ahead to unprecedented levels of achievement, many more are falling further and further behind. Out-of-wedlock births were on the rise, and with them, welfare dependency, while the unemployment rate among black men remained high. Moynihan believed that at the core of all these problems lay a black family structure mutated by white oppression: In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.

Moynihan believed this matriarchal structure robbed black men of their birthright” The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut, he wrote” and deformed the black family and, consequently, the black community. In what would become the most

famous passage in the report, Moynihan equated the black community with a diseased patient: In a word, most Negro youth are in danger of being caught up in the tangle of pathology that affects their world, and probably a majority are so entrapped. Many of those who escape do so for one generation only: as things now are, their children may have to run the gauntlet all over again. That is not the least vicious aspect of the world that white America has made for the Negro.

The Other Half of the Moynihan ReportDespite its alarming predictions, The Negro Family was a curious government report in that it advocated no specific policies to address the crisis it described. This was intentional. Moynihan had lots of ideas about what government could do" provide a guaranteed minimum income, establish a government jobs program, bring more black men into the military, enable better access to birth control, integrate the suburbs" but none of these ideas made it into the report. A series of recommendations was at first included, then left out, Moynihan later recalled.

It would have got in the way of the attention-arousing argument that a crisis was coming and that family stability was the best measure of success or failure in dealing with it. President Johnson offered the first public preview of the Moynihan Report in a speech written by Moynihan and the former Kennedy aide Richard Goodwin at Howard University in June of 1965, in which he highlighted the breakdown of the Negro family structure. Johnson left no doubt about how this breakdown had come about.

For this, most of all, white America must accept responsibility, Johnson said. Family breakdown flows from centuries of oppression and persecution of the Negro man. It flows from the long years of degradation and discrimination, which have attacked his dignity and assaulted his ability to produce for his family. The press did not generally greet Johnson™s speech as a claim of white responsibility, but rather as a condemnation of the failure of Negro family life, as the journalist Mary McGrory put it. This interpretation was reinforced as second- and thirdhand accounts of the Moynihan Report, which had not been made public, began making the rounds. On August 18, the widely syndicated newspaper columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak wrote that Moynihan™s document had exposed the breakdown of the Negro family, with its high rates of broken homes, illegitimacy, and female-oriented homes.

These dispatches fell on all-too-receptive ears. A week earlier, the drunk-driving arrest of Marquette Frye, an African American man in Los Angeles, had sparked six days of rioting in the city, which killed 34 people, injured 1, 000 more, and caused tens of millions of dollars in property damage. Meanwhile, crime rates had begun to rise. People who read the newspapers but were not able to read the report could” and did” conclude that Johnson was conceding that no government effort could match the tangle of pathology that Moynihan had said beset the black family. Moynihan™s aim in writing The Negro Family had been to muster support for an all-out government assault on the structural social problems that held black families down. (Family as an issue raised the possibility of enlisting the support of conservative groups for quite radical social programs, he would later write.

) Instead his report was portrayed as an argument for leaving the black family to fend for itself. An interview with Ta-Nehisi Coates, exploring the myth of black criminality. Moynihan himself was partly to blame for this. In its bombastic language, its omission of policy recommendations, its implication that black women were obstacles to black men™s assuming their proper station, and its unnecessarily covert handling, the Moynihan Report militated against its author™s aims.

James Farmer, the civil-rights activist and a co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, attacked the report from the left as a massive academic cop-out for the white conscience. William Ryan, the psychologist who first articulated the concept of blaming the victim, accused Moynihan™s report of doing just that. Moynihan had left the Johnson administration in the summer to run for president of the New York City Council. The bid failed, and liberal repudiations of the report kept raining down. I am now known as a racist across the land, he wrote in a letter to the civil-rights leader Roy Wilkins.;,?