

The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy

Lee Rainwater

William L. Yancey

A Trans-action Social Science and Public Policy Report

Including the full text of
The Negro Family: The Case for National Action
by Daniel Patrick Moynihan

THE M.I.T. PRESS

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England*

The Wollman Library
BARNARD COLLEGE
Columbia University

Introduction.

On June 4, 1965, President Johnson spoke at a Howard University commencement. His remarks were unique among presidential utterances on the situation of Negro Americans in that the emphasis was not upon federal efforts to do away with traditional Jim Crow practices but rather on the social and economic situation of Negroes. The focus of his concern was similarly a break with tradition; he dealt not so much with the plight of Negroes in the South but of those in the great northern ghettos.

The President said, "Negroes have been another nation: deprived of freedom, crippled by hatred, the doors of opportunity closed to hope." After brief mention of the civil rights legislative accomplishments of the past eight years, which he characterized as only "the end of the beginning," he announced the "next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights," in which the goal would be that "all our citizens must have the ability to walk through [the gates of opportunity]." He emphasized that although some Negroes, including the graduating class before

him, were steadily narrowing the gap between themselves and their white counterparts, for the great majority of Negro Americans "the walls are rising and the gulf is widening."

Detailing the facts of "this American failure" he noted increasing disparity between Negroes and whites in unemployment rates, in income, in poverty, in infant mortality. He asked why this should be and then answered the question: "Negroes are trapped in inherited, gateless poverty."

While the increasing and accelerating attack of his administration on poverty would help, Negro poverty was of a special, more desperate kind. It was the product of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice which had produced a twisted and battered cultural heritage, a community excluded from the rest of society and buried under a blanket of circumstance. To lift just a corner of that blanket would provide no lasting solution, the entire cover must be raised "if we are to liberate our fellow citizens."

The injustice that Negroes suffer was now an urban injustice. Negroes lived separate lives in a world of decay which shaped them, crippled the youth, and desolated the men who knew not the saving pressures of a more hopeful society. Unemployment strikes most swiftly at the Negro and this burden erodes hope and breeds despair, which in turn brings indifference to the learning that offers a way out; together these burdens and responses were "often the source of destructive rebellion against the fabric of society." Success and achievement could wipe away the lacerating hurt of prejudice, distaste, and condescension. "It can be overcome. But for many the wounds are always open."

As a final element in his diagnosis, the President emphasized the importance of the breakdown of the Negro family structure, "its influence radiating to every part of life." White America must accept responsibility for this breakdown that flows from oppression and persecution of the Negro man, from long years of degradation and discrimination which have attacked his dignity and assaulted his ability to provide for his family. Again the facts: Only a minority of Negro children reach the age of eighteen having lived all their lives with both parents; a majority of all Negro children receive public assistance at some time during their childhood. And the consequences: "When the family collapses, it is the children that are usually damaged. When it happens on a massive scale, the community itself is crippled." Unless the family is strengthened, conditions created under

which most
"will never
and deprivati

The President
the problem -
decent surrou
welfare and
heart by all A
to be found."
ference "To
outstanding N
every level. I
barriers of lav
condition of
would be a cl
the years to c
nation."

For anyone
and credit
speech was re
the basic plig
insights, howe
stance of the
"next and mor
not have to d
provision of
turn freedom
so much on la
and economic
and family life

The social
over three dec
research on th
of the federal
sultation, it w
so clearly cent

How could s

The Howard
confidential ("
The Case for
ning and Rese
been complet

which most parents will stay together, all other public activity "will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation."

The President announced that we knew part of the answer to the problem — jobs, a decent family income, decent homes and decent surroundings, an equal chance to learn, better designed welfare and social programs, medical care, an understanding heart by all Americans — but that there were other answers still to be found. Therefore, he intended to call a White House Conference "To Fulfill These Rights," inviting scholars, experts, outstanding Negro leaders and officials of the government at every level. Its goal would be to "shatter forever not only the barriers of law and public practice but the walls which bound the condition of man by the color of his skin." He pledged that it would be a chief goal of his administration and his program in the years to come to end this "one huge wrong of the American nation."

For anyone who still maintained some belief in the sincerity and credibility of federal civil rights policy, the President's speech was remarkable for its eloquence and for its insights into the basic plight of Negro Americans. Beyond eloquence and insights, however, it seemed to signal an important shift in the stance of the federal government toward civil rights issues. The "next and more profound stage" of the civil rights struggle would not have to do with the legal protection of rights, but with the provision of resources that would enable Negro Americans to turn freedom into an equal life. The emphasis seemed to be not so much on law- and court-guaranteed justice, but on the social and economic factors of jobs, housing, education, community and family life.

The social scientist could see in this speech a distillation of over three decades of economic, sociological, and psychological research on the "Negro problem." Despite the voracious appetite of the federal government for social science findings and consultation, it was still unique to find a social science perspective so clearly central to a major presidential address.

How could such a thing come about?

The Howard University speech gave a public face to a then confidential ("for official use only") report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, from the Office of Policy Planning and Research of the Department of Labor. The report had been completed in March 1965 by Daniel Patrick Moynihan,

Assistant Secretary of Labor, in collaboration with two members of his staff, Paul Barton and Ellen Broderick. It gave voice to views that Moynihan had been formulating for over a year and reflected his belief that policy making in the government should make greater use of the social sciences for problem diagnosis and description.

In the report and several related memorandums, Moynihan had sought to inform the President and his staff of what he felt should be some of the central issues in formulating a more effective national effort for carrying out the complex task of bringing Negro Americans into full participation in the society. With the speech and the announcement of a fall conference to develop a program in line with the goals it enunciated, it seemed that Moynihan's report had borne its first fruit.

At the direction of the President, presidential assistant Richard N. Goodwin and Moynihan had drafted the speech, using drafts that Moynihan had already prepared, on the night of June 3rd and into the early hours of June 4th. Part of the speech's crispness and assertive tone was perhaps due to the fact that it was not exhaustively reviewed and criticized nor negotiated with the various departments affected by its content—it was closer to a pure "Presidential Act" than most presidents' speeches. (The President's "We Shall Overcome" speech was another example.) Before the speech was given, however, approval was sought and obtained from three civil rights leaders—Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young.

Yet, by the following October it also seemed that this might perhaps be all that the report would accomplish except to precipitate one of the angriest and most bitter controversies yet among government and private individuals all presumably dedicated to realizing Negro rights. From anonymous layers of the federal government, in the inner councils of some civil rights groups, in unpublished memoranda and private denunciations, in the professional conversations of some social scientists, and finally, in public meetings and in the press the report (but not the President's speech) increasingly came under attack during the late summer and fall of the year.

Finally, early in November, a week before the White House Conference (now scaled down to a planning conference for a larger one to be held the following spring), sixty representatives of New York churches and civil rights organizations, under the leadership of the Commission on Religion and Race of the Na-

tional Council of Churches and the Office of Church and Race of the Protestant Council of New York City, met to adopt a resolution urging the President to strike the questions of "family stability" from the agenda of the conference.

When the White House Conference met, its director announced to the amusement of the audience that he had been reliably informed that no such person as Daniel Patrick Moynihan existed, the report on the Negro family became one of several subjects about which the civil rights leaders expressed indignation, the press searched out these rumblings and characterized them as one of the main events at the conference, and the controversy was used to support the apparent view of some high administration figures that the conference was a "total disaster."

From the report in March, then, to the conference in November, a great deal had transpired. These events shed considerable light on complexities of formulating national policy concerning our most sensitive domestic problem and on what can happen to social science information as it makes its way through the political mill.

The skeletal features of Moynihan's Report are simple indeed. As the government removes barriers to Negro liberty through various kinds of antidiscrimination action, the problem of equality will become dominant. Here the question is not so much the freedom of Negroes to live their lives as whites do if they wish but the question of having equal resources to enable them to live in the way that whites do. Moynihan argued that this was not now the case and that equality (in the sense of the Negro's equal ability to produce equal results for himself) will not result simply from lifting legal barriers to full participation. He argued that the effect of the way Negroes have been and are treated in American society has been to create conditions in the Negro community that make it all but impossible for the great majority of Negroes to take advantage of the new opportunities the laws provide. He felt that "at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family." His report built the following argument:

1. The deterioration of the Negro family is demonstrated by these facts (a) nearly a quarter of urban Negro marriages are dissolved; (b) nearly one quarter of Negro births are now illegitimate; (c) as a consequence, almost one fourth of Negro families are headed by females, and (d) this breakdown of the Negro family has led to a startling increase in welfare dependency. Why should this be so?

2. Moynihan found "the roots of the problem" in slavery, in the effects of reconstruction on the family and, particularly, on the position of the Negro man, in urbanization, in unemployment and poverty, in the wage system that often does not provide a family wage. He noted that the dimensions of all of these problems are growing because of the high fertility of Negroes (for example, the Negro population and labor force will be increasing twice as fast as that of whites between now and 1970).

3. Having demonstrated that the socioeconomic system, past and present, produces an unstable family system for Negroes, he went on to discuss "the tangle of pathology" in the Negro community (a phrase borrowed from social-psychologist Kenneth Clark's description of Harlem ghetto life). This tangle of pathology involves the matriarchy of the Negro family (by which he meant the tendency for women to fare better interpersonally and economically than men and thereby to dominate family life), the failure of youth (by which he referred to the fact that Negro children do not learn as much in school as white children and that they leave school earlier), higher rates of delinquency and crime among Negroes, the fact that Negroes disproportionately fail the Armed Forces qualification test (and that this suggests their poor competitive position in the job market as well), and the alienation of Negro men which results in their withdrawal from stable family-oriented society, in higher rates of drug addiction, in despair of achieving a stable life.

Moynihan, then, saw a vicious cycle operating. Negro men have no stable place in the economic system; as a result, they cannot be strong husbands and fathers. Therefore Negro families break up, and women must assume the task of rearing children without male assistance; often the women must assume the task of bringing in income also. Since the children do not grow up in a stable home and so learn that they cannot look forward to a stable life, they are not able to accomplish in school, leave school early, and therefore are in a very poor position to qualify for jobs that will produce a decent family income; and the cycle starts again.

With this, Moynihan had achieved his main goal of defining a problem rather than proposing a solution. He concluded his report with what he felt was its most immediate policy implications:

The policy of the United States is to bring the Negro American to full and equal sharing in the responsibilities and rewards of citizenship. To this end the programs of the federal government bearing on this objective shall be designed to have the effect, directly or indirectly, of enhancing the stability and resources of the Negro American family.

One of the author spoke of those Negroes of instability points in the contained two middle class, a so, those who within the Ne "good name" Moynihan's cha

To sociology in the situation that was new and policy-oriented universally supported. Indeed, the basic reflected had to Franklin Frazier temporary sou in the work of published at a House. Moynihan of and then re: effects of social on the situation cities. Further, initially published. *The Ghetto*, 19 generally in the provided data fifteen years, welfare progra

Yet, if there should it have House; why segments of the from some in science circles new national p

We seek in of both accep

One of the most frequent criticisms of the Report was that its author spoke of "the Negro family" and thus did an injustice to those Negroes whose lives are not characterized by the kind of instability and pathology with which he dealt. Yet at two points in the report, he indicated that the Negro community contained two broad groupings—an increasingly successful middle class, and an increasingly disorganized lower class. Even so, those who wished to emphasize the sources of strength within the Negro community or who wished to preserve the "good name" of Negro families were highly displeased with Moynihan's characterizations.

To sociologists and psychologists with a professional interest in the situation of Negro Americans, the report presented little that was new or startling. Rather, it presented in a dramatic and policy-oriented way a well-established, though not universally supported, view of the afflictions of Negro Americans. Indeed, the basic paradigm of Negro life that Moynihan's report reflected had been laid down by the great Negro sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier, over thirty years before. The most direct contemporary source for the thinking in the report probably lay in the work of Kenneth Clark whose book, *Dark Ghetto*, was published at about the time the report was sent to the White House. Moynihan's work took the form of testing the accuracy of and then restating Frazier's predictions about the intertwining effects of socioeconomic deprivation and family disorganization on the situation of Negro Americans as they migrated to the cities. Further, he sought to show that Clark's work in Harlem, initially published as a report of the HARYOU project (*Youth in The Ghetto*, 1964), described a process that could be said to apply generally in the Negro ghettos of American cities. The report provided data indicating the situation of Negroes over the past fifteen years, particularly in relation to government labor and welfare programs.

Yet, if there was "nothing really new" in the report, why should it have elicited such a positive response from the White House; why the uneasy and critical response within certain segments of the government; why the strong negative response from some in the civil rights movement and in academic social science circles? How, in short, does "nothing new" become both new national policy and a controversy?

We seek in the balance of this book to elucidate the sources of both acceptance and rejection of the report. In the chapters

that follow, we will consider the political situation of the government and the civil rights movement during the time when the report was first made and later surfaced; and we will examine in detail Moynihan's strategy and the report which he wrote in the service of that strategy, reactions to the report within the government, reactions to the report in those outside agencies involved, the press treatment of the report and the intellectual debate that followed, and finally the apotheosis of the controversy in the White House conferences and publicity about them.

The Political Government

One can view
lus, a natural in
understand not c
itated but also
Necessary to an
some knowledge
of the administra

The Movement

Bayard Rustin
by the 1954 Su
and the Civil Ri
as the period in
were destroyed.
it would be hard
legal structure