

## THE AMERICAN FAMILY BELEAGUERED/MOYNIHAN

What happened? Senator Moynihan wrote in a seminal article two years ago (see the excerpt which follows) that along with America's entry into the postindustrial era "has come a new form of social distress, associated with the 'post-marital' family." While there isn't as yet any fully adequate explanation of this development, there's compelling indication that a root cause is the radical redefinition of individualism which transformed so much of American social life in the 1960s and 1970s.

In *Habits of the Heart* (U. of California Press, 1985), the best book yet on the subject, sociologist Robert Bellah and four colleagues argue that this redefinition left the self so sovereign and its claims for personal reward so narrow as to make it hard for collective institutions like the family

to work satisfactorily. "What is at issue," they write, "is not simply whether self-contained individuals might withdraw from the public sphere to pursue purely private ends, but whether such individuals are capable of sustaining either a public or a private life....Modern individualism seems to be producing a way of life that is neither individually nor socially viable..." (pp. 143-44).

I believe the line of reasoning is generally right—though I think Bellah, et al, overstate the problem by overly discounting the strength of traditional limits on narrow self-serving in American individualism. This means we will need to find some of the answers to the special problems of black Americans in acts and measures that curb the excesses of modern individualism and thereby strengthen family life for all Americans.

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from his Christian Science Monitor  
column of March 1, 1991.*

### COSTS OF THE "POST MARITAL FAMILY"

By Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Along with this new form of society [postindustrial] has come a new form of social distress, associated with the 'post-marital' family. As yet we have no explanation for this development, nor any great ground for thinking that we ever will. We do know, however, just how sharp and sudden the change was. It began at midcentury and has not yet stopped. Its suddenness and unexpectedness at least partially explain our inability so far to respond.... (p. 17)

Nathan Glazer was the first to suggest that some of these 'old' programs might create or perhaps 'abet' new problems. As he puts it, we come up against the 'limits of social policy' when welfare programs designed to deal with the breakdown of traditional structures weaken them further, 'making matters in some important respects worse'....(p.18)

Family structure is the principal correlate of child poverty. As demographers repeat, children in single-parent families are poor, and there are more and more of them. Thus Sandra Hofferth projects that relatively few children born in 1980 will live to age seventeen with both natural parents. For white children the likelihood of living with both parents fell from 81 percent for those born in the early 1950s to 30 percent for those born in 1980. For black

children it dropped from 52 to 6 percent over the same period....

A growing number of children—now almost one in four—are born to unmarried women. The increase in illegitimacy has been striking. In 1951 the illegitimacy rate among whites was 1.6 percent; by 1986 it had reached 15.7 percent. More extensive historical series are for some reason still hard to come by, but there can be little doubt of the trend. In 1909 W.E.B. DuBois recorded the percentage of illegitimate births among blacks in Washington, D.C., for the years 1870 through 1907; it began at 19 and ended at 21. In 1986 it was 68 percent; in Baltimore it has reached 80 percent. Among blacks nationwide the rate is 61.2 percent.... (p. 22)

In sum, family structure may now be the principal determinant of class structure. Able scholars are now testing this proposition, and while they have found evidence of intergenerational transmission of poverty and dependency, it is not as yet overwhelming. Then again, we have only just entered this period of social history; half a century may be needed to sort things out.... (p. 24)

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