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# The Great Divorce

By David Brooks

I'll be shocked if there's another book this year as important as Charles Murray's "Coming Apart." I'll be shocked if there's another book that so compellingly describes the most important trends in American society.

Murray's basic argument is not new, that America is dividing into a two-caste society. What's impressive is the incredible data he produces to illustrate that trend and deepen our understanding of it.

His story starts in 1963. There was a gap between rich and poor then, but it wasn't that big. A house in an upper-crust suburb cost only twice as much as the average new American home. The tippy-top luxury car, the Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz, cost about \$47,000 in 2010 dollars. That's pricey, but nowhere near the price of the top luxury cars today.

More important, the income gaps did not lead to big behavior gaps. Roughly 98 percent of men between the ages of 30 and 49 were in the labor force, upper class and lower class alike. Only about 3 percent of white kids were born outside of marriage. The rates were similar, upper class and lower class.

Since then, America has polarized. The word "class" doesn't even capture the divide Murray describes. You might say the country has bifurcated into different social tribes, with a tenuous common culture linking them.

The upper tribe is now segregated from the lower tribe. In 1963, rich people who lived on the Upper East Side of Manhattan lived close to members of the middle class. Most adult Manhattanites who lived south of 96th Street back then hadn't even completed high school. Today, almost all of Manhattan south of 96th Street is an upper-tribe enclave.

Today, Murray demonstrates, there is an archipelago of affluent enclaves clustered around the coastal cities, Chicago, Dallas and so on. If you're born into one of them, you will probably go to college with people from one of the enclaves; you'll marry someone from one of the enclaves; you'll go off and live in one of the enclaves.

Worse, there are vast behavioral gaps between the educated upper tribe (20 percent of the country) and the lower tribe (30 percent of the country). This is where Murray is at his best, and he's mostly using data on white Americans, so the effects of race and other complicating factors don't come into play.

Roughly 7 percent of the white kids in the upper tribe are born out of wedlock, compared with roughly 45 percent of the kids in the lower tribe. In the upper tribe, nearly every man aged 30 to 49 is in the labor force. In the lower tribe, men in their prime working ages have been steadily dropping out of the labor force, in good times and bad.

People in the lower tribe are much less likely to get married, less likely to go to church, less likely to be active in their communities, more likely to watch TV excessively, more likely to be obese.

Murray's story contradicts the ideologies of both parties. Republicans claim that America is threatened by a decadent cultural elite that corrupts regular Americans, who love God, country and traditional values. That story is false. The cultural elites live more conservative, traditionalist lives than the cultural masses.

Democrats claim America is threatened by the financial elite, who hog society's resources. But that's a distraction. The real social gap is between the top 20 percent and the lower 30 percent. The liberal members of the upper tribe latch onto this top 1 percent narrative because it excuses them from the central role they themselves are playing in driving inequality and unfairness.

It's wrong to describe an America in which the salt of the earth common people are preyed upon by this or that nefarious elite. It's wrong to tell the familiar underdog morality tale in which the problems of the masses are caused by the elites.

The truth is, members of the upper tribe have made themselves phenomenally productive. They may mimic bohemian manners, but they have returned to 1950s traditionalist values and practices. They have low divorce rates, arduous work ethics and strict codes to regulate their kids.

Members of the lower tribe work hard and dream big, but are more removed from traditional bourgeois norms. They live in disorganized, postmodern neighborhoods in which it is much harder to be self-disciplined and productive.

I doubt Murray would agree, but we need a National Service Program. We need a program that would force members of the upper tribe and the lower tribe to live together, if only for a few years. We need a program in which people from both tribes work together to spread out the values, practices and institutions that lead to achievement.

The Great Divorce. A Dream. C. S. Lewis. "No, there is no escape. There is no heaven with a little of hell in it" no plan to retain this or that of the devil in our hearts or our pockets. Out Satan must go, every hair and feather." George MacDonald. Blake wrote the Marriage of Heaven and Hell. If I have written of their Divorce, this is not because I think myself a fit antagonist for so great a genius, nor even because I feel at all sure that I know what he meant. But in some sense or other the attempt to make that marriage is perennial. The Great Divorce. This is the unedited transcript from the audio. As you know from this material, there are great books that we are going to be looking at, and we are going to be looking at a total of six. The first of these is by C.S. Lewis. I always like to start with Lewis because he is so easy to read and so attractive to a wide readership, and for some very good reasons that I am going to mention in just a moment. The best study guide to The Great Divorce on the planet, from the creators of SparkNotes. Get the summaries, analysis, and quotes you need. Teachers and parents! Struggling with distance learning? Our Teacher Edition on Great Divorce can help. Introduction. Plot Summary.