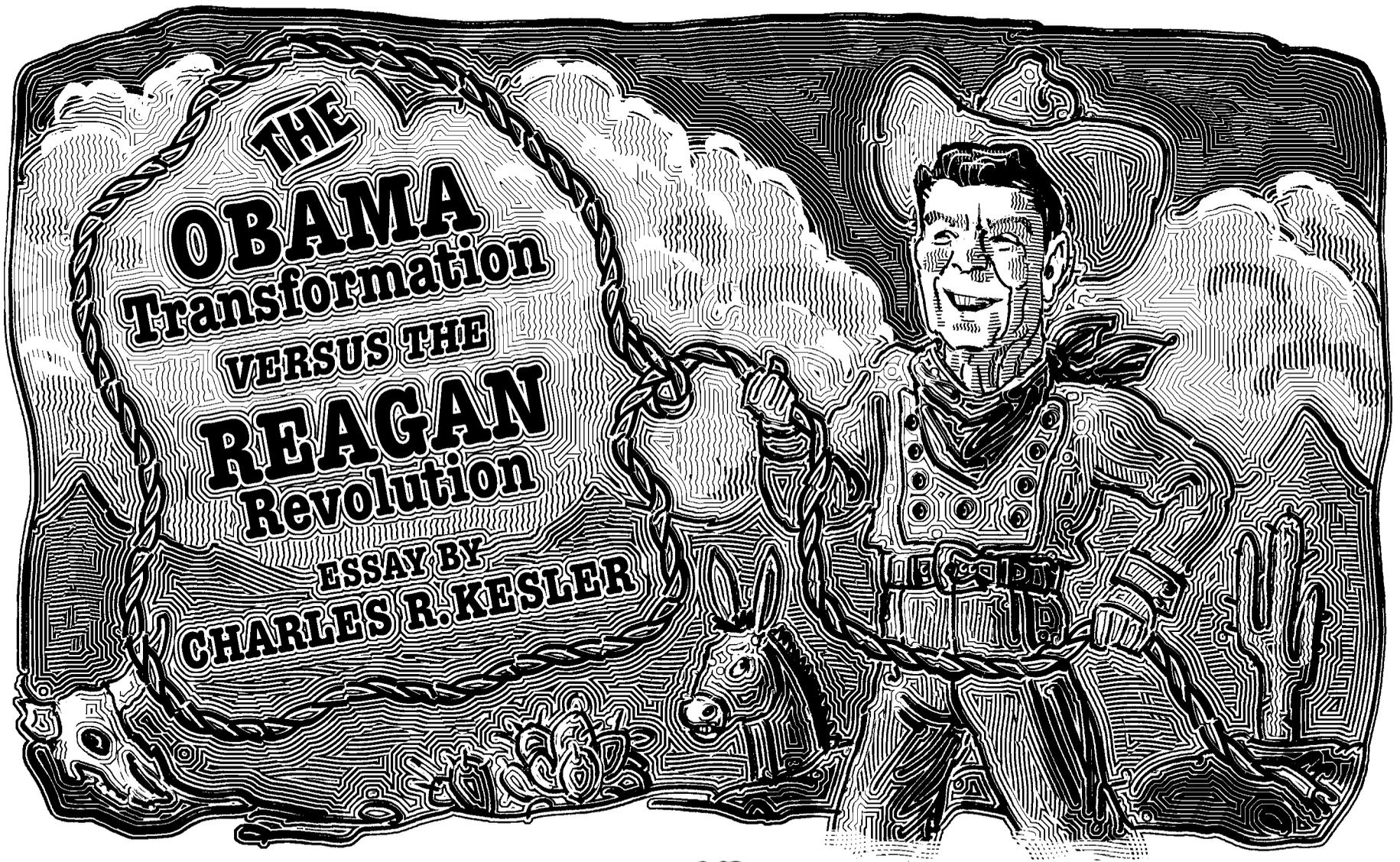


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# CLAREMONT

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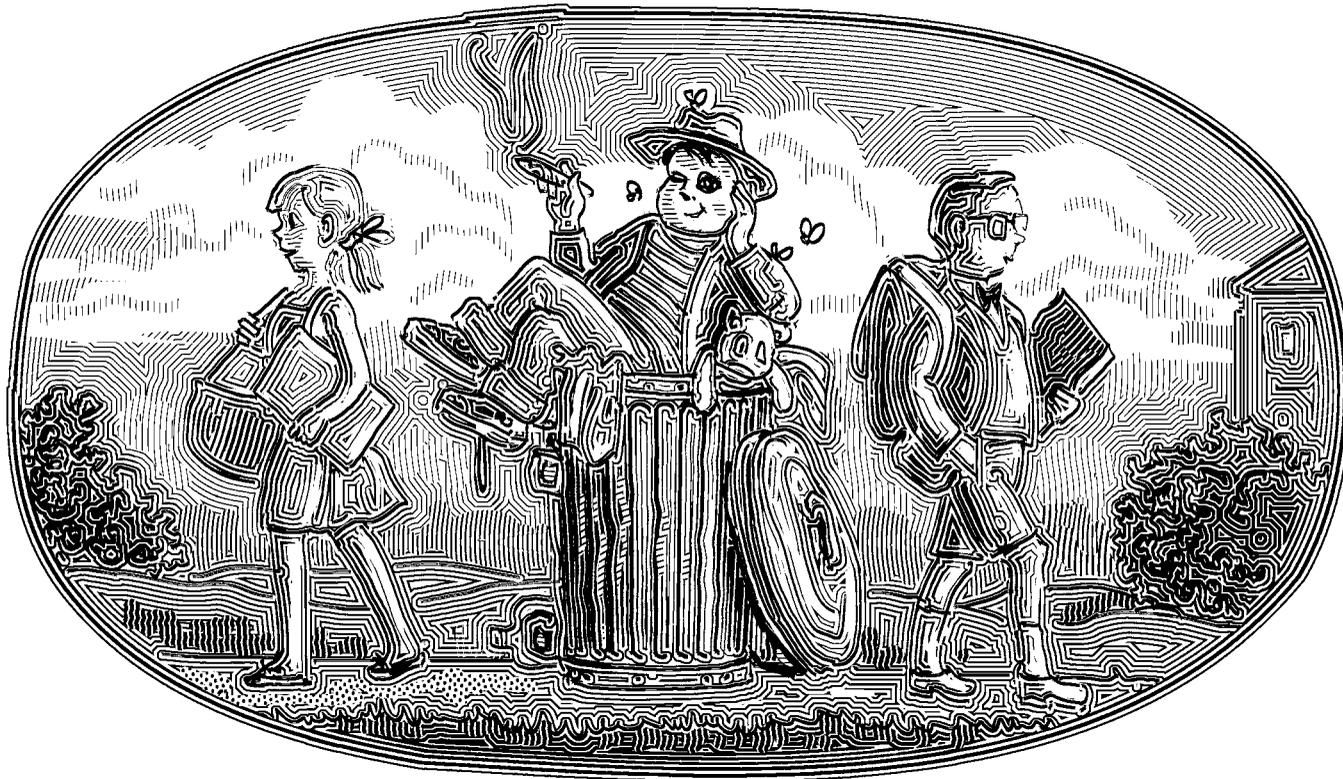
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Book Review by Charles Murray

## KIDS TODAY

*Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, by Robert D. Putnam.  
Simon & Schuster, 400 pages, \$28



POLICY ANALYSTS WHO WRITE ABOUT America's new lower class hardly ever know what they're talking about—not at first hand. The typical social scientist in a major university, or scholar in a Washington think tank, grew up in a comfortable middle-class (or better) neighborhood, stayed in academia through the Ph.D., and now lives in an upscale faculty neighborhood or D.C. suburb. These analysts may know the data on labor force participation, marriage, and educational attainment backward and forward, but few of them have actually lived in working-class communities and observed first-hand the phenomena they analyze.

Of the few who grew up in working-class communities, those over 50 have memories that are unlikely to correspond to the reality of daily life in today's working-class America. Robert Putnam, the Harvard political scientist who informed America about its plunging social capital in *Bowling Alone* (2000), is such a person. The son of a small businessman, he grew up in the 1950s in Port Clinton, Ohio, population 6,500, on the shore of Lake Erie. Port Clinton had class divisions in the 1950s,

but the town corresponded closely to the American ideal: lots of interaction across social classes, stable and mostly loving families in all social classes, low crime, and high levels of community engagement. I grew up in the same era in the same kind of town.

Since Putnam left Port Clinton, it has become a radically different place, with haves and have-nots separated by chasms not just in income, but on a wide range of cultural dimensions that, to borrow from the book's subtitle, have put the American dream in crisis. The kids of today's working class have it worse in so many ways that climbing the socioeconomic ladder, as many of Putnam's classmates in the 1950s succeeded in doing, has become dauntingly difficult. In *Our Kids*, Putnam describes the new cleavages on a national scale.

OUR KIDS IS A 400-PAGE BOOK ORGANIZED into just six chapters: An introduction, separate chapters on families, parenting, schooling, and community, and a closing chapter of policy recommendations. Putnam uses a brilliant device for setting out his case: he opens each chap-

ter with an extended narrative account of two families, one that's making it in postindustrial America and one that isn't, in a specific geographic area—Port Clinton itself, Atlanta, Philadelphia, California's Orange County, and Oregon's Big Bend. The narratives are long and detailed, with lots of direct quotations. Only after these stories does he revert in each chapter to customary social science analysis.

Putnam's success with the qualitative narratives is no small accomplishment. Things tend to go wrong when academics venture into the field to study real people in real communities. Margaret Mead's massive misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the Samoans is just the most famous example of a universal problem: academics often aren't good at getting ordinary people to open up about their lives, and they tend to censor responses that don't conform to their preferred storyline. The narratives in *Our Kids* don't appear to have either of those problems.

Putnam gives credit for the interviews to an associate, Jennifer Silva, who, judging from *Our Kids*, is a truly gifted field interviewer.



But he did the final write-up, and he deserves credit for laying out a messy picture that gives ammunition to all sides in the policy debate. We hear the voices not just of the unemployed whose well-paying manufacturing jobs were exported abroad, but also of people who quit jobs because they didn't feel like working or who can't hold jobs because they make lousy employees. Some low-income parents in the accounts are fiercely devoted to their kids; others created children casually and walked away from them casually. There's rampant incompetence visible in the new lower class— incompetence on the job, as parents, in interpersonal relationships. There's rampant irrationality and unrealistic expectations, with many respondents oblivious about the steps required to get from point A to point D in life.

Race is not a big deal in *Our Kids*. The voices include many whites along with Latinos and blacks, and the problems are similar across ethnicities. Nor do the Latinos and blacks treat discrimination as a decisive factor in their problems. Sometimes they explicitly discount the importance of discrimination. Such observations are heartening, and they correspond to my own experience living in a part of rural Maryland with a Southern heritage and a significant black presence: race is not the angst-ridden issue in working-class America that you would assume if you based your expectations on the highly publicized problems in Ferguson or Baltimore. The same observations are disheartening insofar as *Our Kids* drives home how widely the problems it describes have spread throughout the working class. We've got a national affliction on our hands, not pockets of affliction.

**T**HE NARRATIVES MAKE *OUR KIDS* WORTH reading even if you skip everything else. I would go further: for those who write professionally about the quantitative evidence on poverty, family breakdown, education in low-income communities, or problems with the labor market, *Our Kids* is required reading. It will help them know what they're talking about. Every criticism I have of *Our Kids* is subordinate to that paramount virtue.

I will pass briefly over the analytic portions of the chapters. They contain an abundance of informative graphs of trends over time, with separate trendlines for persons with no more than a high school education and those with at least a college degree. They also contain well-written statements of the Left's received wisdom about why America has diverged into two such widely separated cultures. The leading culprits are economic—globalization, stagnation of working class wages, and loss of manufacturing jobs. When cultural factors

are involved, they are such things as the sexual revolution.

Could the policy reforms of the 1960s be a cause? Not a chance. Putnam devotes a few paragraphs to the conventional liberal talking points (e.g., nonmarital births don't track with changes in the size of the welfare package), writing as if he were unaware of the extensive literature that scholars who implicate the reforms of the 1960s have produced on the topic. Actually, he says, it was events of the 1980s (when Ronald Reagan was president!) that exacerbated family breakdown: the War on Drugs, three-strikes sentencing, and the sharp increase in incarceration. Putnam had earlier refused to come to grips with the critics' indictment of the reforms of the 1960s in *Bowling Alone*. I had hoped for better things in *Our Kids*. I was disappointed.

**N**O MATTER. THE DEBATE ABOUT THE reforms of the 1960s is already a topic for historians, largely irrelevant to the formation of good policy in 2015. Policy today must begin from where we are. Putnam frames his view of the issue thusly:

All sides on this debate [over trends in social mobility] agree on one thing, however: as income inequality expands, kids from more privileged backgrounds start and probably finish further and further ahead of their less privileged peers.... Poor kids, through no fault of their own, are less prepared by their families, their schools, and their communities to develop their God-given talents as fully as rich kids.

Putnam labels this the "opportunity gap" and then runs through the possibilities for policy interventions. He finds that not much can be done to affect marriage rates or nonmarital births, but is optimistic about the effects of income supplements on life in working-class communities. He thinks that reducing sentencing for nonviolent crime and putting more effort into rehabilitation for incarcerated young males could narrow the opportunity gap—on what empirical basis, I don't know.

Putnam, along with just about everybody else except a few grinchers like me, is enthusiastic about the potential of high-quality pre-K programs. He devotes several pages to a review of the evidence on this score, providing a rich bibliography of recent work in the endnotes. He is hopeful about reducing residential segregation through low-income housing programs that help functional families in distressed communities move to bet-

ter neighborhoods. He wants to pump more money into schools in distressed communities—to recruit better teachers, extend school hours, and offer more extracurricular and enrichment opportunities. He likes the idea of "community schools," which put social and health services into schools serving poor children and encourage community involvement. He likes Catholic schools and revitalized vocational education and a larger role for community colleges.

Some of these recommendations are good ideas regardless of their long-term outcomes. In a country as rich as ours, it is appropriate that everyone have the means for a decent existence. My own preferred approach is a guaranteed basic income that replaces the welfare state, but Putnam's options are a workable alternative. When it comes to pre-K programs, it is a good thing if a child who is neglected or emotionally abused is put in a setting where the neglect and the abuse don't occur. It is a good thing if children who are not talked to by their parents are talked to by someone else. In short, pre-K interventions have "worked" in an important sense if they simply put children who spend the rest of their days in destructive settings into ones that are better even if only for a few hours. That's a good in itself. What that good-in-itself is worth in competition with other budgetary priorities is something that does not lend itself to cost-benefit calculations, the many claims for such calculations notwithstanding.

**T**HAT SAID, I MUST RECORD MY OWN judgment that everything that Putnam recommends could be implemented full-bore—far beyond any reasonable hope—and little, alas, would change in the long term. The opportunity gap is driven by larger forces, which his policy prescriptions cannot do much about. Three reasons stand out.

First, the standard interventions are aiming at a relatively unimportant target. Children's personal characteristics are the product of three sources: shared environment, non-shared environment, and parents' genes. Government programs can affect only one of those three—shared environment—which, for the most important outcomes, usually has the least effect of the three.

You may not be familiar with the terms "shared" and "non-shared" environment. The shared environment includes such things as a family's income and social status, quality of the schools, and parenting practices. The non-shared environment is the sum of random differences such as events in the womb that affect one sibling differently from another, an injury or illness after birth that affects one



sibling and not the other, and peer groups that siblings don't share. Some unknown but probably large proportion of the non-shared environment is simply statistical noise.

Aren't the components of the shared environment the important causes of how well children do in life, as Putnam himself is convinced? For some immediate outcomes, yes; for ultimate outcomes, no. Consider the results of a comprehensive meta-analysis of more than 2,000 twin studies published in *Nature Genetics* in May of this year. The shared environment played a large role in the religiosity of children (explaining 44% and 35% of the variance in the two estimates presented by the study), and a substantial role in explaining problems in parent-child relationships (33% for both estimates). But when it comes to the outcomes that Putnam associates with the opportunity gap, the contribution of the shared environment is modest. For "higher-level cognitive functions" (I.Q.), the estimates of the role of the shared environment were just 24% and 17% of the variance. For educational attainment: 27% and 13%. For conduct disorders (antisocial and aggressive behavior): 18% and 15%.

That's not the whole story. Genes and environment interact, among other things. But my point is simple and survives the complications: the roster of standard interventions to reduce the opportunity gap is almost entirely focused on factors that have modest causal roles. Furthermore, a program lasting at most a few hours a day can influence only a small proportion of that modest causal role. The evaluation literature for interventions necessarily yields meager long-term impact even for the best-executed program because the potential effect to begin with is so small. If policy scholars are serious about having a major impact on the shared environment, they should be advocating adoption at birth and high-quality orphanages. They don't.

**S**ECOND, THE OPPORTUNITY GAP EXISTS alongside a substantial ability gap. Most of the graphs in *Our Kids* show the results for parents with at least a college degree versus those for parents with no more than 12 years of school and a high school diploma. What are the I.Q.s of those two groups? In the 1979 cohort of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY), rep-

licating Putnam's assignment rules, the mean I.Q. of the college group was 23 points higher than that of the high school group. In case you're wondering, that's not a function of race. Among non-Latino whites, the difference was 22 points. In statistical terms, those are differences of more than 1.5 standard deviations. For the population as a whole, the average person in the high school group was at the 29th I.Q. percentile while the average person in the college group was at the 84th percentile. Since children's I.Q. is correlated with parental I.Q., it is not surprising to learn that the means of the children of the high school and college groups are also separated—by about 19 points in the same NLSY cohort. Recall the modest role of the shared environment in producing that difference.

Again, my underlying point is simple. I.Q. has a substantial direct correlation with measures of success in life, and it is also correlated with a variety of other characteristics that promote success—perseverance, deferred gratification, good parenting, and the aspects of personality that are variously called "emotional intelligence" or "grit." The correlations are not large, but many modest individual correlations produce large differences in life outcomes when the means of two groups are separated by as large a gap as separates both parents and children of America's working and upper-middle classes.

**T**HIRD, THE GAP IN HUMAN CAPITAL IN working-class and upper-middle-class communities has been widening over time. In 1960, just 8% of adults had college degrees, and many of those had pedestrian academic ability—going to college then was largely determined by socioeconomic status. In that America, an extremely large proportion of the smartest people in the country had no more than a high school education. Data on the I.Q. of high school and college graduates prior to mid-century indicate that the gap between Putnam's two groups as of 1960 was on the order of 14 points, not 23. Since then, the sorting process has gotten much more efficient. Few high school graduates with I.Q.s well over 100 don't get at least some post high school education. It has long been recognized that the functioning of black communities took a big hit when the civil rights revolution

enabled many of the most successful blacks to move out. The same thing has been happening to the country as a whole. White working-class communities have also seen an outmigration of the most able; that outmigration is continuing, and it is entrenching many of the problems in working-class communities that Putnam laments.

It's not just that the I.Q. gap in working-class and upper-middle-class communities has gotten wider. The life penalties associated with low I.Q. have risen since 1960. If you focus on the economic changes since 1960, those with low I.Q. have faced a labor market in which the market value of a strong back has dropped while the value of brains has soared. If you focus on the reforms and social programs of the 1960s, the reductions in immediate penalties for destructive behavior (e.g., doing drugs, dropping out of school, grabbing purses, having a baby without marriage) had the most effect on people who were impulsive, attracted to immediate gratification, and unable to foresee long-term consequences—qualities associated with low I.Q. The effects of such changes in incentives among the smart were much smaller.

My takeaway from all this was expressed in the closing chapter of my own work on Putnam's topic, *Coming Apart* (2012). Very briefly, I don't think America's civic culture will be revitalized by the kinds of programs that *Our Kids* advocates. If it is to happen, it must be through a cultural Great Awakening that leads the elites to reengage in America's traditional civic culture; one that reverses what Robert Reich memorably labeled "the secession of the successful." Being willing to pay higher taxes to finance more social programs is not what I have in mind.

But let's face it: my strategy does not have more chance of working than Putnam's does. The parsimonious way to extrapolate the trends that Putnam describes so well is to predict an America permanently segregated into social classes that no longer share the common bonds that once made this country so exceptional, accompanied by the destruction of the national civic culture that Putnam and I both cherish.

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