

Fatal Legacy

Myron Magnet, The Dream and the Nightmare: the Sixties' Legacy to the Underclass, William Morrow, New York, 1993

Reviewed by Roger Sandall

Ten years after Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, a lot more ground has been lost. And eight years after Lawrence Mead's *Beyond Entitlement* much of that ground has been occupied by people whose defiance of civic obligation goes well beyond anything Mead foresaw. Whole districts of American cities are now living without law. According to Myron Magnet, after a stray bullet had killed an innocent nine-year-old girl in Brooklyn a neighbour lamented: 'Our lives have been reduced to the lowest levels of human existence' (p.172). It is this barbarising of American urban life, and the steady destruction of civic culture that has followed each well-intended subversion of public order (much of it undertaken at the behest of the Supreme Court), which is the 'nightmare' Magnet's book describes.

How could the American Dream end like this? The 1964 Civil Rights Act was inspired by a noble vision of racial equality. Yet the quota-driven affirmative action programs that followed it have sharply increased ill-feeling on both sides. In the words of the black writer Shelby Steele, instead of making all men one, quotas 'make blacks something of a separate species for whom normal standards and values do not apply'. When tens of thousands of psychiatric patients were released into the streets this was hailed as a liberation equal to the fall of the Bastille. It was not foreseen that when public shelters were provided for these and other 'homeless' they would turn into 'huge, ravenously expensive, permanent bureaucracies with specious "entitlements" that continually expand the clientele and sink clients into permanent dependency' (p.113).

And then there's the Teenage Mother Syndrome now being addressed by President Clinton himself. Aid to Families with Dependent Children was meant to

assist the underclass. Who could have imagined that it would create 'a machine for perpetuating that very underclass, by encouraging the least competent women — with the least initiative, the worst values, the most blighted family structures — to become the mothers of the next generation and pass along their legacy of failure?' (p.135). The result? Delinquent teenage baby-breeding without end.

So who's to blame? Like Charles Murray, Magnet is associated with the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. Unlike Murray, he sees the wasteland of US welfare policy as a symptom of a far-reaching 'cultural revolution' — of a radically regressive change of values — rather than as a calamitous collection of disincentives. 'Economic opportunity is meaningful only if individuals are culturally equipped to seize it' (p.27). And it is those who have wilfully deprived the underclass of that equipment — the main elements being belief in themselves, hope for the future, and a strong conviction of 'the worth of the respectable working life, however humble' — who are the villains of the piece. These range from left intellectuals like Michael Harrington and William Ryan who redefined even the working poor as 'victims', to investment bankers and prominent Democrats like Felix Rohatyn who told Magnet that a man and his wife doing menial work in support of their three kids were 'people living dead-end lives' (p.33). Will this help them? In Magnet's eyes Rohatyn's statement is a classic expression of the political irresponsibility of the Haves. Its message to the hard-working Have-Nots of the working class is that those who have got married and stayed married, got jobs and kept them, and manage to support their children while working at low-paid jobs, are idiots: while its message to the welfare class is that the dole is the only way to go. Smart guys become wards of the state.

Of course, no immediate harm is likely to come to Mr Rohatyn for expressing such views. Wealth pleasantly insulates him from the consequences of his own philosophy. But the harm done to the morale and well-being of low-paid workers, by equating them with people too stupid to claim relief, is incalculable. Nor was Dr Thomas Szasz personally hurt when he announced that mental illness was a myth, and that schizophrenics should henceforth be 'liberated' into the streets (known sentimentally as 'the community' in welfare circles). But the mentally ill, not to mention society itself, have paid dearly. No skin is visibly missing from the noses of the Supreme Court judges whose rulings effectively abolished the vagrancy and loitering ordinances, and who in cases like *Miranda* and *In re Gault* have created a situation where thousands of wild juveniles across the nation regularly, and literally, get away with murder. In each instance it is not the well-intentioned Haves who have suffered. But the neighbourhoods where the Have-Nots live have become uninhabitable.

There are well-known polemical advantages in dividing society into two mutually exclusive categories: Haves and Have-Nots. But was it the 'mainstream culture' of the Haves who live in the penthouses and the better suburbs who 'remade' American life from the 1960s on? Or was this precipitated by a smaller but immeasurably more influential collection of academic intellectuals from Galbraith on — persons who are habitually idealistic and impractical, and whose ideas are some-

times downright crazy? Magnet tends to equivocate, mainly in order to expose the pernicious role of the affluent in ruining the lives of the poor. But Charles Murray's narrower reference to an intelligentsia that originates ideas, writes about them, and confers respectability on 'elite wisdom', is a more consistent and perhaps more useful way of talking about the changes that have taken place.

Can the uninhibited spread of sex and violence throughout American culture be realistically explained without at least some reference to commercial forces? Are the twin ideals of More Sex and Less Work wholly attributable to 1960s radicalism? Certainly, under the rubric of 'liberation', the counter-culture vigorously promoted these ideals. But a lofty distaste for work and a weakness for sexual indulgence have been aristocratic traits throughout history. Indeed, has there ever been a secure, materialistic, pleasure-loving elite that did not display them?

Magnet would no doubt dismiss this as an idle aside. And perhaps he should, for it hardly affects his argument. Which is, in brief, that it was one thing for Margaret Mead and Co. to advocate, for an educated academic readership, looser standards of sexual conduct and more liberal drug laws, but it is quite another to deal with the final consequences of this 'liberation' for the black underclass: doped-out teenage crack addicts copulating in broad daylight in vacant lots. And if this doesn't worry you, how about the selling of the brain-damaged offspring, by their own mothers, as sexual toys?

Magnet's book is essential reading for anyone involved in the making of social policy. It would be ridiculous to claim that the situation in Australasia is of comparable seriousness. But the ingredients are here, especially the popularity of victimology in welfare circles, with its assumption of systemic poverty that only more governmental largesse will cure. For this reason *The Dream and the Nightmare* holds important lessons for us too.

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