

# A Reign of Error

At the end of [\*The Unheavenly City: The Nature and the Future of Our Urban Crisis\*](#) (1968), Edward Banfield presents a prospect regarding race relations that seems to have been fulfilled since his tumultuous years and ours: *a reign of error*.

Let me set the stage. America had become the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, and the wealth was making its way to the lower classes also. Thus the main “accidental factor” that had locked Americans in a vicious cycle of white discrimination and prejudice on one side and low standards and attainments for blacks on the other would be largely alleviated. Such prejudice, said Banfield, writing during the years of urban riots, was already in decline.

By any reasonable criterion, he was correct about that decline. Consider, for one example, our nearly universal acceptance of interracial marriage. Such acceptance was unimaginable when “[Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?](#)” was nominated for the Academy Award for best picture of 1967, largely on account of its message (for a much superior and gut-ripping film on interracial marriage, racial animosity, and rank injustice, see 1964’s “[One Potato, Two Potato](#)”). More than 1-in-6 new marriages in the United States are interracial. That alone, I had once thought, would suffice to put those animosities to rest, as it had done between other embittered groups.

Why have improvements in our material circumstances and markedly improved attitudes about race *not* settled the problem, even now that for tens of millions of people interracial marriage is a family affair? Banfield warned that such things might not be enough.

Improvement causes expectations to rise, and that means bad

actions will appear more perverse, injustices more unjust.

"To a large extent," Banfield says, "our urban problems are like the mechanical rabbit at the racetrack, which is set to keep just ahead of the dogs no matter how fast they may run." Such is the case when we define poverty by ever-rising standards, so that although the level of material privation that my parents and my wife's parents knew when they were children is now a thing of the past, we still have the problem of *relative poverty*, whereby people will feel less content than my parents felt, because we measure our welfare by comparison with what other people have.

Relative poverty, if it were a matter of extrinsic circumstances alone, might be eliminated by a redistribution of goods; that was the reasoning behind the welfare system. But perhaps it is not so easily cured. Banfield, who had written about a dysfunctional village in southern Italy in [\*The Moral Basis of a Backward Society\*](#) (1967), never forgot that man was a moral creature and not just a passive thing acted upon by forces from without. We possess moral codes, he says, "certain styles of life that are learned in childhood and passed on as a kind of collective heritage."

In America, one's social class depended upon two moral factors: the "ability to imagine a future," and the "ability to discipline oneself to sacrifice present for future satisfaction." But the lower-class individual, white or black, lacked those abilities.

He "suffers from feelings of self-contempt or inadequacy, and is often apathetic or dejected," . . . "suspicious and hostile, aggressive yet dependent." He "resents all authority . . . and is apt to think that he has been 'railroaded' and to want to 'get even.'" The lower-class household is usually headed by a female, and the boy so raised "is likely to learn at an early age to join a corner gang of such boys and to learn from the gang the 'tough' style of the lower-class man."

Such a boy will have a strong taste for risk and violence, nor will he want to marry or to settle down to one mate. It follows, then, that government initiatives which, despite the best of intentions, encourage the formation of female-headed households, or make it harder or to all appearances unnecessary to domesticate the strongest, most aggressive, and most spirited young men and direct their energy toward productive ends, will *confirm* the self-thwarting pathologies of the lower class: "Overgenerous welfare programs may destroy more incentives to look ahead and provide for the future than improved job and other opportunities can provide."

So it is that what we think about things can be as important as the things themselves, because it forms our moral stance toward the world. But what if our thoughts are in error?

There is less violent crime in our cities now than there was 30 years ago (in part because of our dreadfully high rate of incarceration, including self-incarceration behind gates and guards). But people still register the violence. Mass media causes an atrocity in Boise to be known in Perth, when most of the people in each city could not find the other city on a map.

Persuaded that their cities are war zones, people retreat to their havens, and the streets are abandoned to the most antisocial. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jane Jacobs said much the same thing in [\*The Death and Life of Great American Cities\*](#) (1961). When you *think* that your streets are unsafe for children, they become so: for children are eyes, and they are everywhere and unpredictable, a strong deterrent to serious crime.

This is how "a false public definition of the situation may," says Banfield, citing the sociologist Robert K. Merton, "evoke new behavior that makes the originally false definition come true, thus perpetuating a 'reign of error.'" The decline in racial prejudice "counts for little if the Negro *thinks* that

white racism is as pervasive as ever." The opening up of his opportunities "counts for little if he *thinks* that 'massive' government welfare, housing, and other programs—and *only* these—can help him."

The original error, shared by many people who wish him well, may cause him to "do things that are counterproductive (for example, to cut himself off from 'white' schools, jobs, and politics and to enter the fantasy world of black separatism)." Indeed, it would be better for him, says Banfield, to put the best construction on things rather than the worst, "for a self-fulfilling prophecy of the unimportance of racial factors would be as great a blessing as its opposite would be a curse."

One way to determine whether racism or a destructive perception of racism is at work is to control for race and separate groups by perception. The fabulous success of Nigerian immigrants to America is powerfully suggestive. It is not simply that the best and brightest are leaving Nigeria for America – explaining why Nigerian-Americans have higher educational attainments than any other ethnic group in the nation. It is also that they come without the burden of history. Nigeria is a deeply divided country, with plenty of Islamic terrorism. But the Nigerian does not arrive in New York thinking, "Here I will be despised for my race," or, "Every light-skinned person I meet might be the great-grandchild of slave owners." That story is not *his* story.

Instead, the Nigerian immigrant is likely to assume that most people will like him if he treats them cheerfully, and they will be glad to see him succeed, *and this assumption contributes to his chances of success*. It enters his behavior. He has no wicked past to forget.

Banfield seems to have had little religious sensibility. The true aim of life lay beyond what he could imagine. It was not – and is not – success in this world. It is friendship with

God and man. In what soil does friendship flourish? Gratitude, modesty, generosity, self-denial; the willingness to see the best in your friend and to overlook or to forgive the worst; and, of paramount importance, the knowledge that if God should give us what we justly deserve, none of us would see salvation.

If we do not know that, we dwell in a reign of error indeed.

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