

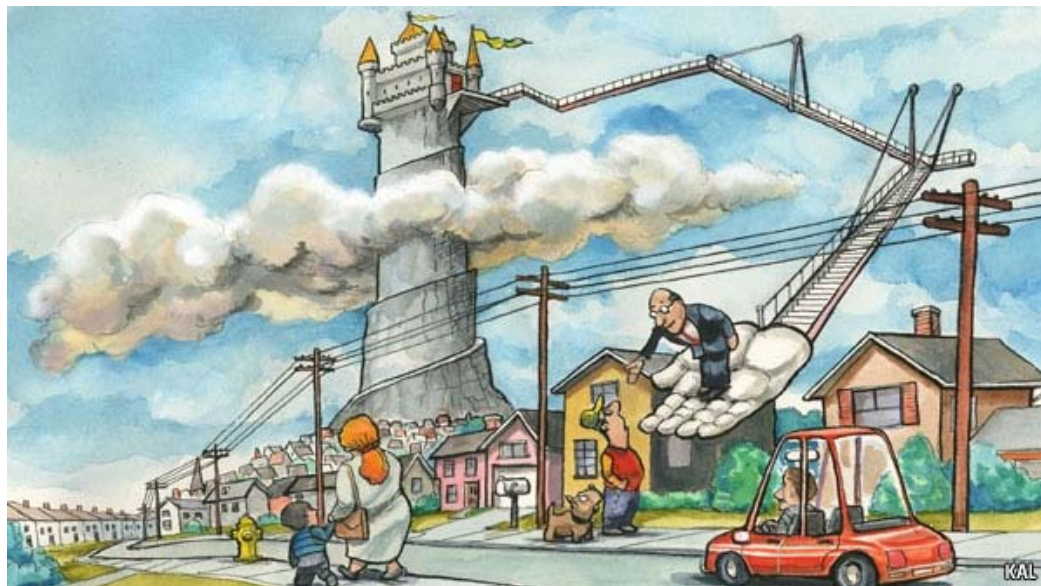
Lexington

The classes drift apart

Can the rich save the American dream by preaching what they practise?

Feb 4th 2012 | from the print edition

JUST
because
he
belongs
to it
himself
does not
make
Newt
Gingrich
wrong
when he



grumbles that America is run by an out-of-touch elite. If you want evidence, the data can now be found in a book published this week by Charles Murray, the co-author in 1994 of "The Bell Curve", which became controversial for positing a link between race and intelligence. That controversy should not deter you. "Coming Apart: The State of White America 1960-2010" brims with ideas about what ails America.

David Brooks, a conservative columnist for the *New York Times*, thinks it will be the most important book this year on American society. And even if you do not buy all Mr Murray's ideas about what ails America,

you will learn much about what conservatives think ails America, a subject no less fascinating. Though it does not set out to do so, this book brings together four themes heard endlessly on the Republican campaign trail. They are the cultural divide between elite values and mainstream values (a favourite of the tea-partiers); the case for religion and family values (think Rick Santorum); American exceptionalism (all the candidates); and (a favourite of Mitt Romney's) the danger of America becoming a European welfare state.

Mr Murray starts by lamenting the isolation of a new upper class, which he defines as the most successful 5% of adults (plus their spouses) working in managerial positions, the professions or the senior media. These people are not only rich but also exceptionally clever, because America has become expert at sending its brightest to the same elite universities, where they intermarry and confer on their offspring not just wealth but also a cognitive advantage that gives this class terrific staying power.

This new elite is not just a breed apart. It lives apart, in bubbles such as Manhattan south of 96th Street (where the proportion of adults with college degrees rose from 16% in 1960 to 60% in 2000) and a small number of "SuperZips", neighbourhoods where wealth and educational attainment are highly concentrated. These neighbourhoods are whiter and more Asian than the rest of America. They have less crime and more stable families. They are not, *pace* Mr Gingrich, necessarily "liberal": plenty of SuperZips voted Republican in 2004. But they are indeed out of touch.

In the 19th century Alexis de Tocqueville marvelled that in America the opulent did not stand aloof from the people. That, says Mr Murray, is no longer true. He assumes (perhaps too blithely) that this class runs America, but makes decisions on the basis of atypical lives. A great cultural gap separates the elite from other Americans. They seldom watch "Oprah" or "Judge Judy" all the way through. In fact they do not watch much television at all. They eat in restaurants, but not often at Applebee's, Denny's or Waffle House, chains that cater to the common taste. They may take *The Economist*, with the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and perhaps the *New Yorker* or *Rolling Stone*. They drink wine and boutique beers (and can discuss them expertly) but only in moderation, and they hardly ever smoke cigarettes.

A lot of American commentary about the elite is suffused with a creepy resentment (Mr Gingrich), or exercised by inequality (Occupy Wall Street) or “fairness” (Barack Obama). In contrast, Mr Murray has nothing against this class of good parents and good neighbours. He just wants it to know and care more about the rest of America. And instead of handing over more of its money, he would like it to teach the rest of America its values.

Most in need of instruction is a new lower class, perhaps a fifth of the white population (Mr Murray excludes blacks and Latinos, simplifying his thesis by taking race out of the equation), whose plight forms the next part of his book. This class is in the throes of disintegration. Too many of its men will not work; too many of its women raise their children out of wedlock; religious worship is in decline. In lower-class neighbourhoods the togetherness of communities has vanished. Family, pride in work, religiosity, community: these, says Mr Murray, are “the stuff of life”. Take them away and you block the road to happiness.

Now comes the compulsory jeremiad on America’s imperilled exceptionalism. To Mr Murray, what is at stake is not just the lot of the lower class but “the American project”. Jefferson thought the state should stop people from harming one another but otherwise leave them free “to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement”. But what if a growing proportion of Americans lose the virtues required to be functioning members of a free society? The danger Mr Murray foresees is that America will copy Europe’s mistake and give the job of fixing broken families and communities to government bureaucracies that are bound to fail. The upper class might go along with this, because it is easier to pay higher taxes than to become involved in the lives of fellow citizens whom the rich no longer understand. America will become Europe and the Jeffersonian idea will die.

It’s noblesse oblige all over again

Mr Murray pleads instead for “a civic great awakening” that will see the upper class sally forth from its SuperZips to talk the less fortunate into marrying, working harder and becoming better neighbours. Mr Brooks thinks national service would bring the classes closer. The Republican candidates think that whatever the answer, it must not cost a penny more in taxes.

Your own columnist, a jaundiced Brit residing temporarily in a SuperZip, wonders how the lower class will respond to hearing that the main help it needs is an infusion of its betters' morals. Mr Murray believes his numbers show that following his prescription can help people lead fuller lives at almost any level of income. He may be right. But those in the upper class who heed his call might want to leave their Mercedes Benzes at home when they set out for Denny's and their voyage of persuasion.

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from the print edition | United States

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