

# Banfield Returns

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## Book Review:

*The Unheavenly City Revisited*

by Edward C. Banfield

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Edward C. Banfield's *The Unheavenly City* was published in 1970, and almost immediately it came to dominate discussion of urban policy issues in serious academic and political circles; apparently it was also bought and read by many people who were not professionally concerned with its subject, perhaps because the "urban crisis" was still moderately in fashion then. But *The Unheavenly City* was very different from most books written by college professors—especially their "policy books"—which achieve a wide popular audience. It did not exaggerate the importance of its subject, but rather questioned whether many of the most talked-about "urban problems" could properly be called problems at all, and argued that many problems which were serious were resolving themselves independent of—or in spite of—all public exertions. Nor was it a call to action or a brief for the author's policy proposals; although it discussed practically every urban policy idea ever advanced, its focus was on the complexity of things, and on the persistency of human nature against all attempts at manipulation by "policy."

Many who read *The Unheavenly City* were mightily disturbed by it, as Professor Banfield plainly intended them to be. Some were more or less converted and others fought back—but understood the dignity of pure intellectual battle and the importance of keeping it pure. Unfortunately, there were others: politicians (some of them disguised in sheepskin and academic robes) and public officials who were embarrassed or confounded by the book's arguments, and gangster elements on many campuses who needed a cause to stir fellow students from their post-Vietnam torpor. They made a fine hash of Professor Banfield's views, and served it up to anyone who would listen, in some important respects representing his views to be precisely the opposite of what they plainly were. This spring, SDS mobilizers appeared to have found their final solution when they bullied Banfield into silence at two academic gatherings. (And why not, when tenured professors had written in scholarly journals that his ideas were not only mistaken but socially "dangerous?") A society that knew itself would have libel laws to remedy such mayhem; as it was, the result (aside from a good deal of grief to Professor Banfield) was confusion on the part of many well-meaning people who had not read the book or had read it carelessly, and distraction from the serious arguments the book had been intended to provoke.

Professor Banfield has now revised his book. *The Unheavenly City Revisited*, however, is a second edition rather than a sequel: the format, argument, and conclusions of the first are essentially unchanged. This is rather startling, and probably will disappoint many of his friends and supporters. For he could have used the occasion to clobber those who had treated him with such meanness. It must have taken saint-like restraint for him to have abstained, but anyone who devotes himself to the book will see that he was right. *The Unheavenly City* was a lapidary work, addressed to the ages and not to the humors of the time. It was and is impervious to easy or self-interested criticism, and it is surely better that Banfield does not now dignify such abuse with his attentions.

This is not to say, of course, that Banfield has neglected all of his critics. Indeed he actively solicited reasoned criticisms of his first edition, and has taken meticulous account of many of them in his revision. As a result he has elaborated upon many of his more difficult points, and has usefully simplified one of his central arguments (concerning the amenability of lower-class culture to objective changes in social opportunity). These changes have greatly clarified and strengthened his exposition at important junctures; they will reduce the chances of innocent misinterpretation and present new challenges to those who wish to lie about the book. The serious student, though, will find that Banfield's most important revision is his addition of scores of references to recent statistical studies (such as Census surveys) and scholarly works (e.g., Thomas Sowell's *Black Education and Race and Economics* and Christopher Jencks' *Inequality*), and his incorporation of their conclusions into the body of his argument.

Professor Banfield's essential argument is that the genuinely serious social problems of the American city are inaccessible to public (i.e. governmental) "solution" in a liberal democracy such as prevails here today. To understand this, however, one must first confront his preliminary argument that the usual public definitions of urban problems are erroneous or perverse. The two arguments, we shall see, are closely related, and both rely on the same two explanatory principles: the nature of democratic politics and the class composition of American society.

Many of the circumstances which are often said to be problems of "crisis" proportions, Banfield suggests, are really costs of city living which could be eliminated only by foregoing important benefits which no one wants to give up. It is senseless, for example, to say that "congestion" is a problem, since the opportunities of congestion are what draw people to the city in the first place; likewise it is senseless to describe "urban sprawl" as a crisis when it arises simply from providing people with homes and lots they desire at a price they can afford, and when it generally affects no one but them.

Such matters are puffed into "crises" because our democracy provides numerous opportunities for people to shift the costs of their pursuits to others by political means. A homeowner who complains about "sprawl" does not mean that the state should have prevented his housing development from being built, but rather that it should prevent development of the still open land beyond his back window. The mayor who moans that his city must receive a "massive" infusion of federal funds, "or else," does not mean that his constituents have run out of money to pay the bills he has run up, but rather that they would much prefer that somebody else pay them instead.

If gravely serious problems exist in the cities, says Banfield, they must be circumstances which threaten the essential welfare of individuals or the good health of society, such as crime, poverty, and racial (or other) injustice. At this point he presents a complicated and politically delicate argument. He asserts that in some respects most of these serious problems have been improving dramatically in the American city, although in other respects they are far more intractable than is generally acknowledged; he adds that the public discussion of these problems is usually misleading because, as in the case of the purely political "problems," important interest groups find it useful both to oversimplify them and to exaggerate their severity. Thus, poverty in the cities has been diminishing rapidly, and it is not concentrated in "festering black ghettos," although it serves the interest of many public institutions to emphasize precisely the opposite view. Banfield also asserts that racial discrimination, while morally repugnant and a grievous burden to blacks historically, is today only a secondary cause of the particular problems (such as disproportionate poverty and unemployment) facing the black community, although the logic of the black leader's role is to emphasize discrimination and minimize other circumstances.

Predictably these assertions were among the most controversial in *The Unheavenly City*, but the controversies generally failed to cut very deeply into Banfield's arguments. Some readers reacted with the superstition of a coach at half-time, fearing that attention to past success might jeopardize the future. Others did wrestle with Banfield's statistics, but followed rather too comically the game-plan he had written for them (thus, to his modest assertion that urban housing has been improving for all income groups, housing consultants went to unpersuasive lengths to demonstrate that housing has really been getting worse). And all around there were bald efforts to embarrass the man by dealing loosely with his arguments—telling people that he had said things like "racism isn't important" or "poverty is the poor's own fault."

The *Unheavenly City Revisited* will not convert these people but it does incorporate important new data and statistical studies which lend further weight to Banfield's arguments. The first edition, for example, noted that there were 13.2 million persons living in metropolitan areas whose family incomes were below

the federal government's "poverty line"; in his new edition he cites the comparable figure for 1972, which was 6.1 million. (In the same period the number of poor families living in rural areas apparently *increased*, however it is a circumstance which is not explained.) Six million is still a lot of people, of course, but as Banfield points out even they are for the most part very far from "hardship," thank in part to numerous government subsidy programs for such goods as housing, food, medical care, and legal services. In any event, it is difficult to reconcile with Banfield's figures the widely-expressed notions that the cities "breed poverty" and that the urban poor are "left out" of society's general economic progress. As for Banfield's point—which could hardly have upset anyone who had come to know the life of a Bedford-Stuyvesant or a Lawndale—that it is misleading to characterize the poorest city neighborhoods as "ghettos" which are uniformly black, poor or squalid, he has received strong support from a special Census survey in 1970-71 of fifty-one OEO/Model Cities "low-income areas" in large cities. Of nine million persons surveyed in these communities, half were black and 35 percent were non-Spanish white, three-fourths reported incomes above the poverty level, 25 percent of white families and 20 percent of black families reported family incomes over \$12,000, and the racial distribution of those below the poverty level was about the same as those above it.

In his first edition Banfield argued that racial discrimination was not the main social disadvantage of blacks taken as a group. Their main disadvantage, he said, was the same as that once faced by other group such as the Irish and Jews: blacks are presently "the most recent unskilled, and hence relatively low-income migrant(s) to reach the city from a backward rural area." He pointed out that the gap between black and white income, unemployment rates, and other indicators of social welfare is greatly reduced—though not eliminated—when one statistically "corrects for" demographic factors such as regional origin, family size, and educational level. He concluded that if all blacks turned white (or if all white turned black) overnight, ex-blacks would be somewhat better off but not much: their social and economic circumstances as a group would for the time being remain largely unchanged. Banfield's view sounded convincing to this reviewer and, I think, to most readers who did not misunderstand him to say that discrimination was "unimportant or that inadequate education should be "ignored." His view, however, was rather long on argument and short on facts.

In *The Unheavenly City Revisited*, Banfield has added the facts. His most graphic addition is a regression analysis by Otis Dudley Duncan, which shows how the 1962 income difference between blacks and whites diminishes as four independent variables are successively accounted for. The remaining gap of \$1,430, which could plausibly be attributed to discrimination, would certainly have been smaller had other variables been accounted for, and it would be smaller still if the same analysis were applied to current income figures. (This last point is suggested by recent Census surveys not cited by Banfield, which found

that for certain narrow groups—for example, young Northern couples where both husband and wife worked—blacks were approaching or had achieved income parity with whites.)

### **The Concept of Class Culture**

That many of the cities' serious problems have in most respects been improving, it will be recalled, is only half of Banfield's argument; the other half is that in some respects these problems are more stubborn and complicated than is usually supposed. Here it is necessary to introduce, in a drastically simplified form, Banfield's use of class analysis. Society, he writes, can be divided for analytical purposes into four classes—upper, middle, working, and lower—each of which embraces persons with a distinguishing pattern of attitudes, values, and modes of behavior. As a heuristic hypothesis to account for these distinguishing patterns, Banfield suggests that an individual's class cultural position can be explained by reference to his ability or willingness to provide for the future. The upper-class individual, for example, is highly future-oriented. He takes future years, decades, or his entire lifetime into account as he gauges his present behavior; consequently he invests heavily in himself through education, foregoes present gratification when it would threaten long-range goals, and is generally prudent and altruistic in his behavior. At the other end of the scale, the lower-class individual is radically present-oriented. He hardly plans his affairs from one moment to the next, and seldom accounts for tomorrow in gauging his behavior today; for this reason he is reckless and improvident, makes no attempt to discipline his passions, and trusts his fate to luck rather than pluck.

It should be noted that Banfield's "time-horizon" hypothesis is not necessary to his use of class theory in analyzing social policies. The empirical observation that different groups in society possess different values which affect their behavior is sufficient for this. But the time-horizon idea does prove to be a powerful tool for simplifying his analysis, and it stands as an important achievement in its own right.

The existence of different class cultures greatly complicates those serious urban problems which otherwise seem to be solving themselves. Although American population has tended to "move up" the class scale over time, it is not clear that lower-class individuals have ever moved up in significant numbers (indeed, the culture itself may prevent those who are strongly lower-class from advancing at all), and it appears that a substantial lower class persists in all of the big cities. Moreover, a disproportionate share of the present lower class happens to be black (as a century ago it was disproportionately Irish). These circumstances mean that despite the large economic advances of the poor, many who remain poor may be not only lower-income but lower-class, and disinclined to take advantage of future economic expansion. They also mean that, despite the rapid

dissipation of old-fashioned racial prejudices, expressions of class likes and dislikes (between working- and lower-class persons, for instance) may be mistaken as racial discrimination, poisoning race relations at a time when they ought to be improving.

It is obviously a small step from saying that because many urban problems are culturally rooted, they are extremely stubborn,' to saying that government agencies are unlikely to do much to relieve (much less "solve") them. And it is here that Banfield deploys his class analysis with greatest force. In his painstaking inquiries into what he regards as the most serious urban problems – poverty, joblessness, violent crime, and rioting – he shows that to the extent they are manifestations of lower-class culture, there is very little that government can be expected to do about them consistent with the ideals of a free society. If, for example, an individual's proneness to violent crime results from a radically myopic view of the future, the conservative prescriptions of increasing the severity and/or likelihood of punishment will have as little effect (because punishment, no matter how likely, is beyond his time-horizon) as the liberal ones of rehabilitation and education (because he sees no purpose in learning or otherwise "improving" himself). And preventive incarceration or lesser restrictions on his freedom, designed simply to protect others from his disposition for violence, are out of the question for both practical reasons (there is no certain way to measure disposition for violence) and ethical reasons (a free society ought not to compromise a person's freedom because of probabilities).

### **The Sources of Lower-Class Culture**

If one believes that many important social problems result in a significant degree from cultural values such as those of Banfield's lower class, it obviously becomes terribly important to determine the extent to which those values might themselves be changed. Here, Banfield's original text created some understandable confusion. In an early chapter introducing the concept of class culture, he paid scant attention to the hot debate among sociologists on this question. Some, like Elliot Liebow in his classic study, *Tally's Corner*, look upon the "culture of poverty" as "situational," as a rational adaptation to a world of severely limited opportunities; according to this view, members of the lower class would shift their attitudes if their social and economic opportunities expanded. Others see lower-class culture as "cognitive," as an expression of psychological traits acquired in early childhood which persist independently of social circumstances; if it is "cognitive," then there is no away to change lower-class culture except by interfering with child-rearing practices, an option our society finds unacceptable. Banfield left the general impression that lower-class culture is irremediable, but in his concluding chapter on the future of the lower class, he acknowledged that present-orientedness might be either "cognitive" or "situational" (or even "volitional"), and then turned his attentions

to the obviously limited possibilities of curing cognitive lower-class behavior without abridging liberties unacceptably.

This matter has been greatly clarified in the course of Banfield's revisit, though not entirely to the satisfaction of the present reviewer. Banfield now alerts us early to the two conflicting views of the causes of cultural characteristics, this time called the "social machinery" and "social heredity" arguments (not, please note, biological heredity, an altogether different debate which Banfield does not discuss and which he appears to regard with great dubiety). In the end Banfield concludes that the debate is more academic than practical, since human behavior tends to adapt only slowly to changes in circumstances (such as increases in social opportunity), but he does argue more explicitly than previously that increased opportunities might expand the time-horizon of many lower-class persons over the long run (meaning a generation or generations).

The idea of "expanding opportunities," however, is a hazy one which deserves more attention than Banfield has given it. For example, he cites the failure of the War on Poverty programs of the 1960s to affect the lifestyle of "the poor" (despite hefty funding in at least some cases), as an unsuccessful attempt to help the poor by changing the "opportunity structure" facing them. But it is doubtful that the example is apt. While the poverty program certainly adopted the language of "economic opportunity" in fact it had little effect upon the real opportunities of the poor. The Community Action Program, which was the centerpiece of the poverty program, was intended to stimulate the poor not by expanding their opportunities but by teaching them self-confidence through participation in dramatic group action, which almost invariably meant political action. The program's job training and education efforts aimed not at expanding opportunities but at better preparing the poor for such opportunities as existed; in fact it was one of the principal criticisms of the program that it trained people for nonexistent job opportunities (it was said that the job Corps transformed ten thousand unemployed day laborers into ten thousand unemployed stone masons), and in this it probably reinforced lower-class attitudes that were rational adjustments to limited opportunities. The other War on Poverty programs were simply benefits-in-kind aimed at alleviating the poor's lack of income, such as the Legal Services Program, and while it may have been imagined that such benefits would make recipients more self-respecting and socially aggressive, they did nothing to change the opportunities available to them.

It seems plain that nothing in the history of the poverty program suggests that lower-class culture would be unaffected by real and large-scale changes in the social opportunities available to the poor. Aside from economic expansion, such changes might come from repealing minimum wage laws, eliminating union restrictions on apprenticeships, and permitting free entry into such occupations

as truck- and taxicab-driving. These changes would not expand the total opportunity available to the lower-class poor as much as might be supposed; if anyone could drive a taxicab, each individual driver would earn somewhat less than under current arrangements in most cities. But they might make such opportunities as exist more visible and easily grasped. On the other hand, it may be that working- and lower-class persons are more sensitive to the opportunities of political clout or connections (as presented by unions or political organizations, for instance) than to those of the marketplace. In any event, these are important matters for speculation, and it undoubtedly would have been enlightening for Banfield to have discussed them at greater length.

### **Institutional Barriers to Reform**

"Serious" urban problems are not, of course, caused solely or even (in some cases) primarily by the heedlessness of lower-class behavior. Unemployment is as much a result of such things as national economic policies, the restrictions in the labor market just mentioned, and racial discrimination. (An important relationship between these last two factors is described in a typically illuminating quotation from Thomas Sowell, one of many in the second edition: "The net effect of any institutional arrangement which sets the rate of pay above that required to attract the number of qualified workers needed is to make it cheaper to discriminate in deciding who not to hire.") And it is rather painfully apparent that our criminal justice system provides little in the way of discouragement to even the most future-oriented individual who would commit riot or other violence, much less publish classified government documents or destroy draft records. (Indeed it is fair to say that under present arrangements the more future-oriented and calculating one is, the more one will understand the negligible chances of being punished for most crimes, and the more one will be left to one's own moral devices.)

Banfield devotes a very large share of his book, in both editions, to exploring these "institutional" aspects of urban problems, but he concludes that government is as unlikely to "solve" the institutional as the cultural aspects. Part of the reason for this arises from the power of interest groups in a pluralistic democracy: many workable reforms are rendered impossible by the opposition of critical interest groups. Thus, although labor market restrictions benefit unions less than they cost society generally, unions are better organized than "society generally" and, within limits; can be expected to prevail when specific legal restrictions are at issue.

### **The Perversity of Moralism**

But to Banfield the more important reason for the "perversity" of urban policy is the nature of moralism which more and more tends to determine that policy, and

especially the moralism of the well-to-do. The upper-class individual, it will be recalled, tends to be highly altruistic, generous, and optimistic. He also has a great need for self-expression, which reifies his place in his very large universe, and he gives vent to this need the more his future seems secure. Consequently, the upper-class persons who have already acquired wealth and status tend to emphasize the moral over the practical aspects of social issues, for moralizing provides opportunities for dramatic self expression, while practicalities require attention to the base as well as the noble in human affairs. This kind of moralizer believes that the only way to help blacks is to "fight discrimination"; he is oblivious to the condescension of his position and is angered by the observation that more mundane economic problems are of much greater practical importance. The way to deal with crime is "rehabilitation," in his view, and proposals to make confinement more immediate or certain are abhorrent. In these and numerous other instances, the practical institutional reforms to which Banfield is led in his analysis of specific problems seem doomed by the asserted dominance of upper-class moralism in the policy-making process: for none of them provide do-gooders with opportunities to parade their moral virtue, and many are offensive to their sublime optimism.

What is worse, Banfield argues, moralistic behavior may itself aggravate already serious social problems. By magnifying the practical importance of one moral issue, racial discrimination, the upper class may deepen feelings of resentment and hostility on the part of blacks. By staging dramatic acts of political expression, the upper-class moralizer lends justification—and therefore encouragement—to lower-class behavior that is not only expressive but truly violent. "No doubt most of the blood spilled by the middle and upper classes will be steers' blood carried . . . in plastic containers," Banfield writes, but, "the effect on the lower classes of this sort of behavior by the upper classes may be incendiary." This argument, which seemed accurate when Banfield made it in his first edition, seems rather too optimistic in his revision. For in the meantime we have learned from such agencies of moral virtue as the Weathermen and the Symbionese Liberation Army that the upper class, too, is possessed by a capacity for genuine violence; the "symbiosis" of lower- and upper-class values, it seems, involves learned behavior in both directions. The threat of upper-class political terrorism appears to be a serious enough urban problem these days (certainly it will take a middle- or upper-class group to construct the small nuclear bomb Mr. Theodore Turner is worried about), though perhaps Banfield felt it was still too new and uncertain to be discussed with much precision in his second edition. There may well be more to go on by the time he writes his third edition.

Banfield's discussion of upper-class values and behavior is one of the most fascinating aspects of his book, no doubt because it touches on at least some of the values of most of his readers. But it is unduly pessimistic to suggest, as he seems to, that the upper-class ethos can be counted on to defeat any sound social

policy which survives the machinations of interest-group politics. After all we are not yet plunged totally into chaos: the sturdier forces of middle- and working-class opinion continue to have their effect at all levels of government, and undoubtedly they will continue to do so. As this review is written the headline on Chicago newspapers is "Killer Con to Attend College Unguarded." Obviously there are some fine upper-class minds at work in the Illinois prisons department, but just as obviously (at least in the view of the paper's editor and headline writer) there are many middle- and working-class minds in this city who will be enraged, and who conceivably will prevail. Moreover, upper-class values need not invariably lead to mischievous political attitudes. Expanding the real economic opportunities of the poor may be politically difficult or even impossible but it would improve the lot of some of the poor quite tangibly, and it would not much affect the selfish interests of upper-class persons one way or the other. Why, then, could it not be a fit subject for the attentions of the upper class? The upper-class view of things is sometimes mischievous and sometimes not, and it is only one of many forming public opinion; after all, an important part of the presidential mandate of 1972 was a rejection of some upper-class views and behavior. Banfield is right, though, to warn of the dangers of moralistic and demonstrative politics. One indication of those dangers was in the reception his first edition received in many important circles, and one indication that his warning has been heard will be if his second edition is received with greater civility.

### **Callous and Cold?**

This review has dealt almost exclusively with the conceptual aspects of *The Unheavenly City Revisited*, as did almost all of the reviews of *The Unheavenly City*. Banfield's approach to his subject commands this response. It should be said, though, that in many ways the most satisfying parts of his work are his several discussions of discrete policy issues: it is here that his concepts come to life, and here that his knowledge of the realities of human situations places him so far above the abstractionists who populate his field. There is simply no other way to demonstrate this than to quote him directly. Many of those who did not like Banfield's first edition complained that he was "callous and cold" in discussing the problems of the poor. The charge that he is callous probably results from his refusal to sentimentalize: it is true that he has the capacity to discuss emotional matters in a matter-of-fact way. It is not at all the case that he is cold. Discussing one social policy which many people would no doubt regard as highly progressive and beyond much debate—the requirement that all young people attend a school through their late teens, regardless of their knack, interest, or use for book-learning—Banfield explodes:

. . . As matters now stand, the pretense of the school—one that must be ridiculous to boys who will be manual workers and to girls who

will soon start having babies – that it and it alone offers 'opportunity' is surely one cause of youth unrest. The boy who knows that he has learned nothing since the eighth grade but that he must nevertheless sit in boredom, frustration, and embarrassment until he is sixteen or seventeen (in a few states, eighteen), when finally he will be labeled 'dropout,' must be profoundly disaffected by the experience. He senses that the school authorities and the whole apparatus of middle- and upper-class opinion that confine him there neither understand nor even care about the most palpable realities of his situation: that he will very likely work with his hands all his life, that he is not learning anything, that for such work he would not be helped by learning any more, and that one who works with his hands had better start early because he will be 'old' by the time he is forty. To tell such a boy that he must stay in school anyway because in the future there will be no jobs for people with only hands is to tell him something that is both untrue and irrelevant. If he cannot learn, staying in school will not help, and if there are no jobs for people with only hands, supporting him will be society's problem, not his.

"The frustration, anger, and contempt for authority engendered by the school may possibly enter into the personality of the individual, coloring his attitudes in adulthood and leading him to take a cynical and resentful view of the society and all its works. Conceivably, the practice of forcing the incapable and unwilling to waste their adolescent years in schoolrooms further weakens the already tenuous attachment of the lower classes to social institutions. The discovery that the school consists largely of cant and pretense may prepare the way for the discovery that the police and the courts, for example, do too.

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