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Daniel Patrick Moynihan and the Politics of Tragedy

Yoav Fromer

Abstract: How does tragedy, primarily a dramatic-literary experience, shape politics? While scholars have mostly looked to classical tragedy and expressions of public mourning to answer this, I employ a policy-oriented case study to do so: the politics of Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Widely known for his data-driven social science, I want to suggest the counterintuitive claim that the popular senator from New York was ironically also influenced deeply by literary tragedy. This article demonstrates how Moynihan cultivated a set of tragic sensibilities that informed his realist political calculations and implanted in his policies a tragic awareness that limited the goals of what government could achieve, while helping define what it should and how. Rather than evaluate the validity of his controversial proposals from the 1960s, I offer a critical reexamination that highlights the tragic impulses coloring them. In the process, I conceptualize a politics of tragedy as a “tamed” form of postwar liberalism.

I don't think there's any point in being Irish if you don't know that the world is going to break your heart eventually.

—Daniel Patrick Moynihan, 1964

In June 1963, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an ambitious young assistant secretary of labor in the Kennedy administration, delivered the commencement address at a high school in Cherrypoint, New York. Although Moynihan

Yoav Fromer is head of the Center for the Study of the United States in partnership with the Fulbright Program and a fellow in the School of Government and Diplomacy at Tel Aviv University, Webb Building Room 505, Tel Aviv, 69978, Israel (yoavfromer@taux.tau.ac.il).

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used the opportunity to encourage students to “make big plans” and “aim high,” he tempered the motivational speech with a gloomy tone and enlisted a surprising source: Greek tragedy. Having surveyed the social turbulence around the world, Moynihan cited the final passage from Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*: “The Greeks had a saying, ‘Count no man happy until he is dead.’ Neither I fear can we count the young people who go forth today as privileged. The world may have a surprise in store.”¹ In the following years, Moynihan would become one of the country’s best-known politicians: counselor on urban affairs to President Nixon, US ambassador to India and the United Nations, and a popular four-term Democratic senator from New York (1977–2001). Throughout his long, albeit controversial, career, the tragic sensibilities exhibited that day in Cherrytown would often return to inform the legislation and policies he championed, many of which came to redefine postwar liberalism itself.

Scholars who have long recognized the unique intellectual qualities that Moynihan brought to public office have not overlooked his brooding fatalism, though most attributed it to his political sobriety and prescience. His former student Robert Katzmann lauded Moynihan’s realist pursuit of “the art of the possible,” while Seymour Martin Lipset observed that “What Pat teaches is that not only are there no utopias, there are no solutions, not in the state or in the completely uncontrolled market. There are only approximations, only the continuing struggle for decency.”² Greg Weiner has even compared him to James Madison—“Both were devoted empiricists bounded by circumstance”—and said Moynihan “believed that government should be grounded in the concrete, not in the abstract.”³

While recognizing Moynihan’s uncanny legacy as a man of ideas among career politicians, scholars have overlooked the abstract literary realm where many of those concrete ideas were also shaped. Existing scholarship traces Moynihan’s political vision to his data-driven social science, as a result of which he gained prominence on the pages of the wonkish policy journal *Public Interest* in the 1960s, as he came to embody what Godfrey Hodgson called “the social scientist as legislator.”⁴ I suggest, however, the

¹Daniel Patrick Moynihan, address at Cherrytown High-School, June 1963. Daniel Patrick Moynihan Papers (DPM), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, MS 75913, box I:95, folder 6. Unless stated otherwise, all DPM citations are to this collection. Roman numeral preceding box number refers to part of the collection.

²Robert A. Katzmann, ed., *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: The Intellectual in Public Life* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 1, 42.

³Greg Weiner, *American Burke: The Uncommon Liberalism of Daniel Patrick Moynihan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), xii.

⁴Godfrey Hodgson, *The Gentleman from New York* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 338. Recent historical studies have focused on particular incidents in his career, especially the Moynihan Report, without giving ample consideration to his broader intellectual framework. See Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Susan Greenbaum, *Blaming the Poor: The Long Shadow of the Moynihan Report on Cruel*

counterintuitive claim that Moynihan, who held a doctorate in political science and famously remarked that “everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts,” was ironically, and surprisingly, profoundly influenced by literature—especially tragedy.⁵

Various forces undoubtedly informed Moynihan’s hallmark political realism: his Catholicism, the ideas of Edmund Burke⁶ and Michael Oakeshott that he imbibed as a student at London School of Economics in the early 1950s, and his personal experiences growing up poor in Hell’s Kitchen during the Depression. But Moynihan’s appreciation for tragedy also shaped his political attitudes and colored his brand of liberalism. I claim that through his recurring engagement with literary tragedy, Moynihan cultivated a set of tragic sensibilities that informed his realist calculations and implanted in his policy endeavors a tragic awareness that limited the goals of what government could achieve, while helping to define what it should.

Rather than simply reflecting a penchant toward pessimism or a way of expressing it, tragedy helped make Moynihan highly conscious of the universal lessons of human fallibility and hubris and highly suspicious of any programmatic thought that tried to ignore them in the belief that, indeed, “virtue has no cost.” He came to approach social problems in a skeptical way that tried to anticipate just how unanticipatable their political prescriptions might prove to be. Embracing its form and content, Moynihan found in tragedy a lens through which to interpret politics and a language and set of narrative techniques to help him explain or express it.

Having cultivated a tragic imagination that reinterpreted social challenges through its analytic lens, Moynihan came to approach politics with a corresponding sense of caution and sobriety. The Greek tragedians, Shakespeare, Yeats, Orwell, and Eugene O’Neill (among others): these authors to whom

Images about Poverty (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); James T. Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America’s Struggle over Black Family Life—from LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Gil Troy, *Moynihan’s Moment: America’s Fight against Zionism as Racism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵Hodgson, *Gentleman*, 319. For examples see Stephen Hess, *The Professor and the President* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014); Eric Alterman and Kevin Mattson, *The Cause: The Fight for American Liberalism from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama* (New York: Penguin, 2012), chap. 13; Peter Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), chap. 6.

⁶Weiner has located in Moynihan’s thought a template for a lost “Burkean Liberalism” that believed “all human endeavor, especially that undertaken politically, was subject to limitation.” See Weiner, *American Burke*, 14; Hodgson, *Gentleman*, 33, 48; Patterson, *Freedom*, 2–20; John Ehrman, *The Rise of Neoconservatism: Intellectuals and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1994* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 63–96.

Moynihan was drawn shared a sense of pathos resulting from a basic recognition of the brutal arbitrariness of fate and fortune to translate good intentions into bad outcomes and upend rational actions with irrational reactions. They helped make him painfully cognizant of the human propensity to miscalculate, underestimate, and subsequently overreach, of the resulting unintended consequences that occur when least expected—i.e., *peripeteia*—and of the fact that hubris, individual or institutional, drives much of this. Moynihan imbibed such attitudes and came to see complex political issues like poverty and racism as also tragic episodes with potentially avoidable outcomes that, accordingly, demand a prudent preemptive policy response.

I focus on the formative period of Moynihan's career as a public servant and intellectual during the 1960s and early 1970s. After distinguishing his tragic sensibilities from those broadly associated with Cold War liberals, I reframe his criticism of the War on Poverty and the Moynihan Report as, among other things, also expressions of his tragic preoccupation with questions of agency, ignorance, fate, hubris, and unintended consequences. I reconceptualize these case studies as a politics of tragedy and explore how the Family Assistance Plan that Moynihan helped engineer in the Nixon administration might have reflected this. I conclude by considering the possible significance of Moynihan's politics of tragedy to policymakers today. From a methodological perspective, I apply an interdisciplinary approach that augments original archival research of Moynihan's large body of published works and speeches with political theory and literary analysis. By engaging in a close rereading of some of Moynihan's most salient works, and recontextualizing them in the light of his tragic sensibilities, I weave the historical evidence into a broader political theory.

Two clarifications are in order. First, regarding chronological scope: Moynihan's tragic sensibilities informed his fatalistic thinking about ethnicity, a major concern throughout his career and one that helped shape his opposition to the Vietnam War and his prescient predictions regarding the Soviet Union's disintegration along ethnic lines in the 1980s. Tragedy also influenced his staunch opposition in the Senate to welfare reform in 1995–1996.⁷ For lack of space and purposes of clarity, this article concentrates on the earlier stages of his career when he primarily pursued social policy. These remain not only the most salient and controversial, but the best indicator of his burgeoning tragic sensibilities that would come to influence his thinking in many other areas. While his long career naturally registered some transformation of ideas, the tragic sensibilities implanted early on remained a constant. Engaging Moynihan's early career to explore the impact of tragedy is

⁷See Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Coping: On the Practice of Government* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 17–20; Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Pandemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Miles to Go: A Personal History of Social Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 44–66.

therefore fruitful given that he was not yet entirely immersed in the rough-and-tumble world of politics; with Moynihan still oscillating between academia and government, this period remains one of his most prolific as a public intellectual—before the practical demands of electoral politics, first as ambassador to India and the UN then as senator, collapsed remaining partitions between the intellectual and the politician and forced him, more often than not, to choose and fulfill the role of the latter.

A second clarification regards causality: I am not proposing that tragedy directly or exclusively shaped Moynihan's policies or that any particular text led him to a particular policy. I am offering a critical reexamination of some of his key proposals during the 1960s and early 1970s in order to demonstrate how certain literary narratives might have fed his tragic imagination and informed his sobered expectations from political action. By acknowledging circumstances that inevitably confront the human condition and breed unintended consequences that underscore the tragedy of politics, he pursued a somewhat *sui generis* politics of tragedy, uncommon among his contemporaries in public service, that sought more realistic ways for government to obviate the effects of those circumstances and ameliorate their inevitable shortcomings. While tragedy was certainly not the only (or even primary) source of his political propensities, it played an important—and thus far overlooked—role in shaping his intellectual legacy.

Politician and Poet

Widely known for his wonkishness, Moynihan was also a great lover of literature who believed “you can tell a man by his library.”⁸ As his daughter Maura recalled about their home in upstate New York: “The farm had a vast library, gathered from Dad’s collection of history books and Penguin Classics from his London years. There were shelves for poetry, mythology, literature, encyclopedias, and dictionaries of many languages. Collection of Dickens, Jane Austen, William Butler Yeats, Dylan Thomas, T. S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, Greek and Roman history, biographies of Disraeli, Gladstone, Pitt the Elder and Younger.”⁹ A friend of Saul Bellow and John Updike, Moynihan befriended the Soviet dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn during his stay in the United States (and was one of the few people invited to meet with him in his reclusive Vermont estate).¹⁰ Moynihan admired Shakespeare, Eliot, and Yeats—whom he could quote, often verbatim—and, accordingly, found the time throughout his hectic career to correspond with

⁸Daniel Patrick Moynihan, memorandum, Jan. 4, 1993, bII:39, f3.

⁹Maura Moynihan, “My Father the Writer,” in *Daniel Patrick Moynihan: A Portrait in Letters of an American Visionary*, ed. Steven R. Weisman (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), 666.

¹⁰See Moynihan to Saul Bellow, Oct. 4, 1972, and Moynihan to John Updike, Aug. 31, 1992, in Weisman, *Portrait*, 267, 592; Moynihan to Solzhenitsyn, July 11, 1980, bII:2793, f7.

Pearl Buck, Bernard Malamud, and Elie Wiesel (among other writers) and even pen the occasional book review himself.¹¹

There is no doubt that, as his critics pointed out, at least some of Moynihan's literary persona was performative and meant for shine rather than substance: a derisive *Rolling Stone* profile called him "a bouncing encyclopedia of arcane historical fact, literary reference and political lore," while Peter Steinfels sardonically observed that Moynihan's use of the same "bits of poetry" constituted "less the mark of the scholar's deep reading than the skillful essayist's literary conceits or even the politician's rhetorical embellishment."¹² A closer look at the depth and breadth of Moynihan's deployment of tragedy, however, suggests that it played a much greater role in shaping his political imagination than previously understood.

Tragedy had served as a moral compass and historical roadmap for many postwar liberal intellectuals disheartened by totalitarianism and struggling to overcome what Mark Greif called "The Age of the Crisis of Man."¹³ Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., literary critic Lionel Trilling, and, most notably, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had all imbibed the lessons and language of tragedy. Rejecting the dogmatism of earlier leftwing progressives, they embraced a more pragmatic approach that reintroduced human fallibility and sin into the political equation, afforded a central role to irony, and demanded liberals abandon overoptimistic faith in progress.¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin expressed this emerging sensibility when he observed: "If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life."¹⁵

While liberal intellectuals invoked tragedy in their historical, theological, and philosophical narratives, Moynihan, who had repeatedly crossed the Rubicon from academia into politics, had gone one step further by incorporating it into actual policy. Many scholars have applied the tragic label to describe postwar liberals—especially Lyndon B. Johnson—when reassessing

¹¹See DPM bI:462, f6; bII:10, f1; bII:15, f4. For an example of a book review see Moynihan, "A Superb First Novel of D.C. Life," *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, Sept. 27, 1970, bI:488, f4.

¹²Timothy Crouse, "Daniel Patrick Moynihan: Ruling Class Hero," *Rolling Stone*, Aug. 12, 1976, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/daniel-patrick-moynihan-ruling-class-hero-228185/>; Steinfels, *Neoconservatives*, 141.

¹³Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1952); Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949); Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Anchor Books, 1953). On the influence of tragedy on postwar liberals see Kevin Mattson, *When America Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 24–51.

¹⁵Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed. Michael Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 31.

the legacies of Vietnam and the Great Society.¹⁶ Looking back at repeated liberal failures to bridge “the gap between human intention and actual outcome,” Steven Gillon averred that “the shadow of the 1960s hangs over any discussion of unintended public policy consequences.”¹⁷ While not all unintended consequences were necessarily tragic, Moynihan increasingly came to view the legacy of the 1960s in those terms and frequently used tragic terminology to describe the period. Although doggedly resistant to the label, he did share many of the neoconservatives’ criticisms of identity politics, foreign policy, and unintended consequences of government action. However, unlike Irving Kristol and Norman Podhoretz, who remained firmly outside politics and lost faith in the efficacy of government, Moynihan adamantly believed in its potential to do good under certain circumstances. He never abandoned faith in government; instead, he sought power and, when possible, exercised it with a tragic sobriety that recognized that only policies that reflected an awareness of what government could not achieve had the potential to accomplish what it could.¹⁸

The War on Poverty

Having joined the Kennedy administration as an aide to labor secretary Arthur Goldberg, Moynihan had been imbued initially with the optimism of the New Frontier.¹⁹ Like many, his faith in politics was compromised by Kennedy’s assassination. In the wake of the traumatic event, “another side of his personality asserted itself: that recurrent, pessimistic sense of the dangers of life.”²⁰ Asked whether he had found any meaning in the assassination, Moynihan responded, somewhat theatrically, by quoting Albert Camus on the absurdity of existence, and opined: “all of us know down here that politics is a tough game. And I don’t think there’s any point in being Irish if you don’t know that the world is going to break your heart eventually.”²¹ Whether he was seeking to strengthen his own association with the fallen president by evoking their shared Irish roots or pointing to his cultural

¹⁶See Robert Dallek, “Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam: The Making of a Tragedy,” *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 147–62; Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996). For a good overview see Robert Pirro, *The Politics of Tragedy and Democratic Citizenship* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 2–10.

¹⁷Steven Gillon, *That’s Not What We Meant to Do”: Reform and Its Unintended Consequences in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Norton, 2009), 22.

¹⁸Justin Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 53–58.

¹⁹Moynihan to Myer Feldman, Dec. 23, 1960, in Weisman, *Portrait*, 50.

²⁰Hodgson, *Gentleman*, 86.

²¹John Hanley, “20th-Century Politico,” *Today*, Feb. 1964, 3.

heritage as a potential source for his tragic sensibility, Moynihan would often perform his Irishness this way and conflate it with tragedy through literary references to Irish writers such as Yeats and Joyce.

Looking back at Kennedy's legacy, Moynihan was possibly projecting when he said the president was "touched by a certain sadness at having perceived the complexity and difficulty of it all," and concluded that this led him to attempt "the achievement of limited goals." It is because Moynihan believed that Kennedy "peered into the abyss and knew the potentiality of chaos" that he attributed a tragic sensibility to his governing style. "The consequence of such a sensibility is not so much great *caution*, as great *care*," he wrote. "Those who govern will do well to provide access for persons with such sensibilities: their views will commonly prove highly convergent with and congenial to the pragmatic liberal political mind that continues to provide much that is most to be valued in the American polity."²² Noting that "Kennedy would say over and again: to govern is to choose," Moynihan, too, acknowledged that by virtue of choice there will always be unintended consequences and disappointment from government action.²³ "The Greek formula for happiness was the exercise of one's fullest powers along the lines of excellence in endeavors concerned with the issues involved in one's own time. Doing an important job in government fits that formula," he said in 1964. "Working for the government shouldn't be described in terms of satisfaction, though, because there's so much sorrow in working for government. You get too close to the insoluble, too close to what you can't do."²⁴

Moynihan's tragic disillusionment with government action was clearly voiced in the late 1960s as President Johnson's Great Society was coming undone on multiple fronts. A set of bleak speeches he gave in December 1967 betrayed how deeply the urban riots, Vietnam War, and antiwar protests informed his tragic understanding of politics. "Life has caught up with us as it will with all men, and all peoples. We collide with the realization that things do not always work out, that time is short, energies limited and overextended, options so much more restricted than we had supposed. . . . The idea of a great society has turned from something noble to something that somehow disappoints, and without even the dignity to cease trying to charm."²⁵ Because he conceded that the "impulses behind all these events are honorable," Moynihan considered their unintended consequences tragic.

And the singular quality of the onset of violence in our nation has to do with the degree to which it is associated . . . [n]ot with forces that would

²²Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (New York: Free Press, 1969), 192–93.

²³Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 14.

²⁴Hanley, "20th-Century Politico," 6.

²⁵Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Franklin and Marshall College address, Dec. 12, 1967, *bl*:207, f8.

be identified as evil, not with causes that would be seen as purely destructive, wholly annihilistic, but rather the degree to which it is precisely out of honorable and hopeful enterprises that we seem to be reaping a harvest of violence and nihilism. One begins to comprehend the unique and tragic quality of this age, the tragedy of a seeming ineluctable descent into an altogether inconceivable outcome.²⁶

Given the tragic themes of the speeches, it was fitting that he couched his address at the University of Akron in the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), from which he borrowed his title: "City in Chassis." The play recounts how Juno, her husband "Captain" Boyle, and their children, Mary and Johnny, a poor slum-dwelling Dublin family, run into an unexpected inheritance only to lose it in a grim reversal of fortune that leads to a devastating chain reaction. Since the play deals in disappointment and disillusionment with politics it is understandable why Moynihan found it useful. Invoking the protagonists' experiences, he warned that "the persistence of violence and its danger is a condition of life, not an occasional circumstance," and declared that "the whole world is in a state of chassis." He cautioned against the "almost insensate tyranny of misplaced righteousness," and employed the lessons of O'Casey's drama in a call for lowering political expectations. "From the prices we now pay for the heightened sensitativity [*sic*] and sensability [*sic*], when they are not controlled by a sense of the limits of life, the tragedies of life can become fearful things to behold. . . . The age, it seems to me, has come for us to taste a little humility in America, to understand the limitations of the time, of ourselves and of this place," he concluded. "Because the one other thing we know is that however we behave, the dangers and the failings of life will persist."²⁷

In another 1967 address, aptly titled "The End of Innocence," Moynihan pointed to "three massive disappointments" of the era: the failure to eradicate poverty, the failure to achieve racial equality, and the degeneration of "the great dream of internationalism" into "the nightmare of Vietnam." To convey his disappointment stemming from the unintended consequences of these once-promising liberal endeavors Moynihan turned to Yeats's "The Second Coming." "Those of us caught in between, increasingly deprived of self-assurance, begin to know the taste of self-contempt, and think back to Yeats and the foreknowledge of this moment," he said, before reciting the first stanza in its entirety: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned." It may be its ironic twist that drew Moynihan to the tragic poem: not only did it anticipate the dissolution of the political center that liberals tried to maintain against ascending forces of the New Left and New Right, but it offered a tragic explanation—"foreknowledge of this moment"—for the ostensibly predestined

²⁶Daniel Patrick Moynihan, University of Akron address, Dec. 6, 1967, bI:207, f7.

²⁷Ibid.

fate of postwar liberalism that had aspired, through its own innocence of government social engineering, to build a Great Society, but ended up, in his eyes, unintentionally unleashing anarchy, violence, and war.²⁸

To justify his stiffening political realism, Moynihan turned to Yeats's obscure one-line poem about Charles Stewart Parnell, the nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish national leader in the House of Commons: "Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man: Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone." "There is only one political poem of the twentieth century I consider worth remembering, and that is Yeats's 'Parnell,'" Moynihan admitted in 1973. "But who save a poet who has been a senator will say so? This is the knowledge life gives us, and it is indispensable to politics."²⁹ His lifelong admiration for the poem seems intelligible: mirroring Yeats's own skepticism toward the efficacy of political reform and revolution, Moynihan feared that America's poor were condemned to continued hardships despite the promises of the Great Society because social transformation was inevitably slow and disappointing.³⁰

It is worth considering how the tragic vision that increasingly colored Moynihan's political outlook during this period might have informed his sociological analyses of poverty. Although Moynihan never embraced a pessimistic fatalism about government's ability to enact social change, his tragic imagination helped temper its scope and limit its possibilities. This cautious approach to politics can be inferred from his consistent embrace of a tragic sense of limitation that was couched in the language and logic of tragedy (i.e., the sequential connection between ignorance, hubris, irony, *peripetia*, and unintended consequences of government action). As early as 1964, when Johnson's War on Poverty was getting underway—the massive legislative effort to eliminate poverty and expand welfare through federally funded programs like Head Start and food stamps and the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO)—Moynihan, as assistant secretary of labor for policy planning and research, increasingly viewed combating poverty and inequality in nearly fatalistic terms:

There is a famous exchange that took place between Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway that I believe has unappreciated sociological significance. Fitzgerald declared, "The very rich are different from you and me." Hemingway answered, "Yes, they have more money." . . . It was Fitzgerald, however, who was actually the more perceptive social analyst. The inheritance of great wealth for several generations changes the personality of its possessors, so that they are not simply poor men with money. Similarly, to live in poverty over generations produces a

²⁸Moynihan, Franklin and Marshall College address.

²⁹Moynihan, *Coping*, 31.

³⁰On Moynihan's enduring admiration for Yeats see Hodgson, *Gentleman*, 188; Moynihan, "Dear New Yorker" newsletter, Sept. 1, 1986, bII:2788, f4, and July 4, 1989, bII:2790, f6.

personality of impoverishment that makes the poor much less than simply well-to-do men without money. We cannot approach the problem of poverty constructively without realizing that the very poor are, as an end result of their prolonged poverty, often very different from the majority of us.³¹

The “sociological significance” that Moynihan found in the Fitzgerald-Hemingway exchange might have conflated tragedy with conditioning and habituation in a literary-sociological synthesis that came to view poverty as an “immoral inevitability,” one that could still be altered—even if not entirely overcome. Influenced by anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s seminal, though highly contested, “culture of poverty” theory that attributed deep cultural ramifications to systemic poverty in ways that affect individuals not only materially in the short term but behaviorally in the long one, Moynihan interpreted the unintended consequences of poverty in pathologic ways as a cyclical pattern predetermined by mutually reinforcing structural forces (socioeconomic, cultural, psychological), that, regardless of individual agency or ambition, combine to perpetually condition the fate of the poor.³² This did not mean that the cycle could not be broken, but rather that it would be difficult to do so.

In preparation for another speech about poverty a few months later, Moynihan’s notes reveal literary-tragic inspirations for his call to redistribute America’s unprecedented wealth. The first passage he copied out for himself was George Bernard Shaw’s remark that “there are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart’s desire. The other is to get it.” The second was the nearly identical remark by Shaw’s fellow Irishman Oscar Wilde: “In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.” For Moynihan, who like many at the time was disturbed by Michael Harrington’s shocking findings regarding the millions of overlooked poor people who still lived in “the other America,” Shaw and Wilde’s observation had more than mere rhetorical value. Endemic poverty was tragic exactly because it was occurring just as America had, indeed, “got what it wanted” by becoming affluent.³³

³¹Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Morality of Work and Immorality of Opportunity,” March 25, 1964, bI:97, f14.

³²Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Professors and the Poor,” in *On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, ed. Daniel P. Moynihan (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 3–35; Oscar Lewis, “Culture of Poverty,” in *On Understanding Poverty*, 187–200. For critical reviews see David Harding, Michele Lamont, and Mario Small, “Reconsidering Culture and Poverty,” *AAPSS* 629, no. 1 (May 2010): 6–27.

³³Daniel Patrick Moynihan, notes for address at the New York Democratic Club, June 10, 1964, bI:98, f10. Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

An early critic of the War on Poverty, Moynihan, who temporarily left government for academia in 1965, first at Wesleyan then at Harvard, located what he considered to be the "fatal flaw" in government's ability to "control events" not in a lack of good will but in the denial of reality. Pointing to "an absence of data," Moynihan complained that "there is hardly two bits worth of reliable information" about the effects of poverty and criticized OEO's presumption to know what it did not and subsequently aspire to control events it could not.³⁴ Although his critique of a lack of empirical evidence is that of the social scientist, the focus on political hubris is possibly that of the tragedian wary of government endeavors to try and control forces beyond its control. In 1968, as the War on Poverty was floundering and the administration entered its twilight, he wrote, "the advent of the Johnson manner, with its justified pride and preoccupation with legislative maneuver, moved matters much too precipitously. . . with ominously little attention paid in between to the question of what exactly was the problem to be solved."³⁵ Lamenting what he called "OEO's tragedy,"³⁶ he repeatedly faulted its administrators with ignorance and hubris, since their errors "lay to a considerable degree in presumed knowledge as to the nature of social processes and social change."³⁷ What was missing, Moynihan warned, was not just sufficient data to tackle social problems, but a humility to concede such insufficiency: "The essential fact is that our present concern for this cluster of social issues and the amount of resources being allocated to it are wholly disproportionate to our knowledge of the subject."³⁸

In *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (1969) and a series of articles published in *The Public Interest*, Moynihan systematically interrogated the War on Poverty with the language and logic of the tragic imagination.

Wishing so many things so, we all too readily come to think them not only possible, which very likely they are, but also near at hand, which is seldom the case. We constantly underestimate difficulties, overpromise results, and avoid any evidence of incompatibility and conflict, thus repeatedly creating the conditions of failure out of a desperate desire for success. More than a weakness, in the conditions of the present time it has the potential of a fatal flaw.³⁹

He believed that flaw to be exemplified in Community Action Programs (CAP) and the cadre of grassroots activists, administrators, and social workers who carried them out.

Committed to old-fashioned urban politics, Moynihan feared delegating responsibility and resources directly to communities and suspected that

³⁴Moynihan, "Professors and the Poor," 26.

³⁵Ibid., 10.

³⁶Ibid., 16.

³⁷Ibid., 21.

³⁸Ibid., 26.

³⁹Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, xii.

relying on grassroots organizations like Mobilization for Youth (MFY) and Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited (HARYOU) to battle crime, promote education, or provide healthcare would lead to self-defeating unintended consequences. "A somewhat ironical turn of events in this area is the role the community action programs are playing in recreating the ethnic political-social organizations of the big city slums—the dismantling of which was for so long the object of political and social reformers in the United States!"⁴⁰ Rather than enhance democracy, grassroots reformers unintentionally undermined it by causing "a decline in the moral exhilaration of public affairs."⁴¹ Warning that CAP administrators were "going to play god with other persons' lives,"⁴² he wrote that "a final irony, and in its many ramifications a fateful one, is that the Federal antipoverty warriors, for all their desperately good intentions, got previous little thanks. Each local conflict solved seemed to bear the seeds of the next one."⁴³ Moynihan went on to add that "their program survived, but only just," and wrote that "it remains to be seen whether it can do what is promised for it, just as we may discover to our sorrow that 'participatory democracy' can mean the end of both participation and democracy."⁴⁴ Although such a critique does not have to emerge from a tragic outlook, the recurring emphasis on ignorance, hubris, humility, irony, and fate in Moynihan's analysis of unintended consequences suggests how the sociological and the tragic imaginations have merged to reinforce and complement each other.

In a notable speech before Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) advocating a "politics of stability," Moynihan poignantly referenced Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* to elucidate the causes of the urban riots ravaging America at the time. Bemoaning an unwillingness to acknowledge the misery of the African American underclass, he called on liberals to face up to "the realities of life," and observed:

This situation of the Negro masses today is startlingly like that of Yank, the quintessential, apolitical proletarian stoker in one of Eugene O'Neill's plays. Determined to make the world of the first class passengers acknowledge his existence, he makes his way to Fifth Avenue and the Fifties and begins jostling top-hatted gentlemen and insulting bejeweled, befurred ladies, but can elicit nothing but politeness, which is in truth a refusal to acknowledge that he is what he knows himself to be. He is driven mad by 'I beg your pardons,' turns finally violent, and in the end is destroyed.⁴⁵

⁴⁰Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Professionalization of Reform," *Public Interest*, Fall 1965, 13.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 16.

⁴²Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, 168.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 140.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁵Daniel Patrick Moynihan, address to Americans for Democratic Action, Sept. 23, 1967, BI:206, f2.

The reference to *The Hairy Ape* possibly illuminates the hubris Moynihan attributed to CAP's liberal reformers and the manner in which he felt such attitudes could lead to unintended consequences. The play recounts how Mildred Douglas, a privileged heiress-turned-social-worker, traveling to England to "study" the working classes, asks to go down to the ship's engine room and observe the workers. Once there, she is horrified by the sight of Yank, a big, brute, hairy man, and shouts "Oh, the filthy beast!" before fainting. Her reaction scars Yank deeply and sets in motion a chain of events that causes him to self-destruct; he is beaten, arrested, and finally killed by an ape. The metaphorical *peripeteia* aptly reflects Moynihan's tragic judgment of CAP: the social worker dedicated to saving the poor ends up unintentionally hurting them.⁴⁶

It is important to treat Moynihan's criticisms of CAP with some caution. Despite a historiography that has harshly portrayed the War on Poverty as fundamentally flawed since it was, in the words of one historian, "declared but never fought," and that has treated CAP as a hodgepodge of ill-conceived, mismanaged, and underfunded programs, a revisionist narrative that sheds a more nuanced, more favorable light on its legacy has revealed the profound grassroots contribution, material and cultural, that CAP made to the lives of many disadvantaged Americans.⁴⁷ Moynihan possibly failed to see this because, among other reasons, his political vision was already clouded by tragic sensibilities that circumscribed his expectations from what government could and should try to achieve.

Moynihan's Report

Moynihan's tragic understanding of the War on Poverty informed his approach to racial inequality. An early proponent of liberalism's ambitious goal of guaranteeing African Americans not just political but economic equality, Moynihan still feared that the unbridgeable gap between what was promised by the federal government and what could realistically be appropriated by Congress threatened to impede racial progress by virtue of its failure to meet rising expectations.⁴⁸ In the wake of the 1966 midterm elections, he wrote that "it appears that the nation may be in the process of reproducing

⁴⁶Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*, in *Four Plays by Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Signet, 1998), 273.

⁴⁷Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 270. For a critique see Amity Shlaes, *Great Society: A New History* (New York: Harper, 2019). For revisionist narratives see Mark Krasovic, *The Newark Frontier: Community Action in the Great Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Noel Cazenave, *Impossible Democracy: The Unlikely Success of the War on Poverty Community Action Programs* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

⁴⁸On racial liberalism see Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights*, 47–55.

the tragic events of the Reconstruction: giving to Negroes the forms of legal equality, but withholding the economic and political resources which are the bases of social equality."⁴⁹ Employing tragedy not merely as a rhetorical tool but as an analytic one, Moynihan claimed that "it was unavoidable that some such shift in [the public's] attitude should have occurred eventually; the tragedy is that it came before the true destiny (if such terms are permitted) of this moment in history was fulfilled. Negroes did get a good deal out of this period. But not enough. They now have enforced legal rights as never in their history, but they remain terribly weak in economic and social terms." The apparent failure of the War on Poverty, which Moynihan called "the moment lost," to uplift African Americans in an era of prosperity appeared so tragic precisely because it was so avoidable. "The misery is that it did not have to happen. The moment came when, as it were, the nation had the resources, and the leadership, and the will to make a *total* as against a partial commitment to the cause of Negro equality. It did not do so," he claimed. "For a moment it had seemed this could be avoided. . . . But the destiny reasserted itself."⁵⁰

Moynihan's tragic understanding of racial liberalism potentially sheds new light on one of the most salient chapters of his public life: the Moynihan Report. No incident in his career had been more consequential than his infamous report on the African American family. Officially titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), the report that would haunt him sought to explain the dire social conditions of urban blacks by the breakup of the family and predominance of female-headed households. It also reflected the semideterministic fears that the Fitzgerald-Hemingway dispute possibly animated in Moynihan, who came to believe that socialization—in a way, almost like predestination—was dooming the fate of African Americans. Daniel Geary has argued that the public firestorm that followed the report "resulted not from critics' misunderstanding of Moynihan's reformist intentions, but from the report's ambiguities that allowed multiple interpretations."⁵¹ Reevaluating the report as a tragic narrative as well as a sociological one offers yet another interpretation that reframes it, at least partly, as a political expression of Moynihan's tragic imagination. Such reconceptualization seeks not to defend or condemn its problematic and erroneous conclusions, but to understand how Moynihan might have reached them.

Moynihan's adherence to social scientific data seems to have merged with his tragic sensibilities to fuel skeptical foresight. The myriad graphs and datasets in the report detailing unemployment figures, education levels, rising poverty rates, crime, and out of wedlock births in Moynihan's eyes bode ill

⁴⁹Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The President & the Negro: The Moment Lost," *Commentary*, Feb. 1967, 31–45, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/daniel-moynihan/the-president-the-negro-the-moment-lost/>.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹Geary, *Beyond the Moynihan Report*, 4.

for the future of African Americans, much as the earlier experiences of slavery, Reconstruction, and segregation—all of which he repeatedly points to—had nearly ensured a grim destiny for many. Believing that “the family is the basic social unit of American life. . . it is the basic socializing unity,”⁵² he feared that its systematic destruction under slavery had caused a chain reaction that undermined employment opportunities and access to education, while facilitating crime, delinquency, and broken families, effectively guaranteeing many a life of misery and hopelessness. Persuaded by data that “low education levels in turn produce low income levels, which deprive children of many opportunities, and so *the cycle repeats itself*,”⁵³ Moynihan suggested a “tangle of pathology” was at work—a self-perpetuating cyclical pattern of poverty that, given the social circumstances into which more and more blacks were born, ensured in tragic form they would be destined to repeat it. “Most Negro youths are in *danger* of being caught up in the tangle of pathology that affects their world, and probably a majority are so entrapped.”⁵⁴

For Moynihan, the cycle could be broken through structural reforms and mass employment by the federal government. His normative assumptions about race and gender understandably sparked criticism—for instance, the idea that the white middle-class family was the standard to which African Americans should aspire or the premise that the matriarchal family was undesirable. But it is worth considering just how limited were the actual solutions Moynihan proposed, relative to the deep structural problems he uncovered. Already in the opening passage, the report sets out to temper expectations about what government can achieve: “Being Americans, they will now expect that in the near future equal opportunities for them as a group will produce roughly equal results, as compared with other groups. This is not going to happen.”⁵⁵ Evoking William Faulkner’s observation that “there is no such thing as equality *per se*, but only equality *to*: equal right and opportunity to make the best one can of one’s life within one’s capability” to substantiate his call for lowering expectations, Moynihan invoked government aid as the principal source for such opportunity.⁵⁶ “It was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people,” he concluded. “Although that will has reasserted itself in our time, it is a resurgence doomed to frustration unless the viability of the Negro family is restored.”⁵⁷

⁵²Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Moynihan Report*, in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, ed. Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey (Boston: MIT Press, 1967), 51.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 76.

That the only policy-oriented chapter, “The Case for National Action,” is the last and shortest (barely a page and a half) is reflective of Moynihan’s sober approach that emerges, almost organically, out of his tragic diagnosis. Having claimed that “this problem may in fact be out of control,” he proposed a vague solution that urged a coordinated national effort “designed to have the effect, directly or indirectly, of enhancing the stability and resources of the Negro American family.”⁵⁸ However bold his commitment to massive federal intervention, there remains a tragic awareness on Moynihan’s part of the profound challenges such intervention would face, tempering his expectations of just how effective it would prove. “Where we should break into this cycle, and how, are the most difficult questions facing the United States,” he wrote in closing. “Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American. At this point, the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world. The cycle can be broken only if these distortions are set right.”⁵⁹

One of the report’s sharpest critics was the novelist Ralph Ellison, who took issue with its racial and patriarchal assumptions, which he associated with the “new apologists for segregation.”⁶⁰ Addressing the social role of novelists, Ellison criticized the report indirectly and rejected taking a purely sociological approach at the expense of the literary imagination:

But if a Negro writer is going to listen to sociologists—as too many of us do—who tell us that Negro life is thus-and-so in keeping with certain sociological theories, he is in trouble because he will have abandoned his task before he begins. If he accepts the clichés to the effect that the Negro family is usually a broken family. . . he’ll never see the people of whom he wishes to write about. He’ll never learn to use his own eyes and his own heart, and he’ll never master the art of fiction.⁶¹

The irony is that Moynihan agreed with him: he, too, sought to combine the literary and the sociological imaginations, believed that literature was a vital tool for understanding social complexity, and appreciated that novelists like Ellison led the way for sociologists, not the other way around, in highlighting the tragic foundations of racial inequality. Writing in 1969 about the shift in public opinion that heralded liberalism’s collapse, Moynihan noted that “as with any great change in belief. . . artists and writers had been the first to sound the warning.”⁶² In an exchange, decades later, with John Updike, Moynihan took pride in the fact that the warnings of the Moynihan Report had found earlier expression in the “disillusioned insights” of black writers

⁵⁸Ibid., 93–94.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Daniel Patrick Moynihan, draft letter to *Harper’s* magazine, May 22, 1967, b1:426, f3.

⁶¹Ralph Ellison, “A Very Stern Discipline: An Interview with Ralph Ellison,” *Harper’s*, March 1967, 76.

⁶²Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, 7.

themselves. He sent Updike a Xeroxed page from Ronald Berman's *America in the Sixties: An Intellectual History*, highlighting a passage on the Moynihan Report which claimed that black writers like Ellison, James Baldwin, and Claude Brown had anticipated Moynihan by alerting audiences to the tragic consequences of the breakup of the black family: "The novelists were more honest than the politicians—they were in fact alone among Negro professionals . . . in their insistence that the quality of Negro life was tragic."⁶³

Despite the report's attention to structural factors, Moynihan's critics have long taken issue with his essentialist focus on the family at the expense of other causal effects, notably those of structural racism, claiming that his approach was patronizing and that it facilitated new forms of racism that "blame the victim."⁶⁴ But Moynihan's insistence that only massive government aid to help reconstitute the black family could finally break the cycle might be best explained in terms of his belief that black family life proved tragic because it was trapped in a cycle of misery historically conditioned by structural racism.

Rethinking Moynihan's positions on race through his tragic imagination might also prove useful for revisiting his much-maligned suggestion to President Nixon in 1970 that the administration enact a policy of "benign neglect" on issues of race. James Patterson has suggested that "Moynihan's unfortunate habit of phrasing things in ways that could be misconstrued" got him into trouble here.⁶⁵ But what appears as a retreat from racial progress could be reinterpreted as another preemptive policy response to fears of unintended consequences driven by Moynihan's tragic-sociological approach. If government efforts to ameliorate the economic plight of African Americans ended up unexpectedly backfiring—*peripeteia*—by fueling white backlash, alienating moderate liberals, and deepening frustrations among blacks understandably fed up with the government's unwillingness to meet their demands for social justice, then maybe alternative means were necessary to achieve similar ends.

It was within this wider context of the urban riots and subsequent bellicose conservative backlash spearheaded by right-wing populists like George Wallace and Nixon himself that Moynihan wrote the infamous memo in which he outlined a policy for tackling African American inequality, what he considered "the central domestic political issue."⁶⁶ The memo's basic

⁶³Moynihan to Updike, Aug. 31, 1992, bII:32, f6.

⁶⁴Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights*, 79–109; Greenbaum, *Blaming the Poor*, 1–67.

⁶⁵Patterson, *Freedom*, 126.

⁶⁶See Steven Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unravelling of American Liberalism* (New York: Basic, 2018); Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Mary Edsall and Thomas Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: Norton, 1992).

premise was that “in quantitative terms, which are reliable, the American Negro is making extraordinary progress. In political terms, somewhat less reliable, this would also appear to be true. In each case, however, there would seem to be countercurrents that pose a serious threat to the welfare of the blacks.”⁶⁷ Navigating this dilemma of how to continue with material progress in terms of employment, income, and education without succumbing to reactionary countercurrents that might impede it was the rationale behind his advice. It was only because Moynihan, relying on data, believed “young Negro families are achieving income parity with young white families” that he recommended Nixon avoid overambitious programs that could create unrealistic expectations, and instead opt for “talk[ing] out the subject” and proceed gradually in ways that did not jeopardize recent gains.⁶⁸ When Moynihan concluded, “The time may have come when the issues of race could benefit from a period of ‘benign neglect’” he did so because he feared unintended consequences. “The forum has been too much taken over to hysterics, paranoids, and boodlers on all sides,” he warned. “We may need a period in which Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades. The administration can help bring this about by paying close attention to such progress—as we are doing—while seeking to avoid situations in which extremists of either race are given opportunities for martyrdom, heroics, histrionics or whatever.”⁶⁹ If the War on Poverty foundered because of ignorance, political hubris, and unintended consequences of well-intentioned though poorly implemented government programs—which is what Moynihan, correctly or not, believed to be the case—then “benign neglect” appears to be a chastened policy proposal aimed at avoiding the repetition of such tragic failures in order to promote rather than undermine alternative paths for black advancement.

A Politics of Tragedy

Some critics have relegated Moynihan’s politics to “pragmatism” and dismissed his literary sensibilities as window dressing, even political theater.⁷⁰ Moynihan himself labeled his views “politics of limitations,” “politics of stability,” and “art of the possible.” Doing so, however, overlooks just how constitutive literary tragedy was to his basic approach to politics and inverts what his experiences from the 1960s and 1970s reveal: tragedy was not a superficial expression of Moynihan’s pragmatic politics so much as a justification for them. While many liberals and neoconservatives shared his disillusionment with the turmoil of the era, few, if any, so explicitly couched

⁶⁷Daniel Patrick Moynihan, memorandum to Nixon, Jan. 16, 1970, in Weisman, *Portrait*, 211.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 213.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 214.

⁷⁰Steinfels, *Neoconservatives*, 135–43.

them in the language and logic of tragedy.⁷¹ Questions of fate, agency, irony, and hubris were organically and repeatedly woven into Moynihan's social thought and policy proposals, both in and especially out of public office. And the unintended consequences of the War on Poverty and civil rights clearly had a sobering effect on Moynihan that reaffirmed, in his eyes, the inescapability of tragedy. This also led him to search for an alternative political approach tailored to its effects—what I call a politics of tragedy.

The first core principle that can be extracted from Moynihan's tragic imagination to construct a politics of tragedy is the import of limitations in government action. "The stability of a democracy depends very much on the people making a careful distinction between what government can do and what it cannot do," Moynihan contended. "To demand what can be done is altogether in order. . . . But to seek that which cannot be provided, especially to do so with the passionate but misinformed conviction that it *can* be, is to create the conditions of frustration and ruin."⁷² The second is the need for humility in setting goals. "Government intervention in social processes is risky, uncertain—and necessary. It requires enthusiasm, but also intellect, and above all it needs an appreciation of how difficult it is to change things and people," Moynihan wrote.⁷³ It is not just making sure that resources meet the goals but recognizing what goals can actually be achieved. "Many of the Great Society programs could never have worked, and ought never to have been tried," he conceded. "We had to learn the limits of legislating social attitudes."⁷⁴ This danger of hubris in attempting to achieve the unachievable—such as altering social attitudes—shines new light on one of Moynihan's most memorable remarks. When he declared, "The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself,"⁷⁵ he was, in essence, not only raising a basic sociological and anthropological question, but implicitly applying the classic tragic dilemma to American politics: how much free will does democratic government actually have in determining the fate of society, and how much agency do institutions possess for altering ostensibly predetermined historical conditions like culture and behavior.

Third, a politics of tragedy acknowledges not just limited goals but limited knowledge and truths. "But to proceed as if that which only *might* be so, in fact was so, was to misuse social science," Moynihan averred. "It is the

⁷¹Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, 50–109.

⁷²Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Politics as the Art of the Impossible," *American Scholar* 38, no. 4 (Autumn 1969): 580.

⁷³Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "What Is 'Community Action?,'" *Public Interest*, Fall 1966, 8.

⁷⁴Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Suzanne Weaver, *A Dangerous Place* (London: Sacker & Warburg, 1979), 6.

⁷⁵Moynihan, *Miles to Go*, 63.

necessary condition of politics that action be based on insufficient knowledge."⁷⁶ In his mind, "the uses of ignorance—acknowledged, understood ignorance—are many," and therefore a recognition of government's *lack* of knowledge was integral to the efficacy of any political scheme.⁷⁷ Rather than presume to hold any certainties, government must take for granted a priori that there might be things it cannot know in advance and remain malleable enough to adjust policy accordingly in anticipation of unintended consequences. To do so required an additional quality: a holistic approach that favors policy over program. One of the operational errors of the Great Society, Moynihan believed, was embracing specific programs attuned to "simpler times," when a relatively narrow approach "was an efficient way to go about the public business."⁷⁸ He wrote that "the policy-frame-of-mind may not grasp all the interrelations and surprises implicit in social problems, but it does at least start out with the expectation that there are such, and so is not only more on the alert for signals of such problems, but also is least resistant, least unbelieving in the face of the evidence."⁷⁹ Policy, then, is preferable to ambitious programs because it takes into account the possibility of failure as a constant and, even while marshaling the whole scope of government toward transformative goals, maintains flexibility for making incremental changes that could avoid it. While each of these principles in and of itself can surely spring from alternative, nontragic sources—like freedom, individualism, autonomy, and rights—the language and logic of Moynihan's justifications and his propensity to bundle them together as complementary factors invite us to synthesize them as part of a broader conceptual framework in which tragedy is the connecting thread that plays an important, albeit certainly not exclusive, role.

Born of his tragic disillusionment with the War on Poverty, Moynihan's efforts to reform welfare and establish family allowance through guaranteed cash payments as part of the Social Security Act's Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) amounted to a chastened policy solution that reflected his increasingly "tamed" form of liberalism, especially by comparison with the more progressive liberalism suffusing George McGovern's New Politics at the time.⁸⁰ Although Moynihan was not the only proponent of guaranteed income, his dogged pursuit of it offers a useful case study for how the tragic imagination can be translated into policy. Conceived as the Family Assistance Plan (FAP) he championed as Nixon's advisor in

⁷⁶Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, 189.

⁷⁷Moynihan, *Coping*, 267.

⁷⁸Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Policy vs. Program in the 1970s," *Public Interest*, Summer 1970, 90.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁰On the break within liberalism see Jeffrey Bloodworth, *Losing the Center: The Decline of American Liberalism, 1968–1992* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 2013).

1969–1970, Moynihan eventually sponsored and helped pass a watered-down version, the Family Support Act (FSA), in the Senate in 1988. The landmark legislation, despite the onerous work conditions and job training it imposed, still provided a basic commitment—far too little, according to critics—to guaranteed income for poor families with dependent children that also expanded eligibility to two-parent households.⁸¹ Lauding it as “a new style in social policy”⁸² that “sought to change not the goals of American society, but rather the institutional arrangements by which the society sought to achieve those goals,” Moynihan believed that FAP, which reflected a reformist Nixonian *mélange* of liberal and conservative principles, could succeed where the War on Poverty failed by abandoning “self-delusion” and “naiveté born of noble purpose.”⁸³

Moynihan’s defense of it in *The Politics of a Guaranteed Income* (1973), his memoir of the FAP struggle, highlights the foundations of his politics of tragedy. First, it took cognizance of the strict limitations regarding government’s knowledge of, and control over, society. Despite the considerable social science research informing the plan, Moynihan conceded that it “was formulated in an atmosphere of sustained uncertainty” and acknowledged “that with respect to perfectly good questions, there were simply no good answers.”⁸⁴ Second, it was from this humbled position that FAP embraced equally humbled goals by insisting “that government stay close to what it knew how to do, and be rigorous in judging just what that was”—in this case, guaranteeing families an annual cash allowance rather than promoting wider social engineering.⁸⁵ By removing intermediaries, Moynihan thought government could do what it does best: directly aid those in need by incentivizing them to take charge of their fate. What was needed was “money in the hands of people and [to] let them run their own lives,” he said. “If we can’t do it, the question is whether we really still control our own destiny.”⁸⁶ Third, individual leadership and agency have primacy over technocratic foresight. “The more important contribution of social science advice was to suggest to the president that, inasmuch as there was no way to know what the correct course of action would be, he had as well choose what he felt to be the wisest and most distinctive.” Indicating that democratic leaders must sometimes make bold and risky choices without sufficient data to anticipate their outcomes, he noted that “while social science advice might tend to

⁸¹On FAP see Hess, *Professor and the President*; Brian Steensland, *The Failed Welfare Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 79–181. On FSA see Luisa Deprez, “The Illusion of Change, the Politics of Illusion: Evolution of the Family Support Act of 1988,” *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 35, no. 1 (2008): 105–32.

⁸²Moynihan, *Politics of a Guaranteed Income*, 149.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 185.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 186.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 150.

⁸⁶Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Summer of ‘67,” interview by Frank McGee, *NBC News*, Sept. 15, 1967, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-zWYA6kYRY> (at 49:00).

restrain social-policy expectations, it does not restrain social-policy decisions."⁸⁷ Fourth, critical introspection: FAP, Moynihan believed, demonstrated political maturity because of its "capacity for correction" that was "accompanied by a considerable willingness to acknowledge error."⁸⁸ This led him to conclude that "it may be that a guaranteed income will elude the Nation, that its destiny is to be Sisyphean, rather than Promethean, almost but not quite capable of fundamental change."⁸⁹ In the book's afterword, Moynihan left little doubt as to the tragic bent suffusing FAP: "Events recur, Marx agreed, 'the First time as tragedy, the second as farce.' 'Tragedy' is not so much a strong term as an exact one. It probably could not be shown that Family Assistance was *fated* to fail in the 91st Congress, albeit there was a certain inevitability to it all."⁹⁰

Although FAP died in the Senate Finance Committee in 1970, voted down by Democrats and Republicans, it offers a good example of what a politics of tragedy might look like. Informed by data, Moynihan's support for family allowance emanated from a tragic understanding of what that data signified: if government could not reasonably be expected to alter human behavior it need not even try; but since the family might be able to, the best government can do is strengthen it instead. Surprisingly, this was a radically antigradualist approach—implemented in a contained, indirect fashion. Rather than appropriate massive resources to programs with questionable results and risk unintended consequences, here was a more feasible solution tailored to the politics of tragedy: family allowance did not aspire to eradicate poverty, as previous programs had, but Moynihan believed it could strengthen families enough to partake in the socialization and accumulation of social capital that would help individuals do so themselves. Changing social behavior, almost like destiny, was hard enough; but if government was to have any hope in achieving it, Moynihan felt the family was the only viable means for attempting to do so.

In his aptly titled collection of essays *Coping*, published after leaving the Nixon White House, Moynihan emphasized the importance of factoring the risk of unintended consequences into policymaking by employing tragedy's timeless appeal for humility. "Indeed, an increasingly common source of failure in social policy derives not from ignorance as such, but from the failure to recognize and acknowledge it," he wrote. "*Increasingly it is possible to know what you don't know*, especially with regard to efforts to change human behavior, an objective which underlies so many of the social initiatives of modern time."⁹¹ Accordingly, the practice of government should be concerned "less [with] what *should* happen than what *will*,"⁹² and he insisted

⁸⁷ Moynihan, *Politics of a Guaranteed Income*, 549.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 543.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 554.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 557.

⁹¹ Moynihan, *Coping*, 24–25.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 29.

in tragic fashion that “the unexpected, the unforeseen” must guide policy-makers: “What leaders need is foresight. . . . Those I have respected most and most tried to emulate have not tried to think immensely far ahead, but only a little way ahead: their art is not that of prophesying, but of coping.”⁹³ Here, then, is possibly Moynihan’s best description of how tragic awareness moderates political ambition in practical terms: the practice of government must not be that of changing or saving society but of coping with it.

Conclusion

On the twentieth anniversary of Robert Kennedy’s assassination in 1988, Moynihan, by then a senator, marked the event by lauding Kennedy’s admiration for Aeschylus. “Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.’ Aeschylus, he [Kennedy] said, was his best-loved poet and these his favorite lines.”⁹⁴ Throughout his four decades in public office, Moynihan clearly held on to this belief; despair in politics, although somewhat inevitable, could be useful for making wiser policy decisions—especially if made in the light of lessons learned from failures past. Rather than be pessimistic about government action, what I am calling his politics of tragedy actively employed pessimism in order to improve that action, and ironically considered a heightened awareness of potential policy failure a means to ensure its success. Unlike the reactionary credo, expressed by William Buckley Jr., that conservatism “stands athwart history, yelling Stop,”⁹⁵ Moynihan was yelling something very different: Wait, contemplate, anticipate, and proceed with caution. In his eyes, tragedy was not an impediment to government action, but a compass: it did not suggest there was nothing to be done, but how to go about doing things. Realist rather than complacent, sober rather than defeatist, Moynihan understood politics to be an inherently disappointing affair, but one in which you could succeed if you limited from the outset your expectations.

Political scholars have mostly engaged literary tragedy to explore themes of “tragic wisdom” and interrogate how suffering and mourning have been employed to generate political responses that, in the words of Simon Stow, rest “on a distinction between democratically productive and unproductive mobilizations of grief.”⁹⁶ Peter Euben suggests that “tragedy drew its citizen audience to reflect on the latent pattern of their lives,”⁹⁷ and by

⁹³Ibid., 4.

⁹⁴Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Dear New Yorker,” July 1, 1988, bII:2789, f3.

⁹⁵William F. Buckley Jr., mission statement, *National Review*, Nov. 19, 1955.

⁹⁶Simon Stow, *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 5.

⁹⁷J. Peter Euben, editor’s introduction to *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 29.

doing so, “let us know that ignorance is the foundation of knowledge; mortality, the foundation of ignorance; and that all wisdom, including their own, is incomplete.”⁹⁸ A valuable source of revelation and education, political theorists maintain that tragedy was a political tool for self-scrutiny and revitalization that enhanced the bonds of democratic citizenship. But while their studies focus on more abstract ways literary tragedy and politics intersect, this study of Moynihan’s tragic imagination suggests alternative ways to express the “wisdom born of suffering” that extend previous understandings of tragedy: moving beyond a politics of memory and mourning, it offers a case study that transcends the confines of his personal wonkishness, Catholicism, or “Burkeanism” and demonstrates how to constructively weave timeless universal lessons of tragedy into the nitty-gritty of policymaking. If, as Moynihan believed, tragedy is a first principle rooted in the human condition, democratic politics must be rooted in tragedy since they too revolve around the basic dilemmas of human agency: making choices for organizing societies, managing conflict, and allocating resources. In this regard, tragedy appears a useful policy tool for minimizing risk and maximizing the possibility for a successful outcome of those choices.

The politics of tragedy seem especially relevant to American liberalism today as it employs the massive resources of the federal government, once again, to meet the challenges of Covid-19 with spending legislation unseen since the 1960s.⁹⁹ While statistics and algorithms threaten to overtake human agency by effectively foreseeing, like a modern-day oracle, how we should act, a tragic awareness has the humbling power to remind us of the fickleness and unpredictability that often dictate how we actually might act. It does not replace the quantitative analysis driving policy but confines it in a way that allows government to intervene in particular areas where it can be productive while avoiding those where it cannot. This is especially timely as the federal government is called upon to disburse billions of dollars toward myriad causes: whether it is social, economic, or healthcare policy at home meant to alleviate the devastating effects of the pandemic, or diplomacy, development, and democratization abroad, constructing policy informed by a politics of tragedy—with limited goals emanating from limited knowledge, humility, malleability, and propensity for self-correction to avoid unintended consequences—might aid in its successful pursuit of a policy that avoids eventually succumbing to tragedy.

“The sunny rationalism of the past is past,” Moynihan declared in 1970. “The times are tragic and will be surmounted only, I should think, by men capable of accepting that fact.”¹⁰⁰ Ever the social scientist, Moynihan

⁹⁸Ibid., 40.

⁹⁹Nicholas Lemann, “The Stimulus Bill Is the Most Economically Liberal Legislation in Decades,” *New Yorker*, March 13, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/22/the-stimulus-bill-is-the-most-economically-liberal-legislation-in-decades>.

¹⁰⁰Moynihan, *Coping*, 271.

acknowledged that modern politics must be driven by data; but his tragic imagination, deeply influenced by the experiences of the 1960s, called on policymakers to filter that data in a way that circumscribed what can and should be done with it. Rather than replace or undermine the sociological approach to policymaking, a tragic imagination complements it by curtailing potential excesses and anticipating potential failures. From the Moynihan Report to the War on Poverty to FAP, Moynihan kept coming back to the tragic conditions of agency, ignorance, fate, *peripeteia*, and unintended consequences of hubris, precisely because they offered a path toward more sober policy solutions in an increasingly complex era. Politics did not have to end up as tragedy. And in Moynihan's eyes, anticipating that they often do was also the best way to make sure they would not.