

# HISTORY

OF SOCIAL WORK

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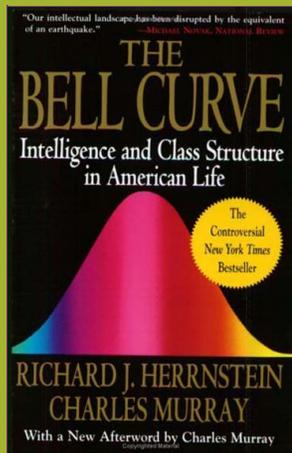
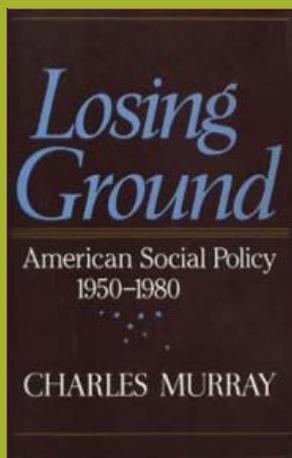
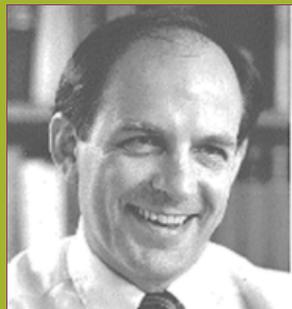
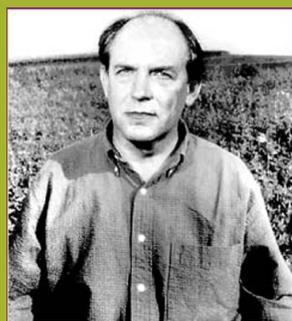
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## 1984 Charles Murray

A critique on social work and the welfare state



An overview of the history of social work not only sheds lights on the persons and facts that strengthened social work, but also on those that weakened it by voicing fundamental critique. One of them is Charles Murray. Although his name doesn't feature frequently in social work literature, it is useful to learn about his work as it is quiet influential on the political right and moulds their arguments in discussions on social work and the welfare state.

Charles Murray was born in 1943 in the American state Iowa. Thanks to his excellent school results he acquired a bursary to study history at Harvard University, after which he continued to the neighbouring Massachusetts Institute of Technology for a PhD in political science. He afterwards participated in a peace mission in Thailand for six years. It is only afterwards that he started his career as scientist at different conservatives think tanks. First he worked for the American Institutes for Research (1974-1981), followed by the Manhattan Institute (1981-1990) and since at the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute.

In 1984 Murray published his most famous book *Losing ground* in which he analysed the social policy of the USA in the period from 1950 to 1980, a time when across the world welfare states emerged and blossomed. How can it be, asked Murray, that we give ever more money to fighting poverty and there still is an increasing amount of poverty? How can we explain this paradox?

Murray used the fictitious example of Harold and Phyllis, a young couple from Pennsylvania, to illustrate the key point of his analysis. Phyllis becomes pregnant and they discuss what to do. Murray makes them consider what to do in the same situation but at two different times. In 1960 they would have married and Harold would have looked for fulltime employment. There would not be any benefits for Phyllis as there was a man in the household and an unemployment benefit for Harold would have been too low to sustain three people. Ten years later however, in 1970, Harold and Phyllis would not have married but both would have tried to get an allowance. High benefits with less requirements made it far more attractive for the young couple to rely on the welfare state than to look for work and earn their own income. By not sanctioning behaviour that led to poverty social work and the welfare state became one of the causes of poverty, Murray argued. The safety net had become a hammock.

The book *Losing ground* resulted in fame for Murray and gave many opponents of the welfare state extra arguments. Ten years afterwards Murray became even more famous by publishing *The bell curve* with Richard Herrnstein. Here, their key message was that social inequality was genetically determined and racially influenced. Their work was met by fierce criticism.

More recently, a critique very similar to that of Murray was written by Theodore Dalrymple and published as *Life at the Bottom: the worldview that makes the underclass* (2001). He argued that social work disengaged people from their own responsibilities.

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### Additional information

- Murray, C. (1984), *Losing ground: American social policy, 1950-1980*. Basic Books, New York.
- Dalrymple, T. (2001), *Life at the bottom: the worldview that makes the underclass*. Chicago: Ivan R Dee, Inc.
- Herrnstein, R., & Murray, C. (1994), *The bell curve*. New York: Simon & Schuster

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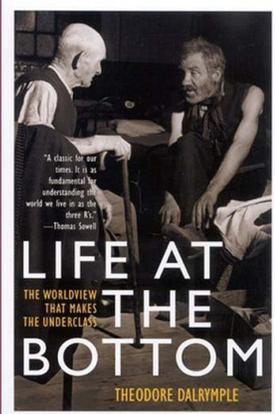
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This initiative also exists in Dutch, where it covers the history of social work in the Netherlands, in Flanders, and internationally.

See [www.canonsociaalwerk.eu](http://www.canonsociaalwerk.eu)

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- [American Enterprise Institute](#)
- [Wikipedia on Charles Murray](#)



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