Edward Banfield Revisited

Daniel DiSalvo

Many involved in the contemporary policy debate share the view that the nation is in crisis and that bold political action is needed—even if they disagree on what that action should be. Some two-thirds of the public also believe that the country is on the wrong track and that government should do something to right the ship of state.

However, even if some groups are struggling, the fact remains that a majority of Americans live more comfortably than ever before. They have better housing, better schools, better transportation, more options at the grocery store, and so on. By nearly any conceivable measure of material welfare, Americans today are living better than any group of 320 million people has ever lived anywhere in the world. And in material terms, at least, things are likely to get better for most people—even if perhaps at a slower rate than in the past.

In what sense, then, is the nation in crisis? Perhaps it has to do with social status—the extent to which certain groups feel respected and appreciated—and whether some groups are losing status relative to other groups in American society. Feeling poor or poorer would then be more important than actually being poor or becoming so. Perhaps it is a problem of ever-rising expectations: Things appear worse relative to how people think they should be. Ever-rising standards to evaluate society make it harder to feel grateful and easier to feel aggrieved. The result is what the writer Gregg Easterbrook once called “the progress paradox,” wherein things get better but people feel worse.

Such a gap between expectations and reality implies that, despite the nation’s failures in social policy, Americans have come to firmly
believe that we should have social policies—that government should do something to improve material and moral conditions. The problem is that such expectations lead to demands that government do what cannot be done, which threatens democratic institutions. Obama worship and Trump’s demagoguery are the most visible signs of such corrosive attitudes.

In such an overheated situation, it is useful to revisit the work of Edward Banfield. On nearly all of the issues that comprise the contemporary policy debate—social class, race, employment, the minimum wage, education, crime, immigration, and housing—Banfield’s work still illuminates a great deal.

Reflection on Banfield’s insights into human nature and the importance of culture provides one with an appreciation of the limits and pitfalls of political and policy reform. It also affords us the opportunity to gain insight into contemporary expectations of and dissatisfaction with American government. In particular, his thought offers a powerful case for why we should moderate our hopes and our fears about the trajectory of American politics and society.

A refresher course is therefore useful; however, such a course is unlikely to please liberals and may please only a few conservatives. Banfield delighted in debunking others’ arguments and assumptions. As James Q. Wilson said at the memorial of his mentor and frequent collaborator, “[G]etting a fuzzy thought past Ed was like throwing a lamb chop past a wolf.” This applied to liberal and conservative ideas alike. Rereading Banfield is a little like taking a cold shower—not something you want to do every day, but it’s periodically good for you.

**Subversive Arguments**

In 2003, Wilson wrote in *The Public Interest* that it was difficult to convey Banfield’s “greatness” to those who did not know him or who had not read him. In Wilson’s account, Banfield was a “prophet without honor”: His arguments were rejected when he made them but surreptitiously became conventional wisdom. In the process, however, Banfield was obscured and forgotten.

Born in Bloomfield, Connecticut, in 1916, Banfield attended Connecticut State College (now the University of Connecticut) and began working for a New Deal agricultural agency in the late 1930s. In the 1940s, the economist and former New Deal advisor Rexford Tugwell
recruited him to go to the University of Chicago to study government planning. Banfield went on to become a prominent professor of political science, first at the University of Chicago and then at Harvard University, from 1959 until his retirement. During his university career, he also returned to government service for brief periods, including a stint as head of President Nixon’s Task Force on Model Cities.

Some today might classify Banfield as a neoconservative in the original sense of someone who moved from left to right in reaction to the Great Society. But that gets the story wrong. Banfield was older than the group of intellectuals and writers that came to be known as the neoconservatives. His “conversion” to skepticism about government efforts to solve social problems occurred in the 1940s and 1950s. And it derived, in part, from reflection on his experience working in the New Deal and studying with Tugwell — not in response to the Great Society.

A number of factors contribute to the current neglect of Banfield’s oeuvre. Few of Banfield’s students went on to become prominent academics or public intellectuals — although some went on to distinguished careers in other walks of life. The area of study in which he made his name, urban politics, is now the rump of the discipline of political science. And the sorts of qualitative studies that he produced are no longer much rewarded in the field. But the deepest reason for such neglect is that Banfield’s arguments went against the grain of his time — and ours.

As he himself conceded, his arguments were “deeply subversive of opinions and beliefs to which many highly intelligent and well-informed people are wedded, and without which the world would perhaps be unendurable for them.” He rightly predicted that many would see his work as the product of an “ill-tempered and mean-spirited fellow.”

To wit, he argued that the American political system works against consistency in public policy; that political parties are useful and that attempts to reform them out of existence would have unsavory results; that most urban problems aren’t serious and those that are cannot be solved by government policy; that the logic of urban growth meant that the middle class would continue to leave the cities; that most of our race problems have become class problems; that urban riots were mostly for “fun and profit” rather than in protest of injustice; that the minimum wage harms the unskilled workers it aims to help; and that all previous attempts to change lower-class culture had failed and future attempts
were likely to fail as well. In short, he attacked the progressive faith that
government could make society more rational and more moral.

This explains why he was one of the first victims of what is today
called “political correctness.” In 1970, after publishing his most con-
troversial book, *The Unheavenly City*, he was basically shouted down.
Radical student activists disrupted his classes during a brief stint at the
University of Pennsylvania, and intellectuals attacked him in print. In
2008, a *New York Times Magazine* article reminded readers that “Banfield’s
book is widely seen as retrograde.”

If that was the reaction of the left, the right has largely ignored him.
This is partly because Banfield was not exactly a conservative in the
sense in which that term is conventionally employed today. His outlook
does not fit easily into any of the major schools on the right—paleocon-
servatives, neoconservatives, libertarians, or the religious right. While
his thought has elements that touch on the concerns of each group, the
combination is distinct.

**Philosophic Principles**

Banfield was not a philosopher or a political theorist, but he was ex-
tremely well read. His philosophic outlook emerged inductively from
his studies of the nitty-gritty of government programs, party ma-
chines, and urban politics. Yet based on observation of and reflection
on the processes of government, Banfield developed some principles.
He would say toward the end of his career, “I am a vintage Burkean.”
His Burkean outlook combines a skepticism of the power of reason
in politics, a recognition of the complexity of society, and a fear of
unintended consequences with a deep respect for politics and even
for politicians.

For instance, in an essay on the American founding, Banfield argued
that far too much stress is placed on the notion that the Constitution
emerged from “reflection and choice” rather than “accident and force,” in
Alexander Hamilton’s famous phrase in the Federalist Papers. In his view,
the Constitution was an accident, albeit a happy one, which is why the
founders so quickly set to work in altering their creation or supplementing
it with new institutions, such as political parties, that were unmentioned
in the document. Rationalism has serious limits in politics.

The reason for such conclusions was Banfield’s low (but solid) estima-
tion of human nature and its prospects for improvement. “[T]he only
appropriate [view] for the political thinker,” he asserted, is that man is “by nature mainly a creature of passions and only incidentally one of reason,” and that his “overriding passion is to be admired.” The selfish nature of man means that reason’s power in society is likely to be limited. Conflict is therefore “the central, ineradicable fact of life,” and reasonable discussion can never be the basis of social order. Deliberative democracy is a delusion.

He argued that we can rarely, if ever, make important social changes intentionally. The most we can do is make minor changes at the margins. Change is likely to be slow and seldom develops according to government plan. Culture matters — and culture responds slowly, if at all, to material shifts and the alteration of economic incentives. Government cannot teach virtue. It cannot change human nature for the better. We can merely hope for happy accidents.

Politics makes more claims on morality than the other way around. As Banfield put it, “the world cannot be ruled according to the Sermon on the Mount or the principles of the Quakers.” He had a congenital dislike of moralists and concerted moral reform. This perhaps explains why Banfield was never much disturbed by changing moral standards. He was never drawn to the arguments of social conservatives that society could or should be remoralized. Banfield preferred to observe human behavior unsentimentally.

Leo Strauss, Banfield’s colleague for a time at the University of Chicago, lamented his inability to persuade his friend to take seriously the idea of natural law. For Banfield, the argument was apparently too high-minded, too rationalistic, or both. And he was not a religious man. James Q. Wilson recalled that once, after spending some time reading biblical works, Banfield remarked that “religion might be a good idea if its leaders did not write such nonsense.” Yet he was impressed with the energy of the Mormons in Utah and intrigued by how their religious beliefs appeared to shape their actions. While he thought that religion was an important force in society for encouraging people to think of some things as sacred, he also thought that culture would largely go its own way.

Nor did Banfield think much of the libertarian notion of spontaneous order. He thought that individual freedom and social order were in tension. Releasing human selfishness was more likely to lead to conflict than to harmony, since liberated individuals were more likely to fight
than cooperate; therefore, relaxing constraints on individuals was unlikeliness to serve the general good. So while studying and working at the University of Chicago, and even befriending Milton Friedman, he was never drawn to the “Chicago School” of economics.

Not seeing social order as either spontaneous or as the product of reasoned calculation led Banfield to a central question: Why do people cooperate? Cooperation is a perennial problem for any society. Banfield first alighted on it in his doctoral dissertation, which was published in 1951 as a book entitled Government Project. It was an in-depth case study of the New Deal Resettlement Administration’s efforts to create a cooperative farm in Casa Grande, Arizona. Banfield found that, despite federal bureaucrats’ best efforts, they could not get the farm to work. The sticking point was that the farm, even if it was in the best economic interests of the farmers, could not “satisfy all the claims to status and power that were made upon it.” Banfield argued that “the settlers were unable to cooperate with each other and with the government because they were engaged in a ceaseless struggle for power.” Vanity bested reason, and politics trumped economics.

Cooperation required trust, ideas of reciprocity, and notions of mutual aid. Banfield became interested in where these things came from. He came to believe that they came, over a long period of time, from the development of culture. For Banfield, culture comprised the different ways groups of people live and think. A culture was defined by patterns of behavior based on sentiments, values, beliefs, and ideas.

Banfield most fully developed the importance of culture in a study of a village in southern Italy, published in 1958. In The Moral Basis of a Backward Society, he argued that the region was poor because its culture inhibited cooperation and not because of insufficient government involvement or economic exploitation. What he labeled “amoral familism” — an ethos whereby all the villagers sought to “maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family” — prevented people from cooperating and inhibited the improvement of the society. Banfield compared this community to the Mormons of St. George, Utah. The contrast was striking: The Utahans cooperated continuously, while the southern Italians rarely did.

This recognition of the power of culture led Banfield to elevate politics and politicians over plans and planners, an approach that came to the fore in his study of Chicago. In a 1955 book written with Martin
Meyerson called *Politics, Planning, and the Public Interest*, Banfield and Meyerson explained why public housing in Chicago, as designed by city planners, was doomed to fail: The planners could not manage disagreement among the various interested parties — instead, their plan took precedence over all other concerns.

In contrast to experts engaged in rational planning, politicians are responsible for managing conflict among people. Planners must ignore or suppress disagreement lest it interfere with the plan, which is conceived to be the expression of the general good arrived at by rational reflection. Politicians, on the other hand, act as brokers among individuals and groups that are unwilling or unable to subordinate their own interests to the general interest. Politicians can induce cooperation, but the results rarely conform to any plan. And cooperation requires prudence to craft deals among contending parties. According to Banfield, this is the unique art of politics and isn’t something that can be taught in public-policy programs. Instead, “[w]hat the political leader requires is not policy science but good judgment — or, better, the union of virtue and wisdom that the ancients called prudence.”

Chicago again provided the testing ground for these theories. In his 1961 book *Political Influence*, Banfield dissected how the politicians that made up the Democratic Party machine in the city, led by the mayor, slowly but methodically led the contending parties in any dispute to some sort of accommodation. Instead of planning, outcomes emerged organically. Banfield judged the results favorably. “[I]f the outcomes are considered apart from the seemingly ‘irrational’ way in which they were reached,” he stated, “one might conclude that the political system is remarkably effective.” Rational planning from the center could not have improved them, and probably would have resulted in worse. In contrast, many Chicago housing projects built by the planners of the 1950s have been declared failures and demolished.

Banfield did not, therefore, view politics as a necessary evil like some libertarians, but saw that there is ultimately something noble about the grubby business of politics. Banfield had an Aristotelian appreciation of politics as an arena for the development of human excellence. Therefore, politics should not, indeed cannot, be replaced by technocratic solutions, high moral principles, or the operations of markets. It is a key dimension of human flourishing with a sphere all its own. That sphere, however, is not necessarily rational; it is often immoral, and is very often
inefficient. Yet, it retains an intrinsic dignity. Politics is the only way to manage the rival views held by different groups in society. And those doing the managing deserve a measure of praise rather than excessive blame for society’s ills.

THE AMERICAN SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT

Banfield studied the politics of the United States most intensely. He concluded four essential things about American politics, all of which remain relevant. One was that the most salient characteristic of the American system of government was its “extreme fragmentation of formal authority.” Another was that the key actors in American politics are not poorly informed voters in periodic elections but well-informed, organized interests with long time horizons. The third was that the organization of the nation’s institutions did not “allow of more than a dash of consistency in policy.” Finally, the upper-middle class was the primary supporter of “reforms” meant to make political life more closely adhere to ideal standards of deliberative democracy or majority rule.

Formal authority was (and remains) fragmented because the founders designed the Constitution to divide and disperse power. Federalism in particular worked to decentralize and obscurely allocate power. One consequence of this arrangement was widespread public participation—or “interference”—in the affairs of government. Another was that there was “no place for the making and carrying out of comprehensive, internally consistent plans.” Fragmentation, planning, and participation are combustible elements that can’t be combined. Rational policymaking simply cannot happen in a system with separation of powers and federalism. Instead, when government acts it is on the basis of compromises hammered out among competing interests.

Contrary to the founders, however, Banfield did not view federalism as a serious check on centralized government power—quite the contrary. Banfield held that it was “futile to try to limit government to some defined sphere.” The reason was that the people were simply too powerful. If popular majorities wanted something, they’d get it. Consequently, Banfield argued, “Nothing of importance can be done to stop the spread of federal power, let alone to restore something like the division of powers agreed upon by the framers of the Constitution.”

In the contest for command, popular government would always
defeat limited government. The reason, according to Banfield, is that voters cannot be relied upon to abide by past agreements and will tend to exceed whatever limits they set for themselves. The people may have agreed to a Constitution with enumerated powers, but when the mood strikes they will find ways around that commitment. Rule of the people is at odds with rule by general principles. It’s no wonder so many arguments in politics are undertaken in bad faith. Ultimately, politics cannot be confined to an agreed-upon arena.

Conservatives in particular are likely to find such arguments depressing. But Banfield counseled that it is “pointless to deplore what one maintains is inevitable,” and that while it may be unfortunate that “state governments are well on the way to becoming...mere administrative districts...[that] does not presage any calamity.”

However, there is a deeper problem that should concern conservatives and liberals alike. According to Banfield, the centralization of power in Washington poses a more serious threat than is usually appreciated. That is, that the people, “having forgotten...the great principle of...limited government, will demand that government do what cannot be done and the attempting of which will destroy popular government itself.” Many of the themes, promises, and issues that animated our most recent presidential election should serve as notice that this danger is not as remote as one might hope.

Democratic idealism, which is usually found among upper-middle-class reformers, is also more dangerous than either liberals or conservatives often think (most of them being themselves upper-middle-class reformers). Both frequently refer to the “will of the people” or “public opinion” in some simplistic, majoritarian sense to justify their positions. Furthermore, many rely, implicitly or explicitly, on an ideal of democracy which holds that outcomes are just only if they emerge from “a reasoned discussion in which all participate.”

Banfield saw the expression of this impulse in the efforts to reform, or rather destroy, the system of political parties as it existed in the 1950s and 1960s. The reformers (then called amateurs in contrast to the party professionals) got their start in the cities and then moved up to the national stage with the Democratic Party’s McGovern-Fraser Commission on presidential selection in the wake of the 1968 election. Their goal was to eliminate all forms of power — corruption, pork-barrel spending, log rolling, horse trading, and so on — that did not emerge from a reasoned
discussion about the common good. They wanted a government that was simultaneously majoritarian, participatory, efficient, impartial, honest, and nonpartisan.

To bring American democracy into better accord with this ideal-ized view, many features of the party system had to be eliminated. In their place, reformers would construct parties that were programmatic, internally democratic, and free from patronage and transactional politics. To accomplish this, primary elections would replace party bosses in the selection of candidates. Transparency measures would abolish back-room deals. Public financing of campaigns would eliminate not just corruption but even the appearance of it. And so on.

In response, Banfield defended the existing party system—warts and all. He showed that moralistic reformers had missed the importance and efficacy of the party bosses in states and cities around the country. Paradoxically, Banfield argued, it was the parties that “have been most undemocratic in structure and procedure—conspicuously those of the United States and Britain—[that] have proved to be the bulwarks of democracy and of civilization.”

The reformers, he held, had confused intra-party democracy with results. Rather than open, democratic, and transparent procedures producing good results, they were just as likely to produce bad results. Weak, democratized parties were more likely to unleash unintended consequences and permit politicians to pursue their naked self-interest. One sees almost daily examples of this in Washington today.

Banfield warned that one result of the reformers’ efforts to bring into being an “impossible ideal” would be to unleash unintended con-sequences that would threaten the “imperfect democracy” that already existed. The reformers’ underlying assumptions were that the people were more reasonable and had more desire to participate in politics than previously thought. Yet that was precisely why Banfield believed the reforms wouldn’t work. In his view, they were premised on an overly optimistic view of human nature, i.e., that man is more a creature of reason than passion. The problem was (and is) that the American public does not (and will not) behave in the way the reformers’ simplistic defi-nition of democracy says it should.

As Banfield predicted, state party leaders disappeared, authority became more centralized, more extreme candidates were nominated for office, special-interest groups’ power increased, and trust in government declined. As
Brookings analyst Jonathan Rauch recently put it, “Our intricate, informal system of political intermediation, which took many decades to build, did not commit suicide or die of old age; we reformed it to death.”

The result is that the political parties have lost their ability to serve as brokers among competing interests, intermediaries between voters and elected officials, and institutions that could keep politicians in line. For example, political scientists Ray La Raja and Brian Schaffner of the University of Massachusetts Amherst have shown that attempts to get money out of politics have favored ideologically extreme candidates and fostered political polarization. Attempts to reduce the appearance of corruption in politics unintentionally increase rancor and paralyzed the system.

The culprit in weakening American systems of political intermediation is the upper-middle-class reformer. According to Banfield, the reformer (or activist, as we would say today) tends toward purism in his convictions, amateurism in his experience, and idealism in his outlook. He believes that all problems in America can be solved if enough effort is put into identifying and implementing “solutions.” Problems only persist because of a lack of will. The result is that the upper-middle-class moralizer tends to blame “society” for all ills; a problem that persists is “proof positive of its guilt.” Of course, “society” is not an entity that is able to permit or prevent problems. The danger of this rhetorical tic, Banfield stressed, is that it undermines individual responsibility as well as social trust, mutual respect, and civic harmony.

Consequently, the upper-middle-class reformer, Banfield argued, tends to push policy in unhelpful directions. Not only does the reformer vastly overestimate people’s capacity and appetite for political engagement, but he also assumes that any improvement in material welfare is bound to make a major contribution to combating almost any social problem. According to Banfield, this assumption, if not outright mistaken, vastly overstates the case. Yet it goes a long way toward explaining the ongoing allure of redistributive policy solutions even if they don’t (and probably can’t) pass a cost-benefit test.

In addition, the upper-middle class propagates ever-rising expectations, which means that expectations consistently outpace increases in the absolute performance of society. Things may be getting better, but the standards for evaluating contemporary conditions are always two steps ahead. Insofar as the size of the upper-middle class has been
growing, it is perhaps not surprising that society’s expectations have also been running far ahead of what middle- and lower-class Americans can actually expect from society.

Finally, the upper-middle-class ethic of altruism and community service tends to exaggerate our problems, distorting a sense of proportion. Only if the problems are big enough will we feel sufficiently moral and noble sacrificing our time, money, and energy tackling them. Only then can the reformer flex his “moral muscles.” Reform becomes more about the doer of good than about the person for whom the good is done.

**CLASS AND RACE**

Much of today’s political debate turns on issues of class and race. Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders’s campaigns for the presidency brought the dissatisfaction of working-class voters to the fore. At the same time, controversial police shootings and the Black Lives Matter movement have returned racial issues to the center of national consciousness. This being the United States, race and class are cross-cutting issues that both attract and repel each other.

In both of these areas, however, observers have been stuck in something of a rut, recurring to either structural (the changing nature of the economy) or cultural (deeply ingrained habits among segments of the population) explanations. Banfield’s thought is helpful in breaking the structural-cultural logjam on class and race issues and getting the two sides to interact fruitfully.

When it comes to class in American politics, the discussion has more often focused on the structural changes in the economy, such as the decline in manufacturing employment. Reactions to these changes are said to have inspired white working-class support for Trump and helped shift the upper-middle class into the Democratic column. In these analyses, class in American politics is based on definitions derived from education, income, age, and other demographic characteristics. It is in these terms that the electorate is sliced and diced.

Banfield, however, provided a different and perhaps more useful definition of class (although he came under fierce criticism for it). In his view, social classes are not simply groups of people with similar incomes, occupations, schooling, or status. Nor is class determined by heritable biological traits. Rather, in *The Unheavenly City*, Banfield defined class...
by a person’s “psychological orientation toward the future,” that is, the extent to which a person is present- or future-oriented. Based on their degree of future-orientation, each social class “exhibits a characteristic patterning [of behavior] that extends to all aspects of life: manners, consumption, child-rearing, sex, politics, or whatever.”

The more present-oriented a person is, the more they live “moment to moment,” lack impulse control, and are prone to “improvidence and irresponsibility.” Those who are more future-oriented are better able to maintain self-discipline, plan ahead, and persevere. Well before today’s debates about the virtue of grit and the importance of delayed gratification, Banfield argued that these values were part of the class “culture” that children absorbed at home and from peer groups. Consequently, the more future-oriented a person is, the more upper class they are; the more present-oriented, the more lower class. An important caveat is that a person can thus be of low income and limited schooling but future-oriented and therefore middle class in their culture. It is therefore a person’s relation to time that gives them a certain class culture that influences their tastes, values, beliefs, and deportment.

Banfield went on to construct a set of ideal types that are intended as analytical tools. On that basis, he offered a rich thumbnail sketch of the attitudes and behaviors of four classes: the upper, middle, working, and lower classes. A nuanced work of sociological imagination, Banfield’s approach underscored why social inequalities persist and are so difficult to eradicate. Indeed, distinct classes are among the “constraints which the policymaker must take into account and which limit what he may accomplish.” His approach has the virtue of unpacking how changes in the economy and the nature of available jobs have interacted with existing class culture in ways that explain our current predicament. Opportunity can only be capitalized on with self-discipline.

In this respect, Banfield’s analysis presaged contemporary debates about rising income inequality and diverging social classes. Robert Putnam on the left and Charles Murray on the right each describe an America that is separate and unequal on the basis of class. They identify patterns of personal behavior, family breakdown, and community dysfunction that contribute to these divisions.

To address these problems, Putnam recommends a menu of policy changes to alleviate inequality, while Murray recommends moral suasion by the new upper class. Murray eschews public policy as a useful
tool because he believes that, even if all of Putnam’s measures were enacted in full, they wouldn’t make much difference. Like Banfield, Murray holds that children’s class culture is largely formed at home in their earliest years. Short of taking children away from lower-class parents and putting them in orphanages, the limited character of state intervention is unlikely to make much difference. Yet Banfield would likely also reject Murray’s suggestion that upper-class moralizing might change the class culture of the lower classes.

In this respect, we haven’t advanced much past where Banfield left off. Social class remains a powerful force producing distinct cultures. Government efforts to change people and their neighborhoods — through universal pre-K, marriage counseling, job training, adult literacy, nutrition programs, and youth development — are likely to have limited impact. The problem is that, given prevailing political realities, little can be done that is both feasible and acceptable. And Banfield would be quick to note that when government does go in for full-scale social engineering, it produces unintended consequences that give rise to other problems.

When it comes to racial issues today, America is of (at least) two minds. On the one hand, many argue that white racism remains the primary obstacle to the progress of black Americans. On the other, surveys show a decline of prejudice, with the great majority of whites (80% or more) rejecting supremacist views and favoring integration and increased opportunities for blacks. In addition, black Americans have made undeniable progress over the last 50 years in politics, higher education, business, the arts, and the entertainment industry.

Banfield provided a cogent explanation for our current conundrum. First, the words we use to talk about racial issues often seriously misrepresent reality. Using terms like “segregation” and “ghettos” to describe black neighborhoods has led blacks and whites alike to think that white prejudice forces blacks to live in certain areas. While once true, this is no longer the case, and completely overlooks the preferences of black Americans themselves.

For instance, many middle-class blacks have moved out of the inner cities to the suburbs, as Jacob Vigdor and Edward Glaeser have shown in an analysis of census data. Overall, housing segregation is declining, and American cities are more integrated than they’ve been in a century. Meanwhile, Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson points out that
blacks express a preference for living in neighborhoods that are at least 40% black. Because that figure is more than three times greater than blacks’ share of the total population, the result is that blacks end up in neighborhoods that are predominantly black.

Second, Banfield argued that we fail to make a distinction between “historical” causes of present inequalities between racial groups in America and “presently operating” causes. Banfield asserted that racial prejudice was a powerful historical cause of great injustice in the treatment of blacks in America. It led to many current inequalities in wealth, income, job skills, education, and much more. This is what scholars Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro called the “sedimentation of racial inequality.”

However, Banfield argued in the early 1970s that while racial prejudice persisted, it was not the main obstacle to black advancement. And since that time, affirmative action has expanded in university admissions, corporate hiring and promotion policies, and government contracting. Disparate-impact tests have replaced neutral procedures as the way to detect discrimination. These policies, one assumes, partly offset lingering prejudice. Therefore, the presently operating causes that impede black success are less likely to be racial. Banfield held that education, job opportunities, and class culture are more important than racial prejudice in constraining the progress of black Americans.

Third, Banfield argued that we too often mistake race problems for class problems. Blacks constitute 13.3% of the U.S. population, but the nation currently has the largest group of middle-class blacks in the world. However, about 20% of the black population is among the country’s most economically disadvantaged. Many social problems, such as crime and poverty, are more concentrated in the latter group. As a result of the disproportionate number of black Americans who live in low-income, high-crime areas, many people mistake middle-class blacks for lower-class blacks. Unfortunately, what often appears as racial prejudice, Banfield claimed, is really confused class prejudice.

Fourth, many segments of society have powerful incentives to overemphasize the role of racial prejudice and the extent to which it constrains black people. There are leaders of the black community, such as Al Sharpton, who would put themselves out of business if they were to admit that racial prejudice was not a major problem. Whites too have reasons to stress racism in society; as Banfield put it, “It is graceless of [white Americans], to say the very least, to run any risk
of underemphasizing [prejudice],” and safer in almost any social situation to overemphasize it. Many Americans also feel that stressing the importance of prejudice can do little harm and might do some good. And “even if prejudice is not important causally,” in holding back black Americans, “it is very important morally” and should be attacked. Therefore, it is not surprising that Banfield’s prediction that leaders in American public life would continue to stress race and racial prejudice has proved true. And he wrote before the rise of multiculturalism and identity politics, which offer their own particular attractions.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

If reforms often fail or have unintended consequences, what, if anything, can government do today to address the problems confronting America? Banfield argued that we must begin by making an important distinction in our understanding of public problems. He argued that there are many problems in any society and that, while some may be important, most of them aren’t serious. Most important problems are like a common cold — you should get some rest, but it isn’t life-threatening. These problems have to do with citizens’ “comfort, convenience, amenity, and business advantage.” Think of reducing traffic congestion. An important problem to be sure, as it is uncomfortable and inconvenient to sit in traffic for hours, and it reduces economic productivity. But it does not affect what Banfield called the “essential welfare of individuals” or the “good health of the society.”

On the other hand, serious problems, such as crime, poverty, ignorance, and racial prejudice do affect those things. The trouble is that we don’t know how to “solve” those problems. We can barely take steps in alleviating them, and do so at great risk of causing other problems.

There are areas, however, where Banfield’s skepticism did not hold. One surprisingly positive exception was a change in policing that led to reduced crime. Banfield called for “stop-and-frisk,” or what came to be known as broken-windows policing, in 1970 as a step that might help cities cope with the problem. Over two decades later, such a policy was adopted in New York and other cities, and crime plummeted. Progress at the margins can be real progress.

Despite such a success, Banfield strongly argued that we should, if possible, lower our expectations about what government can do to change society for the better. In the midst of persistently unpleasant
realities, we should be grateful for the civilization we have inherited. But he was under no illusions that many people would adopt such a view, most being more likely to castigate society for its failures to live up to ever-rising expectations.

For intellectuals, Banfield’s teachings remain as hard to take now as they were in his time. Many intellectuals — of the left and the right — are committed to good race relations and greater economic and political equality, and detest arguments that their pet programs to improve those issues often do little good and sometimes even do some harm.

No one, perhaps especially upper-middle-class professionals with degrees from our finest institutions, likes to be told that his efforts are unlikely to make much difference. But that is precisely what Banfield did. More such courage to speak truth to power might reduce the fevered temperature of our current policy debates and provide a much needed sense of proportion — and humility.