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**How Conservatives Saved Metropolis**   
  
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**By Heather Mac Donald**

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Conservative ideas are responsible for the two great urban-policy successes of the last quarter-century: the breathtaking drops in crime and welfare dependency since the early 1990s. You’d never know it from members of the opinion elite, however, who have rarely recognized these successes, much less their provenance. So let’s recapitulate an epic battle about the foundations of social order, a battle that had not just a clear winner but also a clear loser: the liberal policy prescriptions for cities that many opinion makers and politicians still embrace. New York City has been at the centre of this battle because so many of the bad ideas that wreaked havoc on cities hatched there. Fortunately, so did many of the antidotes.

Liberal urban policy was based on several core assumptions. Number One: multi-generational poverty was the result of structural forces -- above all, of rapacious capitalism and racism. It could never be the result of bad decision-making or a deficit of personal responsibility. Number Two: though men were still, alas, required for conceiving a child, they were purely optional for raising one. (Corollary: the role of illegitimacy in creating and perpetuating poverty could never be acknowledged.) Number Three: low-wage work was demeaning and pointless. It was better to receive a monthly welfare check than to labour at an entry-level job. Number Four: crime was an understandable and inevitable reaction to economic injustice and discrimination. (Corollary: the police could not lower crime; only government social programs and wealth-redistribution schemes could.) Together, these four conceits composed the most dangerous idea of all: that the bourgeois values of order, self-discipline and respect for the law were decorative afterthoughts to prosperity, rather than its very precondition.

From the 1960s onward, liberal policymakers put these notions into practice, just as radical disorder was breaking out in American cities. In the name of economic justice, the welfare-rights movement, the brainchild of two New York academics, sought to eliminate all remaining stigma associated with the dole and to sign up as many people for welfare as possible. Within three years, welfare rolls in big cities had doubled. The urban riots of the 1960s heralded a decades-long outbreak of crime. A presidential commission responded to the growing anarchy in 1967 by recommending that prison sentences be shortened or eliminated and that the police focus on coordinating social services to offenders rather than on making arrests. The states complied, and the national incarceration rate dropped through the 1970s, while judges diverted offenders into social programs. Crime kept rising.

By the early 1990s, the fruits of this liberal monopoly over urban policy were in clear view. New York City homicides topped 2,000 in 1990. Drug dealers controlled the streets in the city’s poorest neighbourhoods; children slept in bathtubs to avoid stray bullets from the dealers’ gun battles. Small businesses fled the city, unable to withstand the assaults on their employees and the constant break-ins. Manhattanites posted pathetic little NO RADIO signs in their cars, hoping for mercy from the circumambient thieves. The national welfare caseload was up fivefold, as was the nation’s illegitimacy rate. In New York City, one in seven residents was on welfare. I remember interviewing an able-bodied New York man who had been mooching off his girlfriend’s welfare check but was applying for his own food stamps. “I’m going for every dime I can get out of them,” he told me, righteously adding one caveat: “If they make you work, I’m not doing it.”

But fissures in the dominant ideology were already appearing. In the 1980s, states had started making sure that criminals actually served most of their sentences. And the realization that work was a better corrective to poverty than government handouts made federal welfare reform look more and more likely. As this prospect loomed, the poverty industrial complex erupted in rage, using the very dysfunction and disorder that its policies had produced as an argument against changing the status quo. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, the architects of the welfare-rights revolution, railed against the idea of asking welfare mothers to work. Those mothers already had a full-time job, they said, simply trying to care for their children under the “jungle-like conditions of urban poverty.” Memo to all professors: that jungle is exactly what you get when you dismiss the necessity of the two-parent family, work and respect for the law.

Anticipating federal welfare reform, Marian Wright Edelman of the Children’s Defense Fund warned that it would be a “moral blot on this nation.” Congressman Charles Rangel predicted that it would throw a million people into poverty. (Perhaps he could have offered them lodging in his tax-free Dominican villa.) The most revealing comment, however, came afterward, from the Barbra Streisand Professor in Contemporary Gender Studies (yes, there is such a position) at USC: welfare reform, said Sharon Hays, embodied a “serious problem in the cultural logic of personal responsibility itself.” In other words, personal responsibility, for the academy, had been “problematized”: to hold the poor responsible for their actions was philosophically naive, whereas to subsidize self-destructive behaviour with unconditional welfare displayed philosophical sophistication.

President Bill Clinton, to his credit, ignored these doom-sayers and in 1996 ended the lifetime welfare entitlement. The same women who, the advocates had said, were incapable of working or were unwanted by the economy entered the workforce in droves. The welfare rolls dropped 66%, and black child poverty experienced its greatest drop in history. In New York City, where Mayor Rudolph Giuliani had started asking people to go to work a year before federal welfare reform passed, the welfare rolls have dropped 70%. New York now has the lowest child poverty rate of the eight largest U.S. cities. If any poverty professional has said, “Oops! I was wrong,” I haven’t heard it.

However significant the rout of the poverty industrial complex, New York’s demolition of conventional thinking about crime was even more momentous. Since 1990, New York has experienced the largest and longest sustained drop in street crime of any big city in the developed world. In less than a generation, many major felonies have fallen 80% or more. New York did this by rejecting everything that the criminology and social-work professions counselled about crime. Police Chief William Bratton announced in 1994 that the police, not some big-government welfare program, would lower crime by 10% in just one year. He not only met his goal, he bested it -- by ruthlessly holding precinct commanders accountable for the safety of their beats, by the rigourous analysis of crime data and by empowering street cops to intervene in suspicious behaviour before a crime actually happened.

Just as the liberal philosophy of exempting the poor from bourgeois standards of behaviour set up a vicious cycle of fatherlessness, crime and dependency, the conservative philosophy of universal standards set up a virtuous cycle of urban renovation. With crime in free fall across New York in the 1990s, the tourism and hospitality industries boomed, triggering demand for the low-skilled welfare mothers whom welfare reform was nudging into the workplace. Businesses moved back into formerly violence-plagued areas, creating more jobs. Neighbourhoods were transformed.

To take just one example, contemplate for a moment a small miracle that occurs around 11 p.m. each day at the 96th Street subway stop on the Lexington Avenue line: residents pour out of the subway and disappear into the darkness, heading unconcernedly home. For years, such a routine at such an hour would have been fraught with anxiety. Now, it is simply part of New York’s ordinary rhythm. But it is just such freedom from fear that cities require to reach their full potential as incubators of the creativity that Harvard professor Edward Glaeser rightly lauds.

The national crime drop of 41% since 1991 is also the longest and largest national decline in modern history, one wholly unforeseen by criminologists. It was made possible by the increased incarceration rate, which achieved its maximum effect in the 1990s, and by the spread of New York-style data-driven policing. Most significant is that the national crime rate has fallen in each of the last three years, putting the final nail in the coffin of the liberal conceit that a bad economy drives otherwise law-abiding individuals into crime.

In the last 20 years, conservative ideas, including the value of all work, which binds us to each other through the strange beauty of commerce and voluntary exchange, have done more to turn around American cities than four decades and hundreds of billions of dollars of welfare entitlements, social programs and public housing ever did. More than 10,000 minority males are alive in New York City today who would have been dead, had New York’s homicide rate remained at its early 1990s level. A policy triumph doesn’t get any more concrete than that.

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