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COMMENTARY

Architect of school disaster

The name of James S. Coleman, who died last month at age 68, probably is not immediately familiar to all readers. Yet he has had more effect on our lives than many others — even presidents, let alone senators and bishops — whom you would recognize instantly.

Professor Coleman was a sociologist of great eminence and made a long list of technical contributions to his field that are of interest mainly to specialists. For example, his 1990 book "Foundations of Social Theory" is considered by many experts to be a fundamental contribution to the field.

Two of his contributions, however, burst out of his academic study and changed the nation. We are still witnessing their effects.

They have come to be seen as warnings, terrible warnings indeed, about the relationship between the social sciences and public policy.

In 1966, the "Coleman Report" to Congress used case studies to show that black students perform better in schools that have integrated classes. That conclusion provided the rationale for massive action in the form of busing, redrawing school-district boundaries and other methods of bringing about the desired integration of the classroom. The report led to court orders and legislation designed to bring about integration as rapidly as possible.

Lost in the stampede to integrate was Mr. Coleman's opinion that black children learn more effectively only when mixed with a substantial majority of white children from middle-class backgrounds.

To be fair to Mr. Coleman, that was a crucial qualification, even though it was widely ignored.

It need not have anything to do with race, either. It seems a safe bet that if you integrate a small number of white lower-class children into predominantly middle-class schools you would improve the lower-class children's performance. They would obey the teacher more promptly, they would be more orderly, they might be more self-critical about doing bad work.

All that was forgotten in the furor to integrate the races in the classroom.

But a catastrophic "unintended consequence," as sociologists call it, blew Mr. Coleman's original rationale right out of the window. Yes, integrating schools might improve the performance of black children, but only if the racial balance was right. And Mr. Coleman had forgotten one variable: He had not anticipated "white flight."

Instead of sticking around to see how Mr. Coleman's ideas would work out in practice, millions of whites deserted the cities for the suburbs and quit the public schools for private ones.

A huge demographic change was instituted in the nation based upon a faulty rationale produced in 1966 by an earnest academic. Mr. Coleman was the architect of the "doughnut city" — black in the middle, white around the outside.

That, again, had unanticipated consequences. The tax base of the inner cities eroded. Businesses fled along with the whites. The blacks who could do so themselves fled to the suburbs. One urban school system after another became violent, anarchic and useless.

The 1966 Coleman Report, an academic theory, had hit cities across the country like so many atomic bombs.

Of course, the American academy was not lacking in theories to solve the problems academic theory had created in the first place. The academy came up with "affirmative action."

The Coleman Report and its consequences also had the effect of energizing the presidential candidacy of George Wallace in 1968. Mr. Wallace that year ran all over the nation denouncing "pointy-headed" professors and bureaucrats "who couldn't park their bicycles straight." Mr. Wallace, drawing support from both South and North, especially in the working-class urban neighborhoods, had around 10 percent of the vote and came close to throwing the Richard Nixon-Hubert Humphrey contest into the House of Representatives. If that had happened, Mr. Wallace would have had a considerable say in deciding the outcome.

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As it is, Mr. Wallace pretty much wrecked the Democratic Party. The Wallace voters became "Reagan Democrats" and handed Ronald Reagan his landslide over Jimmy Carter and his 49-state victory over Walter Mondale.

Right now, affirmative action looks as if it will finish off what is left of the Democratic Party.

Professor Coleman might easily have said, "Wow! I sat down at my typewriter, and look what happened!" But Mr. Coleman was a honest man. In 1975, he put out another study that said, in effect, "Oops, I forgot something." His 1975 study recognized the effect of white flight.

The academy is not a very gentle place. After his 1975 retraction, Mr. Coleman was almost expelled from the American Sociological Association, and viciously attacked for the predictable sins, including "racism." Senior members stood firm for him, however, and he stayed on to be elected the association's president in 1991.

The moral of the story: A little untested theory can be a dangerous thing.

The unintended consequences of theory-driven social action can be vast and perhaps irreversible.

Jeffrey Hart is a nationally syndicated columnist.