

The Bell Curve

Familiarizing the Public with the Language of Fascism

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There has recently been a lot of publicity around Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. The authors claim that IQ tests prove that African-Americans are dumber than whites, lower class whites are dumber than middle- and upper-class whites, and immigrants are dumber than native-born whites.

Along with a number of related books, *The Bell Curve* has been widely reviewed and discussed in the mass-circulation newsmagazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News*), the political publications of liberalism and conservatism (*New Republic*, *Nation*, *Commentary*, etc.), and on the opinion pages and columns of the influential newspapers. The reception has mostly been critical but respectful.

I have not read the whole book, only excerpts together with descriptions and commentary. This is not, then, a book review, but a discussion of a social phenomenon.

The USA as an Open Society?

Murray and Herrnstein admit that, in the past, inequality was caused by environmental factors of discrimination and prejudice. But now, they claim, all this oppression has passed away. Nowadays we have an open meritocracy, where individuals from all races, classes, genders, and religions rise freely to the top or fall to the bottom, based only on their intelligence. This creates a "cognitive elite" on top and an "underclass" of fools on the bottom.

The view that the USA is an open society has little relation to reality. Despite certain gains, won with great effort, racism and sexism remain deeply embedded in the structures of every institution. Class position permits wealthier parents to pass on wealth, social contracts, and the social skills and culture needed to advance in this society.

These writers are not making the standard conservative argument. The non-fascist right usually argues that those on the bottom are lazy, shiftless, and immoral: they could do better but chose not to. Therefore society has no responsibility for them; let them starve if they will not work! But Murray and company state that those on the bottom really cannot help themselves. They are simply biologically inferior. This view takes conservatism a giant step toward an openly racist, biological ideology. Its implications, never spelled out, are fascist, including forced sterilization, eugenics, and genocide.

Murray and Herrnstein are clear about the political character of their work. Murray states that he is saying openly the sort of (racist, undemocratic) comments that wealthier white people say privately. Herrnstein is dead, but Murray connects his views with attacks on welfare, Head Start, educational enrichment, and immigration, and with fear of a growing "white underclass."

Phony Science

Defenders of *The Bell Curve* and similar works argue that their opinions should be respected, even if disagreed with, because they are scientific and scholarly. Actually there is no new research presented here, just a rehash of already known material mixed with falsehoods and blatant misinterpretations.

The Bell Curve confuses two very different concepts of "IQ." (Actually, most intelligence or cognitive tests no longer use the term, but I will use "IQ" to mean "scores on intelligence tests.") One is that IQ is a measure of innate intelligence, underlying actual thinking, what people are

born with, unaffected by environment, and unchangeable over a lifetime. It is a real thing in the head (perhaps the speed of nerve conduction). This is the implicit view of Murray and other conservative ideologues.

However, this is nonsense. It is as if someone claimed to have a ruler that did not measure people's real height (caused by the interaction of their genes with the environment) but an innate, underlying Height, unaffected by their diet, and distinct from how tall they actually are.

The other concept is that IQs and other scores are test scores, created to estimate a useful theoretical concept, "general intelligence," that is not a thing but a summary of a set of thinking skills. These include the ability to learn from experience in this culture, to use language (English), to solve problems logically, to think abstractly, and to concentrate on a task. Such skills are the product of a complex interaction between genetic heredity and many aspects of the social and physical environment. This view of intelligence testing is consistent with that of the big majority of psychologists and researchers.

Obviously this set of cognitive skills does not cover all aspects of thinking or acting. It does not include thinking creatively or originally. It does not include artistic or musical or athletic ability. In fact, children may not be classified as retarded just on the basis of an intelligence test; they must also have an evaluation of adaptive behavior: how they take care of themselves and relate to others. Neuropsychologists, who examine brain/cognitive interaction, will usually add a memory test, among other instruments, to an intelligence test. Finally, IQ does not include motivation, so important to how well people do in life, and something heavily influenced by environment and experience.

The manual for the most widely used intelligence test states, "Intellectual ability is only one aspect of intelligence...[We] must distinguish between test scores or IQs on the one hand and intelligence on the other" (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children—Third Edition, Manual).

How Important Is "Intelligence"?

The bell-curve claim that intelligence test scores are important because they predict several aspects of life. Since they treat IQs as measuring innate, biological intelligence, they treat such predictions as proving that intelligence causes these things—instead of as just happening together with them.

It is true that, in general, IQs predict fairly well how people will do in school. After all, these tests try to measure just those traits most important in schools.

IQs predict, but much more weakly, how well people will do in terms of jobs and income. School-type skills and school learning are only weakly connected with "getting ahead"; useful but only up to a point. Otherwise college professors would be the richest people.

More negatively, low IQ scores predict—weakly—the likelihood of going to jail, using dope, having babies without being married, and generally doing things that are dangerous and not respectable. This "proves" little except that it is unpleasant to be undereducated, unemployed, and poor.

Racism

However the conservatives make this exciting by noting that different population groups have different average IQ scores. Thus African-Americans consistently test lower—on the average—than European-Americans. The implication is that Blacks are a biological group that is innately inferior to whites in intelligence, and that this causes Black poverty and crime.

This is ridiculous, because “racial” groups are not biological entities. Black people have quite a lot of white ancestry, as whites have a good deal of Black. Both African-Americans and European-Americans are mergers of a wide range of physical types. Nor are “immigrants” a biological grouping.

From the other view of “intelligence,” as a concept about a set of mental skills, the meaning of “facts” changes. Different ethnic and class groups have different social psychologies—each group’s common way of thinking, valuing, and behaving. Average group IQs go together with group values and behavior because they are all part of the common way of thinking, not because intelligence causes all the other more-or-less common aspects of group life.

Some social groups have been faced with great oppression, discrimination, forced poverty and degradation, with few avenues for learning or social rising. Parts—not all—of these groups respond by rejecting the values of education and by internalizing their oppressors’ view of themselves to an extent. (Malcolm X frequently spoke about this.) This has been true, not only of a layer of African-Americans but also of some Italian-Americans and white Appalachians.

Of course this does not prove that these groups are biologically inferior in intellectual ability. Nor does it show that they are “culturally deprived.” Along with weaknesses, their cultures also have great strengths. Every group—ethnic, racial, or class—has strengths and weaknesses.

Every group’s culture is terribly distorted compared to the truly human culture that a free society may someday develop.

That The Bell Curve and other such trash could be widely publicized and discussed means something politically—beyond their insignificance as science. Far-right ideas have become respectable and can be treated as part of the public dialogue by the mainstream capitalist press. Fascism is definitely not on the agenda yet, but the population is being familiarized with the basic “ideas” of fascism. We have to do our best to attack these ideas and to familiarize people with the ideas of freedom.

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