



Review

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Review Essay¹

The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life. By Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray. New York: Free Press, 1994. Pp. xxvi + 845.

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The discipline of sociology has a lot to answer for, and one of the things I lay at its feet is *The Bell Curve*. If sociologists had been more forthright in studying human intelligence over the past two decades, Herrnstein and Murray might never have written this book, or at least they would have produced a very different sort of work.

As research into the causes of racial disadvantage and urban poverty progressed during the 1960s, sociologists came face-to-face with a series of emotionally charged, methodologically intransigent but important and unavoidable issues, such as culture, intelligence, sex, marriage, and childbearing. These issues were unavoidable in two senses. Scientifically, cogent, empirically testable theories involving these constructs could be (and were) advanced to explain racial disparities. Politically, they were unavoidable because, whether liberal sociologists liked them or not, strong views about race, intelligence, and culture were widely held by the general public and politicians and formed the basis for much social policy, especially after 1980.

The way to discredit theories you do not like, of course, is to confront them directly, test them rigorously, and prove them wrong; but, in adopting this course, you must accept the possibility that an explanation you perceive as noxious might, in fact, be correct. Rather than accepting such a possibility—that culture may somehow be implicated in poverty or that differences in cognitive ability might help account for variation in social outcomes—sociologists stuck their heads in the sand and hoped the unpleasant ideas would just go away.

The situation would have been bad enough if that is all they did, but many also sought to ensure that *no one* would investigate such thorny and divisive issues. In a variety of ways, the field actively discouraged the examination of social differences with respect to culture and intelligence. For those who were slow to catch on, object lessons were made of Oscar Lewis and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and, after the treatment

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these two prominent social scientists received, no one could miss the point.

Using years of ethnographic research conducted in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and New York City, Oscar Lewis published a series of works in the 1960s arguing that poor people adapted to their structural circumstances by adopting behaviors, attitudes, and social arrangements that, while useful in their immediate environment, were disadvantageous in the wider society. In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, at that time a Harvard sociologist serving as assistant secretary of labor, wrote a report entitled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," which noted the rising rate of family dissolution and unwed childbearing in the black community and linked these trends to high levels of black male unemployment in the ghetto. He warned of dire consequences for society unless something was done to check the rapid rise in black female-headed households.

Both views implied that, under certain circumstances, the behavior of poor people might contribute to the perpetuation of their poverty, and, for this heresy, both men were excoriated by liberals throughout the social science establishment. In a gross misreading of their arguments and intentions, Lewis and Moynihan were accused of being racists who "blamed the victims" of unjust social arrangements rather than the forces and people that were truly responsible.

The calumny heaped on these two distinguished social scientists had a chilling effect on social science over the next two decades. Sociologists avoided studying controversial issues related to race, culture, and intelligence, and those who insisted on investigating such unpopular notions generally encountered resistance and ostracism.

Under these circumstances, significant gaps in the empirical research literature began to emerge on questions that were central to understanding social stratification and racial inequality in the United States. Few researchers dared to study how cultural adaptations within deprived environments might contribute to a cycle of poverty, how the disappearance of marriage within the ghetto might undermine the black community, how the welfare system might discourage work and encourage family instability, or how variations in mental ability might help to explain socioeconomic differences between the races.

As result, when conservatives surged to political power and social prominence with Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and began to advance ideas and theories that had long been suppressed by the liberal-leaning social science establishment, the record of contrary research, facts, and evidence that might have discredited those ideas often did not exist. In many cases, the studies had never been done, and, all too frequently, the appropriate data were never collected.

This is the history behind *The Bell Curve*. Indeed, one of the greatest taboos for sociologists during the 1970s and 1980s was the issue of intelligence, particularly the use of IQ tests to measure racial and ethnic differences. As a result, when Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray sought

to write a book that, among other things, connected intelligence to social behavior, they found the way clear of inconvenient facts and studies. Simply put, there wasn't a record of research to contradict most of what they wanted to say. All too often, there wasn't a record of research at all, allowing the authors to produce their own analyses, deftly tailored to fit their arguments.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the ideas advanced in *The Bell Curve*, one has to admit it is an effective book. It is well written, clearly argued, lively, engaging, and even fun to read. In many ways, it serves as a model of how to write an effective social science book aimed at the general public. The authors state their preconceptions up front and then proceed to lay out their arguments and evidence in a cogent, well-organized fashion. For the general reader, and for social scientists who stay away from the footnotes, the large assemblage of facts, graphs, analyses, and authoritative studies must seem pretty convincing.

Each chapter begins with a sketch of the book's principal arguments and conclusions. The body of the chapter then reviews the evidence in simple, declarative prose fleshed out with vignettes and illustrations from everyday experience and buttressed with numerous sidebars and graphics. Although the book contains a surprising amount of original data analysis, the text mainly summarizes results and draws conclusions, usually organized around easily understood plots of data. Methodological complexities are relegated to appendices, where they belong in a book for general readers. The appendices, however, are clear and accessible, even for nonspecialists, and they provide more than enough information for social scientists to figure out what Herrnstein and Murray did to achieve their results.

The Bell Curve develops its argument in five stages. In an introduction the authors review the psychometric literature on intelligence testing, laying out their view that there is a single psychological dimension of human intelligence, *g*, which is substantially inherited (60% is their rule of thumb) and underlies a range of other, more specific mental abilities. This conceptualization of human intelligence plays a central role in the arguments they make in the remainder of the book.

In four extended sections, composed of several chapters each, the authors lay out their case linking intelligence to class structure. First they argue that a cognitive elite has emerged in the United States. They suggest that people with intellectual ability have become progressively more isolated—spatially, socially, and psychologically—from the rest of American society. In a sharp break from the past, colleges and universities have become highly effective at identifying and selecting the brightest applicants. Meanwhile, economic forces have increasingly funneled college graduates into a narrow array of highly paid occupations. As socioeconomic inequality has increased, housing markets have channeled the smart and the not-so-smart into different neighborhoods. As a result, those with cognitive ability increasingly live, work, marry, and play among themselves.

The second section of the book attempts to establish the importance of intelligence for a variety of social outcomes: poverty, schooling, wages, joblessness, marriage, divorce, childbearing, parenting, crime, and citizenship. The authors use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to estimate a series of regression models that link these outcomes to intelligence while controlling for socioeconomic background and age. Their estimates show that intelligence is strongly related to virtually all social outcomes and that its effect is usually more powerful than that of family socioeconomic status.

In the third section of the book, the authors document differences between whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians on standard measures of intelligence and go on to argue that the United States faces a dysgenic threat because those of low intelligence are prone to have more babies and to have them more quickly than those of high intelligence. They demonstrate that those located at the bottom of the nation's socioeconomic hierarchy—the poor, the jobless, the imprisoned, the welfare dependent—are largely people who score poorly on IQ tests. They also show that apparent gaps between whites and blacks with respect to wages, college graduation, and occupational achievement disappear once intelligence is held constant in statistical models.

In the last section of the book, Herrnstein and Murray focus on U.S. social policy. Their reading of prior research suggests that little can be done to raise individual cognitive ability and that more money ought to be spent on the gifted, who have been poorly educated in recent years because of the “dumbing down” of education to make it more accessible to the less intelligent. They show that black SAT scores are far lower than white SAT scores in top colleges and universities and argue that affirmative action has produced an unhealthy climate where blacks constitute a small proportion of all students but a high proportion of those doing poorly, leading to racial tensions and a stigmatization of black achievement. They also suggest that affirmative action in the labor force has lowered the productivity of American workers and acted as a drag on the U.S. economy.

The book concludes with two speculative chapters on where we are headed and an alternative direction. If current trends persist, Herrnstein and Murray foresee the development of a stratified, class-bound society, where the smart join with the affluent to support and run a custodial state. In this brave new world, the elite will receive high-quality private services, whereas everyone else will receive poor-quality public services. The underclass will grow in size, and its spatial concentration will increase; racism will become more virulent, and the state will grow more repressive.

As an alternative to this depressing scenario, Herrnstein and Murray propose building a “communitarian” society of smaller local communities where everyone has a “place,” something like the small town of America's mythic past. Responsibility for solving social problems would lie with local authorities, who would establish simple rules of behavior

and enforce clear notions of right and wrong, thereby providing guidance and dignity to all, including those of limited cognitive ability. How such a society would be achieved in a highly urbanized society such as the United States is not considered.

The Bell Curve is breathtakingly ambitious in its scope. It therefore offers many targets for criticism: whether or not there is a general factor of intelligence; the extent to which cognitive ability is heritable; the degree to which a cognitive elite has actually taken shape; whether intelligence is an immutable individual trait; the degree to which present demographic trends are “dysgenic”; the extent to which racial differences in IQ are genetic in origin. All of these topics have received extensive attention by reviewers in the popular and academic press.

For a sociologist, however, the most interesting chapters are those that attempt to link intelligence to social outcomes such as poverty, joblessness, family structure, and crime. I therefore confine my critical remarks to chapters 5–12 and 14, which have received less attention from reviewers. These chapters are also germane to the initial observations I made about the field of sociology, as within them the authors conduct the sorts of analyses that sociologists should have been doing for the past two decades but have not.

Herrnstein and Murray use the NLSY to estimate statistical models of the following form: social outcome = $f(\text{IQ, SES, age})$. Depending on the specific outcome under study, other variables might be included as additional controls. IQ is measured using the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT), which was administered in 1980 when respondents to the NLSY were 14–23 years old. Here, SES is measured using a Duncan SEI score computed when the respondent was 14 years old on the basis of his or her family income, mother’s education, father’s education, and the occupational status of adults living in the household.

Through their statistical analyses and interpretations, Herrnstein and Murray set up a logical syllogism consisting of three premises: (1) social outcomes are strongly predicted by intelligence; (2) the effect of intelligence outweighs that of socioeconomic status; (3) since the effect of intelligence persists even when social background is controlled, differences in social outcomes must reflect, to some degree, genetic differences in IQ. They seek to demonstrate the first two premises using their models and to infer the third.

With respect to the first premise, the authors succeed in building a strong *prima facie* case for the important role of cognitive ability in explaining social outcomes. Whatever the AFQT measures, it is clearly related to a variety of important social outcomes. Moreover, some well-known racial differentials (wages, the odds of college graduation, and the odds of achieving a professional occupation) disappear once AFQT is introduced as a control factor.

The case for the relevance of intelligence as a social variable remains *prima facie*, however. The models estimated by Murray and Herrnstein are rudimentary by the standards of modern social science, consisting of

variations on three independent variables; and, given their structure, these variables are virtually guaranteed to overstate the role of intelligence relative to socioeconomic background, undermining the second (and hence the third) premise of the syllogism. This overestimation occurs for three reasons.

First, Herrnstein and Murray's measure of socioeconomic background is inadequate to the task of measuring lifelong socioeconomic influences. Intelligence is measured rather late in life, between the ages of 14 and 23, which means that it reflects a combination of two influences: the cognitive potential each respondent inherited at the moment of conception, plus at least 14 years and nine months of environmental influences. A single indicator of parental socioeconomic status at age 14 in no way controls for the cumulative effect of social inferences over many years. The model is bound to yield a lowball estimate of environmental effects.

Second, Herrnstein and Murray misspecify their models by failing to include other independent variables that are clearly relevant to the outcomes they are investigating and likely to be confounded with intelligence. In their analysis of joblessness, for example, the authors do not control for education or labor market experience, much less for variables such as school quality and neighborhood poverty, which have occupied the attention of social scientists recently. To the extent that education is correlated with intelligence, and the authors themselves argue that this is the case, then part of the apparent effect of intelligence reflects unmeasured heterogeneity in schooling. Similar arguments can be applied to labor market experience and other variables likely to influence the social outcomes they consider. In this day and age, a three-variable explanatory model is too simplistic to be convincing, especially given the wealth of information available on the NLSY.

A final problem is that Herrnstein and Murray explicitly model intelligence as an exogenous factor, assuming that it is not influenced by social precursors. This assumption contradicts statements made elsewhere in the book and underscores a recurring inconsistency throughout the text: although the authors readily admit at various junctures that intelligence stems from a mix of genetic and environmental influences, much of their discussion, interpretation, and analysis implicitly assumes intelligence is genetically determined.

A more realistic specification of their statistical model would take intelligence to be an endogenous product of socioeconomic processes that simultaneously influence test performance and social outcomes such as marriage, joblessness, crime, and poverty. In fact, recent work suggests that scores on the AFQT are influenced rather strongly by socioeconomic background (see James Heckman's review of *The Bell Curve* in the *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 103 [October 1995], for some references). Thus, part of the effect of socioeconomic status is indirect: a disadvantaged socioeconomic background lowers the chances that a person will acquire the mental traits and abilities demanded in the labor market, which, in turn, lowers the odds of employment.

The field of sociology and the authors of *The Bell Curve* thus share something in common: both are loathe to study intelligence as an outcome of processes deeply embedded within the American social structure. The difference is that sociology is reluctant to study intelligence at all, whereas Herrnstein and Murray are only too willing to study it while ignoring the social precursors. Rather than continuing its historical pattern of denial and avoidance of theories that are perceived to be illiberal, I believe that sociology should view *The Bell Curve* as a challenge—a call to investigate human intelligence as a legitimate social outcome connected to other social outcomes rather than a pariah idea to be suppressed and circumvented.

From the time of Émile Durkheim onward, a central purpose of sociology has been to connect individual attributes and behavior to social structure, and the sociological study of intelligence provides a timely opportunity to renew and reaffirm this laudable goal, which until recently has been neglected. Herrnstein and Murray have thrown down the gauntlet. Does the field of sociology have the will and the courage to accept the challenge?