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16

THE LAST RATIONAL MEN: CITIZENSHIP, MORALITY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HUMAN PERFECTION

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First Citizen—We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good. What authority surfeits on would relieve us. If they would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely; but they think we are too dear; the leanness that afflict us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to particularize their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them. Let us revenge this with our pikes ere we become rakes. For the gods know I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge.

—Coriolanus, Act I,
Scene I, lines 15-25

The opening speeches in Shakespeare's play Coriolanus launch its characters and their audience into a debate among Roman plebeians about the status and quality of societal membership offered to the lower classes in Rome. This discussion was not simply about the conditions of the people in ancient Rome; Shakespeare was addressing the issue of citizenship in seventeenth-century England. This
discussion of citizenship echoes forward into contemporary debates over identity and nation in the United States, in which Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994) is just one strand of a larger network of discourses that aim to legitimize and naturalize "white popular wisdom" (Murray, 1984), particularly regarding the inhabitants of the depressed urban centers. Taken as a whole, Herrnstein and Murray's volume is an especially disturbing register of contemporary anxiety over the boundaries of national affiliation and citizenship.

Herrnstein and Murray's book is a project of social normalization par excellence. Their objective is to call attention to the variable distribution of human mental capacity and moral virtue in American society and the implications that these "variables" have for the overall productivity and economic efficiency of the nation. As in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, there is a powerful deployment of biological tropes linked to morality and citizenship in *The Bell Curve*. In short, for these two neocconservative social scientists, high-IQ social actors are likely to be good citizens, low-IQ types are likely to be bad. A clear policy implication flows from this formulation: Society must find a way to limit and contain the reproduction of its flawed members. In what follows, we discuss *The Bell Curve* as an example of the popular medical panic prose genre (see for example, the film *Outbreak* [1995], Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone* [1994], or Laurie Garrett's *The Coming Plague* [1994], all of which deal with the threat of invasion of exotic viruses and microbes into pristine American metropolitan suburbs) and its biological treatment of the topic of citizenship. Our primary focus is to discuss chapter 12 and other related chapters of Herrnstein and Murray's book that address the topic of citizenship.

In *Coriolanus*, the plebeians speak for the alienated working classes for all times and all places. They denounce the arrogance and ill-gotten gains of society's patrician elites. But most important, they call attention to the obligations of society's rich to its poor and downtrodden and the obligations of state elites to the lower classes whose surplus value these elites expropriate:
Menenius—I tell you, friends, most charitable care
Have the patricians of you . . .
First Citizen—Care for us! True, indeed! They
ne’er cared for us yet. Suffer us to famish, and their
storehouses crammed with grain; make edicts for
usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome
act established against the rich, and provide more
piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor.
(Act I, Scene I, lines 66-67, 80-87)

Shakespeare gives the plebeian working classes a voice in Coriolanus. In The Bell Curve, Herrnstein and Murray take the voice of the poor away. Instead, society’s downtrodden are the objects of an imperial biological gaze. In the minds of these authors, the poor exist to be defined, categorized, and regulated. Whereas the plebeians in Coriolanus maintain that the issue of inequality is central to any discussion of citizenship, Herrnstein and Murray radically shove the issue of social inequity aside. For these authors, modern American society already offers equality of opportunity to all its citizens. The fact that some individuals and groups do not fare well in this open and fredy competitive system has to do with their genes, not their socioeconomic circumstances: According to Herrnstein and Murray, “Low IQ continues to be a much stronger precursor of poverty than the socioeconomic circumstances in which people grew up” (p. 127). 

And no policy intervention will change that fact.

The Bell Curve, then, is an example of theorizing from the top of the food chain. Herrnstein and Murray take advantage of the panic already constructed by neonationalist movements: the cultural literacy movement (Bloom, 1987; Hirsch, 1987), the anti-immigration movement, and jingoistic isolationist groups such as the patriot militias. They elaborate a proto-fascist defense of the existing system of unequal membership status offered to different groups of America’s citizenry. The authors pursue this objective of political inoculation of the hegemonic social order by using the discourse of
biology to throw up a blanket of ideological protection around America’s professional middle class and corporate elites. Herrnstein and Murray then point an accusatory finger at the country’s minority and white working-class poor who, for the most part, they contemptuously dismiss as mentally degenerate. They are economically poor, the authors charge, because they are poor in cognitive capital. Instead of addressing the issue of the rights of society’s most disadvantaged citizens and the obligations of the state, their focus is the issue of moral responsibility and civic duty and the needs of society for the most efficient deployment of the mental capacities of its citizenry. The view from Herrnstein and Murray’s window on the world is decidedly corporatist. Given this emphasis, the authors write off the lower classes as the tragic ballast weighing down the ship of the state.

Interestingly, in Shakespeare’s Coriolanus, it is Menenius, the apologist for Rome’s patrician elite, who, like Herrnstein and Murray, uses poignant biological tropes in his ideological rationalization of the inequality in Rome’s social order:

Menenius—There was a time when all the body’s members
Rebelled against the belly; thus accused it;
That only like a gulf it did remain
I’ th’ midst o’ th’ body, idle and unactive,
Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing
Like labor with the rest; where th’ other instruments
Did see and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel,
And, mutually participate, did minister
Unto the appetite and affection common
Of the whole body. The belly answered—
First Citizen—Well, sir, what answer made
the belly? . . .
Menenius—Note me this good friend
Your most grave belly was deliberate,
Not rash like his accusers, and thus answered:
“True it is my incorporate friends,” quoth he,
“That I receive the general food at first,
Which you do live upon; and fit it is,
Because I am the storehouse and the shop
Of the whole body. But, if you do remember,
I send it through the rivers of your blood,
Even to the court, the heart, to th' seat o' th' brain;
And, through the cranks and offices of man,
The strongest nerves and small inferior veins
From me receive that natural competency
Whereby they live; and though that all at once"—
You, my good friends, this says the belly, mark me . . .
First Citizen—It was an answer. How apply you this?
Menenius—The senators of Rome are this good belly.
And you, the mutinous members.
(Act I, Scene I, lines 97-107, 129-142, 149-151)

Of course, Herrnstein and Murray's use of biological metaphors draws on a long tradition in the educational and social sciences. The use of medical or biological imagery to interpolate society runs deep in the sociological and educational literatures, from the writing of Herbert Spencer to Talcott Parson and contemporary structural functionalist curriculum theorists such as Allan Ornstein and Francis Hunkins. This mainstream social science research tradition generally compares society to an organism. Much attention is paid to social norms and social normalization and the role of social institutions in the reproduction and maintenance of a functional equilibrium within the body politic. Similarly, behavioral scientists in the field of psychology have concentrated relentless attention on the measurement of human traits as already given in nature. This, for example, allows for the discursive production of glib taxonomies and systems of classification of individuals and groups into hierarchical categories of competence and efficiency. Early behavioral psychologists such as Henry Goddard, Lewis Terman, and Edmund Thorndike promised a world of human perfection through the unyielding practices of diagnosing and eliminating human decrepitude. In The Bell


Curve, Herrnstein and Murray think they have found a pathway to this promised land. And access to the promised land lies in the harnessing and efficient deployment of human intelligence.

In their approach to the assessment of human intelligence and its function in organizing society, Herrnstein and Murray place their work within the most conservative behavioral science tradition of psychology—the tradition that runs through the genealogical line of Charles Spearman, Lewis Terman, Arthur Jensen, and William Shockley to contemporary thinkers such as Phillipe Rushton. This conservative or “classical” approach to cognition maintains that intelligence is massively heritable and that the underlying causal explanation of virtually every social ill—unemployment, poverty, crime, illegitimacy, divorce, and so forth—is a matter of genetic endowment.

In The Bell Curve Herrnstein and Murray deploy a tautological net of biological discourses in their analysis of the relationship of intelligence to citizenship. These discourses are used in three interrelated ways: Biological tropes underscore the authors’ claims of scientific neutrality; they also help to draw out the lines of demarcation that separate the mentally degenerate working class from the mentally whole in the suburbs; and last, the language of biology is used to displace and suppress more radical discourses of social inequality. Let us take a closer look at the deployment of biological discourses in Herrnstein and Murray’s book.

THE CLOAK OF SCIENTIFIC NEUTRALITY

First, these authors use the discourses of biology and nature to wrap their highly motivated and socially prejudicial claims in the cloak of scientific neutrality. The language of genes and heredity suggests a world in which “the social” literally evaporates and the contents of “men’s minds” are all that matter. Herrnstein and Murray try on their lab coats and wear them into the murkiest waters in their assault on the poor: “Going on welfare really is a dumb idea, and that is why women who are low in cognitive ability end up there, but also such
women have little to take to the job market, and welfare is one of their few appropriate recourses when they have a baby to care for and no husband to help" (p. 201).

Here the discourse of measured intelligence provides a cloak for a highly loaded moral didacticism and a deep suspicion of the autonomy and civic judgment of the nation's female poor. Poor, low-IQ women do not make good citizens because they do not pull their weight. In addition, they endanger the economic (and the military) security of the nation by their hyperfertility. This is just a fact of biology, not politics or ideology, Herrnstein and Murray argue. By emphasizing the scientificity of their work, the authors portray themselves as expert citizens—professionals who are direct and honest with the rest of society; even if, by so doing, it means that they anger liberals and radicals and damn the lives of generations of various racial groups and the poor. This use of the discourse of biology invokes "science" abstractly and generally. Ultimately, the discourse of biology and nature constitutes a language of innocence—a discourse of the future linked to the past. In this recourse to nostalgia, the scientist and the citizen are one: dwellers of suburbia where the pursuit of the good life is the social reward for the best and brightest.

METAPHORS OF HUMAN PERFECTION

The second use of the discourses of biology foregrounds metaphors of perfection and their opposite, metaphors of human degeneracy. This deployment of biology represents the professional middle class (PMC) persona as the human ideal, high in the mystical g—a complete and separate human specimen, distinct and distinguishable from the low cognitive dweller of the inner city. The professional middle-class subject is therefore the natural recipient of the genetic bounty of high cognitive capacity. And from this great bountiful storehouse, this PMC citizen dispenses "civility" and magnanimity to all his neighbors. He is the grand role model, the
embodiment of the best in civil society: "Much of what could go under the heading of civility is not readily quantified. Mowing the lawn in the summer or keeping the sidewalks shoveled in the winter, maintaining a tolerable level of personal hygiene and grooming, returning a lost wallet, or visiting a sick friend... [This is] what we are calling civility" (p. 254). As a corollary to this, suburban life is represented as the epitome of wholesomeness and completeness. The suburb is the incubator of civility—an organic environment in which the high-IQ citizen helps his neighbor out, has open-ended, urbane conversations around the picnic table about politics, and enters the voting booth, society’s “civic hearth” (p. 255), to do his civic duty. This application of the discourse of biology is linked to a discourse of the natural habitat where the PMC citizen resides. Here also the discourse of nature blends with the discourse of nostalgia: “We do not need statistics to remind Americans alive in the 1990s of times when they felt secure walking late at night, alone, even in poor neighborhoods and even in the largest cities” (p. 236).

What Herrnstein and Murray designate as “citizenship,” the middle-class suburban resident already possesses as symbolic capital. This is summarized in the metaphors of self-regulation and self-control:

To what extent is high intelligence associated with the behaviors associated with “middle-class values”? The answer is that the brighter young people... are also the ones whose lives most resemble a sometimes disdained stereotype. They stick with school, are plugging away in the workforce, and are loyal to their spouse. In so far as intelligence helps lead people to behave in these ways, it is also a force for maintaining a civil society. (p. 236)

In subtle and not so subtle ways, Herrnstein and Murray center the polity in the suburb. Outside the acropolis dwells society’s problem species: “the dull” and “the very dull,” mostly urban inhabitants—Frantz Fanon’s “wretched of the earth” (1965). The body politic of the suburban high-IQ citizen is healthy and whole-
some. By contrast, the imagery associated with the low-IQ poor is that of disease and degradation. If the problems of the urban centers are intractable or "chronic," as Herrnstein and Murray maintain, it has to do with the people who live there—the low IQ types who wallow in a culture of poverty: "The analyses provide some support for those who argue that a culture of poverty tends to transmit chronic welfare dependency from one generation to the next. But if a culture of poverty is at work, it seems to have influence primarily among women who are of low intelligence" (p. 191).

This culture of poverty is definitively linked to mental frailty. In a striking way, too, such poverty is decidedly gendered. The low-IQ woman of America's working classes makes for a poor citizen because she lacks those values of self-regulation and self-control associated with the middle class. Here again the sense of disease and degeneracy is in the air: "The disquieting finding is that the worst environments for raising children, of the kind that not even the most resilient children can easily overcome, are concentrated in the homes in which the mothers are at the low end of the intelligence distribution" (pp. 203-204).

Herrnstein and Murray draw down the lines between desired citizen traits and behaviors and undesirable ones by pointing to the almost indelible behavioral differences that exist between the woman of "middle-class values" and the "other" woman—the female urban resident who is bereft of these desirable middle-class traits and qualities:

A woman in the NLSY [National Longitudinal Study of Youth] got a "Yes" if she had obtained a high school degree, had never given birth to a baby out of wedlock, had not been interviewed in jail, and was still married to her first husband. People who failed any one of the conditions were scored "No." Never-married people who met all other conditions except the marital one were excluded from analysis. (p. 263)

In foregrounding issues of biology, reproduction, and sexuality (that is, issues of control over the body), the authors of *The Bell*
Curve separate out the inner-city dweller as an anticitizen, a threat to the future security of the nation as a whole. The authors hint at these dangers throughout chapter 12. They spell out the nature of this threat more definitively, however, in chapter 15, which deals with present and future population and demographic trends. The matter can be summarized as follows. While the patriotic high-IQ suburban resident is a model of restraint, the low-IQ population of the country is aggressively fertile. Thus the overall intelligence in the nation is declining because the very dull are producing too many babies and the very bright too few. Worst yet, immigration policies are too generous to low-IQ immigrants from the Third World. The result is the powerful negative phenomenon of overall decline in intelligence, or “dysgenesis”:

Mounting evidence indicates that demographic trends are exerting downward pressure on the distribution of cognitive ability in the United States and that the pressures are strong enough to have social consequences. . . . The professional consensus is that the United States has experienced dysgenic pressures throughout the century. . . . Women of all races and ethnic groups follow this pattern in similar fashion. There is some evidence that Blacks and Latinos are experiencing even more severe dysgenic pressures than whites, which could lead to further divergence between whites and other groups in future generations. (p. 341)

BIOLOGY AND THE REPRESSSION OF THE POLITICAL.

The third type of deployment of biological metaphors in The Bell Curve involves a strategy of suppression of the discourse of the social and the political and their replacement by the discourse of nature. Here the issue of inequality is displaced from the arena of the economy onto the terrain of mental and moral capacity and adequacy. The social world is naturalized as a world of the survival of the
fittest. The best and the brightest of society’s citizenry will prevail over the feebleminded. This is nature’s law: social Darwinism writ large. Most significantly, Herrnstein and Murray suggest that the socioeconomic class map of America is obsolete, since Americans generally now all coexist on a level playing field for contest mobility. They replace the class map of America with a cognitive map based on the distribution of mental capital. This map corresponds with a gradation of national membership or citizenship in society based on competence. Herrnstein and Murray introduce a five-tiered hierarchy: “the Very Bright,” “the Bright,” “the Normal,” “the Dull,” and “the Very Dull”:

The twentieth century dawned on a world segregated into social classes defined in terms of money, power and status. The ancient lines of separation based on hereditary rank were being erased, replaced by a more complicated set of overlapping lines. Social standing still played a major role. . . . Our thesis is that the twentieth century has continued the transformation, so that the twenty-first will open on a world in which cognitive ability is the dividing force. The shift is more subtle than the previous one but more momentous. Social class remains the vehicle of social life, but the intelligence pulls the train. (p. 25)

Following this claim the authors go on to maintain: “Low intelligence is a stronger precursor of poverty than low socioeconomic background. Whites with IQs in the bottom 5 percent of the distribution of cognitive ability are fifteen times more likely to be poor than those with IQs in the top 5 percent” (p. 127).

The cognitive map charts nature’s differential order of endowments to different groups of human beings. It is nobody’s fault that there is inequality in the land. And indeed, our best political efforts to wipe out such inequality only compound the bad hand that nature has dealt to “the dull” and “the very dull.” This is what liberal politicians did in the 1960s. They gave handouts to the poor, the
low-IQ types, the congenital criminals, and the welfare sororities. The consequences everywhere were bad, but particularly bad for the poor: "The irony is that as America equalizes the circumstances of people's lives, the remaining differences in intelligence are increasingly determined by differences in genes..." (p. 91).

Ultimately, for Herrnstein and Murray, liberal policies elaborated in the 1960s aimed at helping poor Americans overly politicized the function of government in people's lives. The best thing that the government can do now is to step aside and let the law of nature and the invisible hand of the market reestablish a necessary equilibrium in social life. For these authors, the removal of impediments to the efficient sorting of cognitive capacity is the key to national renewal and national well-being.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, *The Bell Curve* must be seen against the backdrop of a deeply conservative phase in the evolution of the American polity. This new phase in American life is reflected in ever more conservative inroads into the academy itself. A significant correlate of these developments has been the deep incorporation of academic scholarship into the culture industry. This is reflected particularly in the ever-expanding commerce of fast-break quasi-academic books aimed at mass consumption that blur the lines among academic scholarship, policy, and entertainment. To put the matter bluntly, right-wing academics have learned that panic prose that manipulates authoritarian popular anxieties and desires sells well. Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* joins a steady stream of doomsday books—such as *The Closing of the American Mind, The Disuniting of America, Illiberal Education, Cultural Literacy, Alien Nation,* and Murray's own *Losing Ground*—that focus attention on the internal threats to national identity and national security. Herrnstein and Murray's discussion of citizenship marks the aggressive return of biological arguments in the discussion of the social policy regarding some of
the most intractable political and social problems in contemporary American society.

The lived reality in the United States is that though formally citizens, some groups of Americans, particularly working-class Blacks and Latinos, occupy the place of modern-day plebeians; that is to say, they are treated as second-class citizens. There is solid social, economic, and cultural evidence that this is so. In *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray, with great fanfare, wipe this evidence away, pointing instead to the relative imperfection of the mental structures of America's lower classes. In their hands, biology becomes a powerful tool for the legitimation of unequal status. The very bright and the very dull are two different types of citizens. One type of citizen lives at the top of the food chain in the hallowed suburb, while the other lives at the bottom in the inner city. Herrnstein and Murray contend that there is not much that government should do about this. Indeed, current policies of government handouts and uncontrolled immigration are leading us down the slippery slope of dysgenesis—the precipitous fall in IQ—as the least endowed multiply and procreate without restraint. This perhaps will be the end of America as we know it. And then what? Maybe, the plebeians will inherit the earth.

References


