

Liberty and Equality in Conflict

Book Review by Herbert Rubenstein

One day after telling a colleague that no review could do *The Bell Curve* justice, I was asked to write a review of the book. Certainly in the short space provided for this review I cannot summarize all that the book has to say. In fact, I cannot even begin to discuss some of the comments made by eminent statisticians, economists and other social scientists who argue that some of the statistical methods employed by the authors are seriously flawed.**

The reader of this review should know that I used to work for Charlie Murray from 1977-1980 at the American Institutes for Research. Although I hope my personal knowledge of Dr. Murray has not affected my reading of and writing about his book, I do want to inform the reader that I found Dr. Murray to be a straight shooter, a man with the ability to think and write clearly and a person who is committed to creating a better America.

Dr. Murray often put important items in appendices and this book is no exception. The appendix, "Statistics for People Who Are Sure They Can't Learn Statistics," is most useful and not very controversial. Other matters covered in the appendices include discussions of measuring test bias, the history of affirmative action, and the detailed statistical analysis relied upon in the book.

The Bell Curve provides a somewhat nostalgic tour of American history citing the basic philosophy "that the original American conceptions of human equality and the pursuit of happiness still offer the wisest guidance for thinking about how to run today's America." (p. 535) Yet this is a book designed to show that in one sense, in *intelligence*, as measured by standard I.Q. tests, SAT and AFQT (Armed Forces Qualifications Tests) tests (which may not measure intelligence very well, if at all) and other measures, Americans are quite different from each other and those differences vary by race, by ethnic origin and by socio-economic status. *The Bell Curve* is first and foremost a review of the literature of the determinants of intelligence, concluding that about 60 percent of one's IQ is genetic (inherited) and about 40 percent is the product of one's environment. The book reviews hundreds of studies that measure IQ and concludes that in general these tests and SAT tests are not culturally biased against ethnic minorities.

Having documented that IQ levels are higher, on average, for whites than blacks, and are higher yet for

East Asians and certain groups of European Jews, the book takes a hard look at the question of affirmative action. A basic premise of the book is: America needs to nurture the gifted, those with high IQs, because it is from this group that our society will find its leaders. From this premise the authors call for greater spending on gifted children in public schools and go even further in calling for alternative forms of serving gifted children through the use of vouchers and other government support for gifted children so they may attend private school at government expense. In a direct assault on affirmative action as it is now practiced, the book assails public policy that sets targets for the

number of minorities to be enrolled in the best universities. The case is made that the large disparity of SAT scores between non-minorities and minorities indicates that minorities are overrepresented in these schools and that more qualified non-minorities are being denied

positions in these universities. The book suggests that we need to take a hard look at who should get an advantage and how much, how to modify affirmative action policies in the future to narrow the advantages, to end target numbers for minority groups in schools and employment situations, and how to focus on economic disadvantage over race as a criterion for affirmative action.

A central theme of the book is that in 1994 America is more segregated by IQ levels and more stratified by income and IQ levels than it was 50 years ago. Fifty years ago only a small percentage of students went to college leaving many "smart" (high IQ) people to work, reside, socialize and participate in close proximity to others who were not so smart. Now, almost all of the "smart" people go to college, (and the smartest go to the very best schools) and smart people marry smart people (called "assortive mating"). In addition, smart people are not only making more money than not-so-smart people, but the extent of the disparity has been growing rapidly over the past 15 years. The authors document a tremendous growth in what they call the "high IQ professions" of medicine, law, high tech and computerized occupations, engineers, scientists, accountants, architects, mathematicians, chemists and college teachers. And to make the stratification more complete, smart people are moving (if they have not already moved) out of the geographic areas inhabited by people with lower

THE BELL CURVE
By Richard J. Herrnstein
and Charles Murray
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845 pages, \$30.00

Herrnstein and Murray on Immigration

Mounting evidence indicates that demographic trends are exerting downward pressures on the distribution of cognitive ability in the United States and that the pressures are strong enough to have social consequences. (p.342)

Legal immigration in the 1980s contributed 29 percent of the United States' net population increase, much more than at any earlier period in the postwar era. If illegal immigration could be included, the figure would be significantly higher... Whereas policy can have only long-term effects on the cognitive distribution of births, it can have large immediate effects on the nature of the immigrant population. There are few, if any, other domains where public policy could so directly mold the cognitive shape of things to come. Meanwhile, the nation's political ground rules have yet to accept that the intelligence of immigrants is a legitimate topic for policy makers to think about. (pp.358-359)

The basic statement is that about 57 percent of legal immigrants in the 1980s came from ethnic groups that have scores significantly below the white average, and in consequence the IQ mean for all immigrants is likely to be below 100... [T]he kernel of evidence that must also be acknowledged is that Latino and black immigrants are, at least in the short run, putting some downward pressure on the distribution of intelligence. (p.359)

It makes sense for low-ability people to emigrate when they can reasonably think that the United States not only pays better for the same work but protects them against poor labor market outcomes (in comparison with their birth country) with welfare payments and other entitlements. In other words, the United States may be expected to draw... and will draw low-ability workers from countries that have less extensive welfare states and higher income inequality (such as the poorer countries of the Third World). (p.362)

In the 1960s and 1970s, America became much more of a welfare state. Consistent with that, the earnings potential of the Latino immigrant group fell substantially from 1955 through 1980. Among the non-European countries, three of the four steepest declines in earnings potential were among immigrant groups from Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico, all large contributors to the Latin American immigrant population... The 1980 Mexican wave of immigrants had an earnings potential about 15 percent lower than the wave that arrived in 1955. For the Dominican Republic and Colombia, the earnings potential of the 1980 wave was more than 30 percent lower than those who came in 1955, a decline that remains *after* holding education, marital status, age, and location constant.

Similarly, the success of the early waves of West Indian blacks seems unlikely to repeat itself.

(pp.362-363)

Putting the pieces together—higher fertility and a faster generational cycle among the less intelligent and an immigrant population that is probably somewhat below the native-born average—the case is strong that something worth worrying about is happening to the cognitive capital of the country. (p.364)

The other demographic factor we discussed... was immigration and the evidence that recent waves of immigrants are, on the average, less successful and probably less able, than earlier waves. There is no reason to assume that the hazards associated with low cognitive ability in America are somehow circumvented by having been born abroad or having parents or grandparents who were. An immigrant population with low cognitive ability will—again, on the average—have trouble not only in finding good work but have trouble in school, at home, and with the law.

But we believe that the main purpose of immigration law should be to serve America's interests. It should be among the goals of public policy to shift the flow of immigrants away from those admitted under the nepotistic rules (which broadly encourage the reunification of relatives) and toward those admitted under competency rules... Perhaps our central thought about immigration is that present policy assumes an indifference to the individual characteristics of immigrants that no society can indefinitely maintain without danger. (p.549)

average IQs. Herrnstein and Murray state that this stratification is hurting America. Areas where people live need a critical mass of "smart" people and many areas of America no longer have such a mass. These areas are becoming unlivable and ungovernable. The authors fear that, unlike earlier times, the smart and the wealthy will soon turn their backs on these areas with disastrous consequences for us all.

The book is not only a review of studies that focus on the determinants and distribution of IQ among the populace, it is also a social commentary which claims to give America prescriptions for addressing some of its social problems. For example, after stating that "having a baby without a husband is a dumb thing to do. Going on welfare is an even dumber thing to do, if you can possibly avoid it." (p. 200), the authors present several suggestions to address the growing problem of illegitimacy. To reduce illegitimacy, the authors suggest stopping all welfare payments for children born out of wedlock, stopping all government efforts to collect child support from the father for an illegitimate child, and ending court-enforced parental rights such as visitation and other rights of the illegitimate child's father. The authors state that these measures will help restore the value of marriage — a value that has declined over the past 30 years. The book also suggests that if the mother or extended family or neighborhood can not or will not provide an adequate home for the child, the government should promote adoption (by making it simpler) and consider expanding the use of orphanages. Though the authors do not discuss the potential cost of this proposal, to this author it seems likely to be astronomical.

Herrnstein and Murray estimate that demographic changes, including high fertility levels among low IQ persons as compared to high IQ persons, plus immigration (where it is generally considered that immigrants have lower IQs than non-immigrants), are causing a 1-2 point decline in average IQ per generation. *The Bell Curve* suggests that immigration policy be changed to focus more on criteria based on competency. Canada has recently made this major policy shift. In the area of birth control, the authors suggest that the government stop subsidizing childbirth (through welfare) and make birth control mechanisms more available to reduce fertility.

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The book documents how crime, illegitimacy, long-term welfare dependency, long-term

unemployment, poverty, divorce, child abuse and neglect and other social problems are concentrated among that part of the population in the lowest quartile of IQ. In response to this finding, the authors suggest that all government programs dealing with these problems take into account that the people to whom the programs are addressed represent a population group that is difficult to teach and whose behavior is especially difficult to change. Thus, the authors call for less "federal" programming and more local, tailor-made solutions to these problems.

The book's prescriptions for America are as simple as its basic theme. First, the authors call for government to simplify its tax system, its programs, its regulations and its role in each individual's life. They propose simple, quick punishment for crime (without suggesting how to accomplish this goal), allowing employers to use IQ and other simple, standardized tests for selecting employees and easing affirmative action requirements — which in the authors' eyes promote economic inefficiency.

The authors state that raising IQ (also referred to as "cognitive ability") "is not easy." Promising studies are cited showing that improved nutrition and intensive programs of education in a child's early years can help raise IQ. Also, improvement in a child's home environment may have some potential for raising IQ. However, the schools should not be expected to be able to raise the average level of IQ significantly. The authors acknowledge that when we attempt to improve our schools by spending more on the gifted, this will have the effect of raising IQ most among the most gifted and thus creating even greater "inequality." But the authors suggest that greater inequality is a small price (or even no price at all) to pay for supporting policies that recreate and reinvigorate the classical, Aristotelian concept of the "educated person" upon whom the authors rely for our future leadership. Calling for a return to a meritocracy, if not a "natural aristocracy" as supported by Thomas Jefferson, the authors state "The egalitarian ideal of contemporary political theory underestimates the importance of the differences that separate human beings" (p. 532). Herrnstein and Murray contend that governmental efforts to create and enforce "equality" between individuals and among races have placed the federal government in America not only at odds with history, but also in direct opposition to the concepts of freedom and individualism that made this country great. In the place of "greater equality" the authors suggest that the role of government should be to allow each person to achieve dignity and a valued place in society. How to do this? — by restoring local leadership and promoting neighborhood and citizen involvement in solving social problems. People of all IQ levels can be part of the solution. It is certainly beyond the scope of the book for the authors to suggest in detail how to accomplish this. However, a new, central theme in American

politics is touched upon by the book — this traditional local approach to solving problems, which is certainly gaining momentum quickly.

Finally, the authors lament that cognitive partitioning or stratification will continue and even increase in the future. The authors raise a concern that the affluent and the cognitive elite will join forces and support more strict policing to stop crime, which may foster increased racism. They fear that the future of America can be described as a "custodial state" or Indian reservation type of social structure where, in many areas, the government provides more and more for the underclass causing them to become less and less able to meet their own needs. All this will occur as higher IQ, affluent individuals retreat to the suburbs and look less to government to assist with any needs.

"The authors ... point out the inherent problems and predictable failures caused by government efforts to promote economic equality."

The Bell Curve is an important book whether or not one agrees with its statistical methodologies or its policy conclusions. The book provides important suggestions for dealing with the "inequality" in America after 30 years of government efforts to promote equality. The authors hold a revered place for "political equality" as called for in the Constitution, but point out the inherent problems and predictable failures caused by governmental efforts to promote economic equality. Although the authors' suggestions for dealing with inequality may not be the only viable ones, they have provided thoughtful approaches for dealing with the inequality that does exist in America, whether measured by IQ, by income, socio-economic status, or whatever yardstick one chooses. By any measure, we must agree that Americans are not a line or a point on a graph; we are a bell curve and we must learn how to deal more effectively and more efficiently with this equation if America is to begin to solve the malaise the inhabitants of this country are now feeling and to which the voters are now responding. ■

*** The authors have been criticized for several methodological failings. First, they use SAT tests and other tests such as the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) as indicators or measures of IQ when these tests may not be accurately measuring IQ at all. Second, they are criticized for using cross-section data in some instances to generate conclusions about changes over time that can only be supported through the proper use of longitudinal data. Even if these criticisms are true, the book is of extreme importance in the future public policy debate since many of the policy positions taken by the authors are independent of the statistical methodologies used in the book.*