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# RACIAL IDEOLOGICAL WARFARE: IQ AS A WEAPON

Luke Tripp

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Racial ideological warfare continues in America. This form of warfare is waged primarily against Black people. A major force prosecuting this war is an array of white academics, scholars, intellectuals, and social scientists (Coughlin, 1995; Heller, 1994). Their major premise is that Black people are mentally inferior to all other racial groups, especially the white race. This is the main thrust of *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* by Herrnstein and Murray which was ranked 5th on the *New York Times* Best Seller List on December 25, 1994. Its widespread popularity and appeal, and the accelerated moves of American politics further to the right at all levels of government are concrete indications that America is becoming even more dangerous for Black people.

## Pseudo science

Despite the fact that *The Bell Curve* is based on pseudo science, it should be taken seriously because its major themes fit nicely into the mainstream beliefs of whites and the implied messages of the dominant political forces. In this essay, we will examine the theories and concepts presented in *The Bell Curve*, and consider how they inform and rationalize a political agenda aimed at devaluing Black people.

Herrnstein and Murray have attempted to present *The Bell Curve* as a scientific work by including voluminous studies on race and intelligence as if bulk and quantity were related to quality and validity. In their attempt to shield *The Bell Curve* from being labeled racist propaganda, which it is, they devote most of their book to the discussion of the relationship between IQ and social class rather than to the relationship between IQ and race. However, their principle message is clear: genetically, the *white race* is smarter than the *Black race*.

Since race is a key causal variable in their hypothesis, we would expect them to rigorously define this variable; however, they failed to do this. In fact, they acknowledged that the categories used for the race variable were based on racial self-identification, not on the basis of some genetic criteria (DNA structure). Nevertheless, they used the concept of race as though it has some scientific validity and universal meaning. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) note that the concept of race has defied biological definition and none of the ostensibly objective measures to determine and define racial categories have been free from the invidious elements of racial ideology. Furthermore, as Gloria Marshal (1993) emphasizes, scholars in the biological sciences agree that all topological divisions of humankind into discrete groups are to some extent artificial and arbitrary. She maintains that race has never been and will never be a primarily biological concept and concludes that race is a biopolitical concept, which serves to obfuscate the problems entailed in the study of human variation.

Much of the scholarly criticism of the Bell Curve has been directed at the weaknesses of the pseudo scientific research that Herrnstein and Murray used to support their theory that Black people as a group are at the bottom of the stratified social structure in America because their cognitive ability is lower than that of other races. We will not review the body of research that they cited to support their assertions, nor will we ponder the debates about the validity and reliability of conventional IQ tests. Rather, we will focus on how the concept of IQ is used as a pseudo scientific scale to make invidious comparisons among the "races" and to disparage Black people. We will also consider the effects of The Bell Curve on social policy and American politics.

### **Beliefs about Social Stratification**

To determine the social and political effects of the Bell Curve, let us first examine the social ideology of white Americans. In general, what do white Americans believe about the nature of social stratification in America? Research studies show that most whites have been socialized to believe that America is: 1) democratic, which implies that it is free of oppression, 2) meritocratic, which implies that a person's social location is determined by ability and effort, and 3) just, which implies that whatever unfortunate circumstances that may exist, they can be overcome, and that fair play is the rule, and privileges are earned (Huber and Form, 1973).

In their study of beliefs about inequality, Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that a large majority of whites believe there is nearly equal educational and job opportunity. Whites believe one's socioeconomic status is determined by her/his individual attributes such as ability and effort. Another prevalent belief they hold is that economic inequality is necessary and beneficial. Moreover they endorse the idea of economic and societal equity as the just criteria for the distribution of income.

These basic beliefs constitute whites' ideological justification for socioeconomic inequality. Thus for whites in general, the American class structure can be morally defended as a system which is fair because, although it is not based on the principle of equality, it does provide equal opportunity for success. Given these beliefs, they logically conclude that those who are at the bottom of the social structure are there because of some deficiencies in terms of ability and effort rather than other factors related to historic and continuing forms of oppression. These beliefs under gird the IQ based social stratification model presented in The Bell Curve.

### **Intelligence and Social Hierarchy**

Herrnstein and Murray contend that cognitive ability primarily determines social location in America's stratified hierarchy, and they claim that IQ tests accurately measure cognitive ability. In their model the brightest are at the top of the social system and the dullards are at the bottom. They explain that this hierarchical pattern reflects the correspondence between the distribution of IQs and the distribution of socioeconomic rewards for the various levels of knowledge and skills, which range from the manual labor of an illiterate to the professional expertise of a neurosurgeon.

The underlying assumptions of the Bell Curve model are that: 1) people will tend to seek high paying jobs; 2) there is fair competition for high paying jobs; 3) high paying jobs require a high IQ; 4) those with the highest IQs will get the highest paying jobs; and 5) the wealthiest are those with the highest IQs. We can see how this model is consistent with the way most whites believe the American social system operates, and thus how IQ is used to explain and justify social stratification in America.

However, beliefs and facts are not necessarily the same thing. Social scientists have shown that peoples' social locations, especially among the upper social classes, are primarily based on their social and material inheritance, not their IQs. Furthermore, the inheritance of the upper social classes is largely derived from private capital and the ruthless exploitation of Black people and the lower social classes. The American capitalist system precludes equal opportunity for the lower classes to compete for educational resources or jobs because the wealthy classes have systemic power and privileges. The point is that, in general, economic, social, and political power-rather than cognitive ability-primarily determines people's social positions.

### **Historical Perspective on Stratification and Race**

At this point, we should consider the question of the determinants of social stratification in America in a historical context. From the first permanent English settlement in Jamestown Virginia, when in 1619 Africans were brought in chains to serve their white masters, to the present, Blacks have been forcibly kept in a subordinate position in America. The dominant white ideology, which has historically justified and rationalized the superordinate position of whites and the subordinate position of Blacks, is a set of white beliefs which hold that Black people are inherently inferior in terms of intelligence and morality and thus they are unworthy of full human dignity and respect. These beliefs served to defend slavery in America for about two and a half centuries and subsequently, to uphold legal racial segregation for another century, into the 1960s. The point is that an ideology of racism was used to justify a system of exploitation and oppression. Moreover, in America's social hierarchy, Black peoples' subordinate social position was primarily determined by *race*, not by cognitive ability.

### **Racism and Psychological Processes**

There are several psychological principles that may help us understand why the ideology of Black inferiority remains entrenched in the culture, and the way in which The Bell Curve reinforces it. First, the principle of cognitive mastery holds that individuals attempt to understand their environments in order to enhance their social positions in them. This implies that they believe that their conscious actions can influence or determine outcomes. This leads to the general belief that people receive the outcomes they deserve. Thus we see how this belief justifies social inequality.

Second, the socialization principle maintains that people come to believe what their society teaches them. Beliefs that are taught early and consistently enough form a basic framework of knowledge that is difficult for the individual to recognize. Racist beliefs permeate American society. They are taught in all areas of social life in America- home, school, church, workplace, and recreation. This explains why they are so pervasive.

Third, the principle of cognitive efficiency maintains that a discrete package of beliefs is retrieved from memory and guides inferences. For example, white racists are sensitive to the dimension of racial superiority in a wide range of situations, thus they disproportionately weight this dimension in making judgments and evaluations of social situations involving Black people. Further, through associative links between concepts in memory (Blacks and gangs, Blacks and welfare, and Blacks and crime), they engage in stereotypical thinking. With regard to the Bell Curve, the idea is fostered that Blacks' low academic performance is linked to stupidity- not to the educational system's planned retardation of many ghetto-entrapped Black children (Mazique, 1992).

Fourth, principles regarding the relationship between affect and cognition imply that whites' feelings toward Black people will influence their beliefs about Black people. The white media, along with other institutions, have constructed enduring negative images of Black people as comedic, criminal, dysfunctional and dumb (Spigner, 1991). These negative images of Blacks foster negative feelings among whites which condition them to believe any negative information about Blacks. Thus given the prevailing sentiments of whites, the Bell Curve's theme of Black mental inferiority would seem quite credible to them.

Fifth, the hedonic principle holds that people seek to maintain high levels of self-esteem by attributing negative qualities to others, especially those unlike themselves. Donna Richards (1992) asserts that the white self-image requires a negative image of Black people in order to be positively reinforced. The Bell Curve's assertion of Black intellectual inferiority definitely inflates whites' already vain ego and strengthens their self-image of racial superiority.

Last, the distributive justice principle holds that in some areas the idea of justice requires equality (equality under the law), in other areas equity (benefits should be distributed on the basis of ones' contribution), and under certain conditions, need may be the basis for distributive justice (the deserving poor should receive some benefits on the basis of need alone); however, in this connection, whites tend to view Blacks on welfare as the undeserving poor.

Unfortunately, most whites have also been propagandized to believe that historic structural racial barriers have been virtually eliminated; therefore, they believe Blacks have equal citizenship rights and opportunity. Many even believe that affirmative action policies discriminate against whites and thus allow Black people to have undeserved privileges and advantages, especially in higher education and the workplace. Consistent with the myth of equal, or near equal, opportunity for Blacks is the false assumption found in the Bell Curve that there are few significant racial barriers to upward social mobility.

We can clearly see how The Bell Curve reinforces the prevailing white ideology of social inequality and taps into the widespread racial attitudes found among whites. The assertion that blacks have lower mental ability than whites has obvious appeal as an explanation for the lower socioeconomic status of Blacks in a society that rewards intelligence. This help explains why The Bell Curve has such broad appeal among whites and why it represents a dangerous ideological attack on Black people.

### **The Bell Curve and Politics**

The political agenda of *The Bell Curve* is to eliminate affirmative action programs, defend the existing American class structure, and rationalize white domination and Black subordination. *The Bell Curve* supports powerful anti-Black political forces by providing them with an economic rationale for withdrawing governmental support for many programs that have, to some extent, benefited Blacks, particularly in the area of education. Herrnstein and Murray assert that educational attainment gap between Blacks and whites cannot be closed through educational enrichment programs for Blacks because the gap is based on biology-not sociology. They argue that programs that range from Head Start for pre-schoolers to Minority Opportunity Projects for college students are doomed to fail in their attempt to close the educational attainment gap between Blacks and whites because this gap reflects a racial difference in IQ averages. Thus they conclude that it is not cost effective to spend money for this effort.

They also provide right-wing political forces with spurious arguments against affirmative action policies which they claim undermine the principle of reward on the basis merit, and result in a lowering of quality standards in academia and the professions. This, they believe, will weaken America's competitiveness, and thus have serious negative social and economic ramifications.

The political impact of the Bell Curve is especially significant in this period of intense anxiety about economic security and social mobility. John Miller (1992) believes that America is in a "silent depression" characterized by slow economic growth, deteriorating living standards, and increasing economic inequality. Labor Secretary Robert Reich in his speech in January 1995 said that household incomes have swelled by \$826 billion over the past 15 years, but that 98 percent of that increase has gone to the wealthiest (and most educated and skilled) fifth of Americans (Berg, 1995).

Most Americans are facing the uncertain future with apprehension and foreboding. Increasing global competition and the so-called computer driven information age are the forces that are often cited as shaping the future economy of America, an economy that will demand higher cognitive ability and make low-skilled workers superfluous. These concrete economic conditions and trends provide a context for the politics of the Bell Curve.

Herrnstein and Murray argue that government policy should be designed to reward those with high IQs because they can make the greatest contribution to a rapidly developing hi-tech society. They believe that others with lower IQs deserve less attention; the group with the higher IQ is more deserving. In their Darwinian paradigm, cognitive ability is the criterion on which human beings are ranked, and the basis on which human worth is determined. Thus IQ becomes a measure of human worth; it becomes the criterion for superiority (more rational, smarter, more advanced).

## **Conclusion**

The Bell Curve maintains and produces support for the existing race and class hierarchy. Herrnstein and Murray's IQ theory explain racial inequality as an inevitable feature of a stratified society based on IQ, which is genetically determined. They argue that Black people's lower social position is the effect of their lower IQ in relation to whites, not the effect of racial oppression. By explaining the class structure in terms of ability (IQ), rather than in terms of

white systemic power and control, they direct the analysis of social stratification away from the issue of class and racial domination.

They attempt to camouflage the racist thrust of the Bell Curve by discussing social stratification in nonracial terms (an IQ line rather than a color line). However, the logic of their pseudo science makes this virtually impossible. Their deterministic model is predicated on a casual relationship between biology and social class. Thus according to their model, social class is determined by IQ which in turn is determined by genetics which also defines race. Consequently, they cannot escape the contradiction of trying to make a racial point while denying that this was their intent (Wellman, 1993).

The Bell Curve is another ideological in-your-face anti-Black weapon wielded by the most reactionary sector of white intellectuals. Herrnstein, Murray and their ilk represent the intellectual shock troops who dare articulate the enduring popular beliefs of white Americans, including the vast majority of white academics. Their main thesis of Black mental inferiority is brutally to the point, but it is not new. For most of the history of American higher education, explicitly racist biological theories have been dominant among academics. Some of the most prominent and influential white American scholars have articulated and perpetuated a racist ideology based on the myth of Black inferiority which is deeply rooted in the culture of academe (Harding, 1993).

The political aims of the Bell Curve are to discredit key egalitarian ideas and to eliminate social programs ushered in by the Black liberation movement. These aims are also strategic mobilizing elements in the political agenda of the increasingly aggressive Right wing. However, the Right wing has not yet loudly articulated the IQ thesis of the Bell Curve, probably because it is too explicitly racial. Even the most reactionary politicians prefer coded messages and more socially acceptable and politically expedient explanations for Black and white inequality such as Black's alleged "cultural deficiencies." Nevertheless, the Bell Curve reinforces white popular racial beliefs and strengthens the political undercurrents which are pushing American politics further to the right.

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