

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE BELL CURVE: TEN YEARS LATER

Ten years ago the Free Press published what is arguably the most important nonfiction book of the contemporary publishing era—*The Bell Curve* by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. In a well-written, compelling account, Herrnstein and Murray summarized decades of distilled research on intelligence, analyzed the data compiled from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, which provided a rich trove of IQ results, and applied their findings to a range of social phenomena. Statistical models provided alternative conjectures for evaluating the relative importance of IQ in explaining levels in crime, education, welfare, occupational status, and class structure. Herrnstein and Murray's thesis, that IQ makes a difference in understanding disparities in educational achievement, wealth, delinquency, and occupational success, undermined liberal assumptions about the causes of class and racial differences in intelligence and educational disparities.

The Bell Curve soon spawned a tsunami of criticism, including a flood of commentary in the mass media and a riptide of condemnation from egalitarian critics, and refuting it became a major preoccupation of the policymakers and opinion shapers in the elite circles of academia, the media, think tanks, and the salons of Georgetown and Manhattan. Controversy over the book prompted cover stories in news and opinion magazines, including *Newsweek*, *National Review*, and *The New Republic*, and *The Bell Curve* was the subject of investigative segments on news programs such as *World News Tonight* and *20/20*. The untimely death of Richard Herrnstein a month before the book's publication left Murray as the sole remaining author to battle his critics, and he valiantly defended *The Bell Curve* in appearances on C-Span's *Booknotes* and other televised interviews. Since *The Bell Curve's* publication in 1994, several volumes have been published attacking its thesis. Although this criticism—substantively vacuous and devoid of specific allegations of errors, flaws, or statistical mistakes by the authors—failed to refute Herrnstein and Murray's thesis that intelligence is a largely inherited trait, criticism of the book and its authors persists a decade later. The book's sales (combined hard and softcover editions) soared to nearly half a million copies—a phenomenal feat for a nonfiction book based on social science research and statistical analysis. Major retail chains such as Borders and Barnes & Noble continue to stock the paperback edition, eight years after its release in 1996.

In recent years much criticism of *The Bell Curve* has been refuted by other behavioral scientists. Arthur Jensen's 1998 landmark study, *The g Factor*, is a case in point. Despite the overlapping premise and empirical claims of *The Bell Curve* and *The g Factor*, the mass media largely ignored Jensen's book because of its empirically unassailable propositions: the existence of a general factor of intelligence, its biological and environmental (nonbiological) aspects, and the evidence for racial and ethnic IQ differences. Researchers have lately plowed new ground in the fields of psychometrics, differential psychology, and behavioral genetics that substantiates much of *The Bell Curve's* findings, although this research continues to be ignored in the mass media. As Murray accurately predicted in the mid-1990s, the book's empirical assessments would largely become accepted and incorporated into the psychological literature without acknowledgment or attribution.

Despite the blue smoke and flashing mirrors of the egalitarian critics, research findings have failed to substantiate their assumptions about intelligence and IQ differences—that racial differences in intelligence are substantially or exclusively (100 percent) the product of environment or upbringing. The lingering black-white gap in average IQ scores is an undisputed fact that cannot be explained by a strict environmental hypothesis. As Linda Gottfredson put it:

There is no doubt whatsoever that IQ differences among individuals can be traced to both genetic and environmental differences. Contrary to common perception, however, estimates of overall heritability (the squared correlation of phenotype with genotype) are not of primary interest but are only preludes to deeper analysis. Heritability estimates depend on the degrees of genetic and environmental variation in the population studied, but such variation can vary over time and place without reflecting any change in the nature of intelligence itself.

Imagine a society in which genetic variation for intelligence is moderate but unchanging over generations. Imagine also that the society evolves from one in which living conditions differ dramatically from one individual to another into a society in which all persons live in fairly equal circumstances. This is the goal of modern democracies, which seek equal opportunity through equal conditions of birth. As intimated earlier, heritabilities for intelligence will *rise* dramatically in that society as social circumstances are equalized. Its citizens may become less variable in observed intelligence, but the remaining IQ differences among them will be mostly genetic in origin. Intelligence influences socio-economic outcomes, so heritabilities will rise for the latter as well.

Genetic differences will loom large in this highly egalitarian society. Its remaining social distinctions could be eliminated only by eliminating the genetic differences or by somehow short-circuiting their influence. So far, no society has been able to do either. Such pre-school interventions as the Milwaukee Project and Head Start have failed to raise low IQs permanently. Similarly, no one has yet discovered how to equalize rates of learning from instruction or experience among individuals at different levels of the IQ continuum, despite occasional claims to the contrary.¹

In this issue of *The Occidental Quarterly*, an expert in the field of IQ research considers the legacy and implications of Herrnstein and Murray's landmark book. The topics they cover are a fraction of the full range of issues that could easily be explored, but the author provides a much-needed context for understanding the controversies that have evolved with the publication of *The Bell Curve*, as well as the import of the book itself.

One pressing consequence of the egalitarian establishment's dismissal of *The Bell Curve* has been that educational policies continue to ignore the book's findings. A good example of this is the passage of the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" Act, which compels local schools to conform to higher educational standards by raising student test scores and achievement levels. The presumption behind these goals is that all children are capable of achieving similar educational levels, given a strict regimen of instruction and testing *in the same classroom environment*. This fails to take into account different, inborn ability levels and the learning consequences that are likely to follow. Hans Eysenck's posthumously published book, *Intelligence*, quotes the insightful Thomas Jefferson: "Nothing is so unequal as the equal treatment of unequal people." We wholeheartedly concur with Jefferson's sentiment.²

ENDNOTES

1. Linda S. Gottfredson, "What Do We Know about Intelligence?" *The American Scholar* (Winter 1996): 23.
2. Hans J. Eysenck, *Intelligence: A New Look* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998), 1.