

Review of: "The equality agenda: a clear case of smoke and mirrors"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

In order to properly assess Canning's essay, it is incumbent upon us to refer back to the source or target of her essay. She is writing about, and apparently against, Douglas Murray's critique of a so-called "equality agenda," which in Murray's fevered mind has overtaken Western societies like the United States and the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland with some ideology of guaranteed social and economic outcomes despite (again in his fevered mind) the obvious and demonstrable inequalities in intelligence between social groups such as races, ethnic groups, and classes. Not surprisingly, Murray takes guidance and comfort from his predecessor Charles Murray, whose execrable book purported to find empirical and immutable IQ differences between races, leading him and co-author Herrnstein to despair of any attempt to improve the social position of the cognitively-disabled lower types.

To the extent that the latter-day Murray, as Canning asserts, holds that the "equality debate" ignores the topic of intelligence quotient, he totally and opportunistically misunderstands the movement for equality and inclusion in the United States, the society that I am best positioned to discuss. His utter misconstrual of the "debate" is a highly motivated one. Murray is a well-documented conservative flamethrower who, according to Roni Dori, stokes all of the standard contemporary right-wing fears: "He believes something is rotten in Islam (but don't call him an Islamophobe), advocates for consensual conversion therapy for gay people and warns against trying to achieve racial equality by 'sticking it to the whites'" (Dori 2021). Jonathan Portes adds that Murray's previous book, *The Strange Death of Europe*, "is essentially an intellectual version of the 'great replacement' conspiracy theory advocated by white nationalists here and the US – that liberal elites are plotting the demographic transformation of Western societies" (Portes 2019). Finally, writing for *The Guardian*, William Davies summarizes the argument of the book motivating Canning's essay thusly: "authorized by leftwing academics, minority groups have been concocting conflict and hatred out of thin air, polluting an otherwise harmonious society, for their own gratification" (Davies 2019), reserving special contempt for "intersectional feminism."

This long detour is necessary to demonstrate that Canning's conclusion that Murray "is wrong in his assessment" and that any supposed "equality of opportunity" in the two countries is "more rhetoric than reality" is far too kind. Canning shows convincingly enough that equality of opportunity is palpably lacking in Northern Ireland; in fact, the point could and should be made much more emphatically that differential intelligence quotient is not the issue in that troubled region, where social rewards are distributed on the basis of religious sect, not mental acuity. Rather, she documents the assumption that Catholic children are mentally inferior to their Protestant peers—the same logic that speciously legitimized colonization of the despised races.

Canning's treatment of the United States is much more sketchy and misses the point, as Murray and his ilk do, that equality-and-inclusion efforts, including affirmative action, are not framed in America in terms of intelligence differences (except perhaps under the rug and behind closed doors or by inveterate racists and white nationalists). It is not like American schools or governments administer IQ tests to blacks and whites or anyone else and assign life-chances accordingly. Moreover, both Murray 1 and Murray 2 misrepresent "the equality agenda" and the whole notion of equality by seeing it through the lens of IQ. It is ultimately quite irrelevant whether some individuals (or, heaven help us, groups) are smarter than others or whether there is a "cognitive elite" or a 'meritocracy' (there may well be, and that has been a subject of some analysis and critique in its own right). Equality in the American context at least is not tied to or dependent on intelligence, any more than rights or laws are or should be. The profoundly bankrupt example of a female astrophysicist who wants to be a plumber is a shibboleth (and besides, presumably as a trained scientist she is quite smart, illustrating how the Murrays elide "natural" intelligence and acquired skill).

I go further, and wish Canning would join me, to reject the notion of an "equality agenda" altogether. That would be equivalent to castigating human or civil rights as a "rights agenda" or justice and legal fairness as a "justice agenda" or "law agenda." Equality is not an "agenda" but a basic and essential principle of liberal democracy, the same as rights and justice—none tied to IQ or any other personal quality. If Murray junior is seriously maintaining that rights and justice should be differentially dispensed on the basis of intelligence (or anything else), his case is even more despicable than has been established already.

That all being said, Canning's conclusion that even a cursory glance at history and contemporary politics "dispels Douglas Murray's claim that much of contemporary society is obsessed with a particular idea of diversity" is much too generous. The essay would be strengthened by, first, making it clearer precisely what her argument against Murray is; second, by including more material on the UK and especially the US to show how completely Murray distorts the issue; and third, by refusing to meet Murray on his turf, namely the turf of "intelligence quotient differentials" and "guaranteed outcomes." Most fundamentally, we should not passively accept the premise that there is an "equality agenda" other than the agenda that all people are entitled to a quality education, decent housing, healthcare, employment with a living wage, political participation, and safety from gun and police violence. No one is demanding guaranteed outcomes (well, except the right-wingers who suppress voters, gerrymander legislative districts, and declare any undesirable electoral result a fraud and a theft); what we *are* demanding—and what we should all be demanding—is "liberty and justice for all," as some famous American pledge declares.

Canning also misspells Ronald Reagan's surname.

References

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