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

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It is hard to understand Canning's argument in this piece. The piece concludes with the points that there is no equality of opportunity in the UK and Northern Ireland and that the gap classes is widening. I do not have direct experience with the situation in those nations, but that seems to mirror what we are observing in the United States. The author also points to the "smoke and mirror" character of the equality agenda in the UK. This also seems consistent with all of the political rhetoric utilized to rationalize Neo-Liberalism in the western capitalist nations, so I cannot disagree with that point either.

My problem with this piece is that it is unclear whether it accepts the reasoning of Herrnstein and Murray in *The Bell Curve* (1994) concerning the role of "intelligence" in social life. From the text it seems as if the author accepts much of The Bell Curve's ideas. Let me suggest that if this is so, this is a serious error.

The Bell Curve was not peer reviewed. Prior to publication the manuscript was read by some of the authors' fellow travelers but had not been subjected to any objective scholarly examination. The book's message reduced to its simplest elements was that intelligence (IQ) was a generally agreed upon concept that could be objectively measured by a variety of standardized tests.   Such tests taken together measured the concept entitled generalized intelligence "g." This parameter came from (Cattell-Horn-Carrol or CHC theory). This idea considered intelligence as being composed of both fluid (ability to solve novel problems) and crystallized (amount of stored knowledge). Thus the g parameter was defined as a multidimensional measure of an individual's capacity to solve novel problems as well as the amount of their stored knowledge. They also claimed that g could be readily measured by a battery of standardized tests. In the book they presented a series of multiple regression models that related scores on the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) to various social outcomes and claimed that this variable was highly predictive of a variety of positive and negative social outcomes. High AFQT scores meant high IQ. Thus, they proposed that America was a meritocracy in which an individual's social status was primarily determined by their general intelligence. Herrnstein's model of IQ and social status had been well known for at least two decades. It was published by the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title "IQ" in 1971(i).

The problem with their reasoning was that there multiple regression models were flawed, and even if they were not, the amount of variation in the social outcomes they discussed in their book was very low (ii). The criticisms of the methods used to arrive of *The Bell Curve*'s conclusions should have been discussed in this piece. Also the author should have discussed that fact that with these weak inferences Herrnstein and Murray went on to make a series of sweeping policy recommendations including dramatically weakening affirmative action programs. There reasoning was that affirmative action as it was being practiced in government, higher education, and industry was promoting under qualified persons

based upon the IQ differentials between males of Eurasian descent and protected groups (Blacks, Hispanics, and women).

The Myth of Meritocracy

The problem with this reasoning is that the system that produces an individual's merit is biased. This is a point that Canning arrives at in the discussion of the false equality agenda in the UK. The legacies of social injustice are not "magically" erased in a few generations. Neither is this something that capitalist governments have willingly engaged in through a supposed commitment to equality of opportunity. In the United States, many of the men who wrote the constitution owned slaves and none questioned the notion of white supremacy. Thomas Jefferson, sired children though his enslaved person, Sally Hemmings. Despite the fact that these children were 7/8th European by descent, their social status was limited by race-based law. It took a mass movement of enslaved persons and their allies to end slavery. However that progress was short-lived, as the white population of the United States re-instituted Black Codes and created a system of de-jure racial injustice that was not overthrown until 1964. Affirmative action programs were designed to take on these historical injustices. However, due mainly to these historical legacies and white racism these programs failed miserably. Indeed, in the United States, the determinants of inequality have been ossified. For example, the systems of discrimination in education, employment, health care, incarceration, and exposure to toxic environments are stratified by race and class (iii).

Thus the experience of the United States suggests that similar historical legacies in Northern Ireland operate to stratify individuals in ways that make "meritocracy" a system of oppression as opposed to liberation. If from the start of life, all individuals had equitable access to housing, nutrition, health care, and education; the result would be the production of more people who could successfully participate in society. However, the problem here is that capitalism can never produce such a society. As a result, systems of meritocracy will always be biased to those who began society with access to these basic requirements of life, and biased against those who do not start life with such access. This is the smoke and mirrors that we must see through.

[i] Herrnstein R. "IQ", *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1971; pp. 45-64.

[ii]Graves, J.L. and T. Place (1995) Race and IQ revisited: Figures never lie, but often liars figure. *Sage Race Relations Abstracts* Vol. 20(2): 4-50.

[iii] Graves J.L. and Goodman A. *Racism, Not Race: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions*, (NY: Columbia University Press), 2022.