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.

This is a fascinating study that will seriously challenge the classifying, categorizing mind. Of course, in the age of industrialized science, such a study with such a complex structure and line would not be easy to publish in a journal following traditional standards. Nonetheless, it is an exciting and, at times, moving essay. The author weaves together three loosely connected narrative threads, which, although they do not fit together coherently, reinforce each other well.

The first thread refers to a favorite theme of conservative discourse: fashionable conservative authors from David Murray to Jordan Peterson present it as a great revelation that, in contrast to the egalitarian discourse they imagine, our societies need hierarchy. But, in fact, apart from a few anarchists, no one argues that hierarchy is required in complex - indeed, even not so complex - societies - the question is what privileges are attached to each position in the hierarchy, how open the positions are to access and what skills are required to achieve them. Murray here goes back to his namesake's controversial book from almost two decades ago.

Herrnstein and Murray's argues in “The Bell Curve” (1994) that intelligence is a crucial determinant of individual success and societal outcomes. The authors contend that intelligence is primarily influenced by genetics, with IQ scores as a reliable measure of intellectual ability. In addition, they argue that intelligence is strongly correlated with various social factors such as income, educational attainment, and occupational status.

For Herrsnstein and Murray a ‘cognitive elite’ refers to individuals with high IQ scores who are more likely to excel academically and professionally. They argue that this cognitive elite is becoming increasingly separated from the rest of society, leading to a growing 'cognitive stratification'.

Herrnstein and Murray also consider the implications of their findings for social policy. They argue that intelligence is difficult to change significantly through environmental interventions, calling into question the effectiveness of specific educational and social programs aimed at reducing inequalities. They suggest that society should acknowledge and address cognitive differences between individuals, possibly through policies that accept and accommodate these variations.

The Bell Curve has received, over time, considerable criticism for its methodology, potential biases, and the controversial nature of its conclusions. Critics, along with Canning, have argued that intelligence is a complex trait influenced by multiple factors, including environment and social context.

At this point, the second subjective, autobiographical argument enters Canning's essay.

Importantly, this autobiographical thread is far from self-serving. Here Canning convincingly demonstrates how much the success of standardized school tests depends on a variety of factors - in the Irish situation, politics, history, religious divisions, the Troubles provides the context, or more precisely, the labyrinth of obstacles, that have been erected in the way of personal mobility and entry into the 'cognitive elite'.

It brings us to the third and most profound question of social theory, where, following Young and Sandel, meritocratic rhetoric and policy become the target of critique. This argument is distinct, I think, from the previous argument. Suppose for a moment that the chances of acquiring a hierarchical position, of becoming a part of the cognitive elite, are not distorted by external factors - acquired advantages, Bourdieu's cultural distance, prejudices, the historical constraints of politics and corruption - but that in an ideal world all positions are distributed meritocratically. But even in this case, the question arises as to what happens to those who do not reach the top of the pyramid for external or internal reasons and who are left behind in this competition. The third way, the Clintonian Blairite offer of ensuring equality of opportunity, is not a good answer: in a sense, it makes the problem worse by shifting the responsibility back onto the losers, the laggards. The brutal verdict is this: You have not succeeded; therefore, it is your fault. In the meritocratic worldview of achievement and novelty, the losers - to use Hillary Clinton's memorable and unfortunate phrase, the ‘deplorables’ - are indeed wretched and redundant. This problem, coupled with living in a world far from ideal but distorted by the factors just mentioned, points to a context in which populist right-wing spokespeople like Murray find unexpected and welcome allies among the disadvantaged and the deprived.

If I may add a shade of colour local, the post-communist experience only undermines the validity of this claim. There was a natural breeding ground for disillusionment and hopelessness in these countries, where on the one hand there was no democratic tradition and on the other the encounter with capitalism after the fall of the wall was brutal. In this context, meritocracy, the "role of the state is to create equal opportunities", the unfulfilled promise of social mobility, have prepared the socio-psychological ground for the populist hegemony that Orbán and Kacinsky have embodied. It does not matter that the protection they promise is illusory. At least they promise something that the rhetoric of meritocratic technocracy, even at its best, could not touch.

To sum up, this is a thoughtful study that brings together different arguments. It is certainly worth reading because it addresses fundamental issues in our societies.