

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

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The paper is written clearly and is full of interesting information. I think, however, that it should be better focused because the impression I had while reading it was, on the one hand, that I was not sure where the author was leading me and, on the other, that the author felt she did not have enough arguments to really make her point. I may be biased by my profession - I am an economist and an academic - so I do not claim that what I will point out need be appropriate from all perspectives. This is especially important considering that the journal we are on is totally interdisciplinary. I nevertheless hope that what I say may be of some use.

The paper begins with an Introduction that presents the basic tenets of a book by Douglas Murray but does not say what the author of the paper intends to do about it. It is usually the case that an introduction introduces the reader to what will be argued in the rest of the paper. This is missing and you feel it: I often would have liked to go and see what the author was getting at.

The second section tells the story of intelligence testing and the "scientific" ideology underlying the view that, contrary to previous societies where social status was predetermined, modern societies are managed by a "cognitive elite". The meritocratic implications of this ideology are then examined in three subsequent sections dealing with the special cases of the US, Britain and Northern Ireland. As I mentioned above, this is informative and interesting but, considering that, when you finish reading the sections, you are about half way in reading the paper, you wonder what this story is about. I understand that the author is not happy with the intelligence measurement and meritocratic ideology but I am not sure why. I am sure that she could say a lot to enrich the argument. Consider the following.

- The attempt to measure intelligence begs: 1) for a scientifically rigorous definition of intelligence; 2) for a definition that allows us to convert its qualitative characteristics into a quantitative variable. Does such a definition exist? According to the paper, the supporters of this idea refer to intelligence as "cognitive abilities" but it is not clear what the latter are. Reputable artists may be semi-illiterate: are they intelligent? A statesperson may be unable to master basic mathematics and yet have the extraordinary ability to understand what the nation – or sections thereof – wants. Is that person intelligent? The only answer to these questions is provided, very succinctly, right before the conclusions: "The philosopher Mary Midgley [...] argues the word 'intelligence' does not have a single measurable property". I am not an expert in this field of inquiry but I am fairly sure that there is quite a bit of literature that deals with this issue, I would try to refer to it.
- My impression is that how we define intelligence depends on what we need it for. Reference to the cognitive elite is

crucial. Intuitively, you must put intelligent people in charge of tasks that require intelligence. The issue, however, is what tasks are we really talking about? Truly, we need someone with cognitive capabilities in medicine to be able to diagnose and identify possible cures. Are those same cognitive capabilities enough to decide whether the sick person should actually take that cure, or is a different intelligence involved to decide whether and how to cure oneself? Could it be that it has to do with making sense of life, an intelligence that transcends the doctor's knowledge and that involves making the best of the peculiar cognitive skills the individual involved has? Similarly, the cognitive capabilities of economists may be required to understand how to enhance the growth of national output but is it up to those same capabilities to decide whether the strictly economic benefits of growth, that economists measure, actually make up for the environmental and social costs – such as those associated to climate change - which money, or other quantitative indicators, cannot measure rigorously? My impression is that focus on schools that provide technical cognitive capabilities conceals the need for an education that allows everybody to make sense of the world they live in and to choose what is good and what is bad about it. My impression is that meritocratic ideology is strictly associated to a technocratic one. Do we really want to be governed by technocrats? I believe there is quite a bit of literature on technocracy that would deserve to be discussed. The issue is strictly related to the notion of freedom.[1]

- Is the measurement of intelligence associated only to tasks or does it involve a specific position in the hierarchy of income distribution? In other words, does being intelligent necessarily imply that one should be paid relatively more than others? This is in no way straightforward. Why should a miner who carries out an unhealthy and dangerous job get less than a university professor who sits comfortably in her armchair while she studies? There is no straightforward answer and I believe Michael Sandel, who is cited in the paper, has much to say on this.
- Strictly related to the above, is the measurement of intelligence associated only to tasks or does it involve a specific status, i.e., a position in the social hierarchy? In other terms, does the fact that you are smarter than I am mean that you deserve a higher social standing?[2]

Let us go back to the paper. Following the sections mentioned above, the author focuses on Northern Ireland, its long and dramatic internal conflict and her personal experience there as a scholar. I am not sure what the upshot of this part of the paper is. It does contain two important remarks. The first one is that the intelligence ideology led to self-fulfilling expectations whereby if you were continuously told that you lacked cognitive capabilities you would eventually give up trying to improve. The second one is that “The role of class within Northern Ireland's recent political history is rarely acknowledged”. A great deal of the story told in the two sections on Northern Ireland leads to these remarks but is not centered on them. Both appear incidental whereas they would require further elaborations.

Two subsequent sections discuss the equality agenda in the US and the UK, that is, how the laws in these two countries try to deal with disadvantaged minorities. Unfortunately, it focuses only on discrimination while, at this point of the discussion, I would have expected some information about the actual situation in these countries. Although what people like Murray contend is questionable on theoretical grounds – these were mentioned above – it is also somewhat awkward in the light of the actual state of affairs. It simply neglects the failure of whatever equality goals these countries may have pursued. It does not deal with the persistence of a factual discrimination of minorities and of socio-economic stratification[3]. These phenomena are not a mere historical legacy, they are the outcome of neoliberal economic policies

that have determined a redistribution of income and wealth in favor of the wealthiest along with a reduction of whatever welfare could increase social mobility[4]. This is what underlies the education and health issues the author mentions further on. While the legal system apparently tried to contrast inequality in civil rights, economic policy increased inequality in social rights. Under these circumstance it is definitely not enough to conclude that “This ‘like with like’ comparison [in the legal assessment of discriminatory practices] dispels Douglas Murray’s claim that much of contemporary society is obsessed with a particular idea of diversity and equality ‘that is all encompassing and all consuming’ when in fact, according to UK law, an astrophysicist can only be compared with an astrophysicist and a refuse collector with a refuse collector.”

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[1] I believe Nussbaum and Sen (1995) and Sen (2000) may be insightful in this respect.

[2] The relation between class – broadly defined - and social standing is discussed by Veblen (1994) and by Bourdieu (1984). See also Trigg (2001).

[3] Some indicative data on the present situation of African Americans in the USA is in Mason et al. (2020).

[4] Harvey (2005) is a useful introduction to neoliberalism. Aguiar de Medeiros & Trebat (2022) focuses on income distribution.