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# *Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race*

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*Tracing the philosophical underpinnings of scientific racism from the early work of hereditarians Darwin, Spencer, and Sumner, to the intelligence testing movement led by Galton and Binet, and lastly to the contemporary race and IQ studies of Jensen, Herrnstein, and Murray, this article maintains that science is often used as a justification to propose, project, and enact racist social policies. It begins with a review of the philosophy of Social Darwinism and of its assumptions about race and human abilities, and ends by analyzing a largely unbroached theme in this debate: the consequences of scientific racism for dominant groups.*

Science has often been used as a justification to propose, project, and enact racist social policies. The philosophical and political underpinnings of ideas associated with racial superiority and inferiority were first given scientific legitimacy and credence with the publication of Charles Darwin's (1859) revolutionary book, *The Origin of Species*. In more recent times, the controversy surrounding the publication of Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) presumably scientific study, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, and the reintroduction to the national conversation of powerful arguments about race and human abilities, provide yet another opportunity to focus on questions pertinent to the origins, maintenance, and consequences of human abilities and potential. In the main, however, such studies and debates reveal far more about those proposing and advocating racist arguments than about the groups toward whom they are directed. Although much attention has been directed, and justly so, toward considerations of the impact of genetic politics on excluded and oppressed populations, more attention should be placed on the negative effect these policies have on the dominant and powerful groups that enact and implement them.

The present article maintains that the intellectual bases of the arguments presented in works of scientific racism are more than mere abstractions; rather, they are germane—indeed, they are central—to both the idea of the democratic process and the question of what constitutes a “just” society. Thus, it begins with a review of the philosophy of Social Darwinism and of its assumptions about race and human abilities. It next critiques the social issues and problems addressed or exhumed by this ideology and examines some of the reasons why certain segments of American society have found its tenets so appealing. Third, in discussing the circumstances surrounding the development and introduction of intelligence testing during the early decades of the 20th century, it analyzes a largely unbroached and untapped theme in the race and human abilities debate: the consequences of scientific racism for America's dominant groups.

Before the suppositions of Social Darwinism enshrined the idea of European superiority as a key feature of natural evolution and selection, the association between color (race) and intellectual predisposition had long been a topic for discussion among many European thinkers. Although Rose (1968) notes that the recognition of racial differences is longstanding and traceable through biblical and historical texts, Bernier (see Gossett, 1963), Buffon (1797), and later Gobineau (1853/1915) were to set a pattern in racist thinking by linking color to behavior and human ability. Notwithstanding, the racist logic of these thinkers, though mostly declarative and deeply rooted in the idea of European supremacy and "colored" inferiority, lacked a grand and global philosophical and political framework within which it could logically operate.

Though Darwin (1859) focused primarily on the biological evolution of animal species and almost never addressed the cultural or social consequences of this evolution for humans, others like Herbert Spencer (1874), who first coined the phrase "survival of the fittest," reasoned that Darwinist principles were intended to buttress the case that biological evolution could be equally applicable to human societies. Spencer reasoned further that human societies, like biological species, operate according to the principles of natural selection, are governed by competition and fitness, and evolve from an undifferentiated (homogeneous) and primitive state to one of differentiation (heterogeneity) and progress. Those too weak or ill-equipped to compete, or those who are unwilling and unable to do so, he reasoned, ought not to be given an artificial boost to keep them on Nature's battlefield.

Spencer's ideas about the evolution and operation of human societies were held in conjunction with his strong beliefs in *laissez-faire* government and individualism. Though these views gave his theories a decidedly conservative bent, politically he was a noninterventionist and anti-imperialist, a man whom Hofstadter (1992) describes as a somewhat benevolent pacifist and internationalist armchair theorist. Greene (1963) ties Spencer more directly to ideas equated with racist thinking by noting Spencer's belief that racial conflict was the key to social progress because it entailed "a continuous over-running of the less powerful or less adapted by the more powerful or more adapted, a driving of inferior varieties into undesirable habitats, and occasionally, an extermination of inferior varieties" (p. 85). Spencer's alarm over the potential threat of these inferior varieties to Western civilization was a logical consequence of his desire to promote a society of intellectually superior citizens. Indeed, his great fear was that governments would intervene to keep the less powerful afloat with artificial devices such as social welfare policies, thereby upsetting Nature's natural selection process.

During the antebellum period in the United States, William Graham Sumner (1963) was the nation's leading Social Darwinist; he was also the nation's first sociologist. Sumner adopted Spencer's ideas of *laissez-faire* government, natural selection, and survival of the fittest and applied them to American society. Essentially, he held that what *is* is Nature's stamp of approval of what *ought* to be. Positioning the peculiar institution of American slavery within Darwinist and Spencerian frames of reference, Sumner reasoned that because slavery permitted superior groups the leisure to construct and develop more refined cultures, it actually advanced the cause of humanity (Bierstedt, 1981). He viewed American society, particularly the American business class, as representative of the natural order of things and the living example of Spencer's fitness thesis. Sumner took such a stance without equivocation because he believed all individuals begin the competitive socioeconomic race on an equal footing. Even if the competition is unequal or certain individuals are given an edge, it was his contention that the element of chance, along with motivation and natural ability, were the deciding factors in determining an individual's or

a group's fate. When Sumner's rigid political beliefs are coupled with his view of slavery, what emerges is not only an anti-humanist position but also one that promotes social indifference and social cruelty.

It is clear from these brief accounts of Darwin's, Spencer's, and Sumner's views how their ideas helped to set the tone and mood for relations between the races as well as the classes in American society. In their world views, talent and virtue were features to be identified solely with Europeans. Yet, whereas Spencer might be called a "gentle racist," Sumner was not so gentle, though neither of the two was nowhere near as rabidly racist as two English Social Darwinists of their era, Karl Pearson (1901) and Benjamin Kidd (1902). Kidd's and Pearson's ideas were responses to the rush on the part of the European nations and the United States to establish colonies during the last decade of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Both were territorial expansionists who viewed European, and especially English, colonialism, imperialism, and other efforts to control the natural resources and people of distant continents as natural components of the Darwinist principles entailed in the struggle for existence, survival, and supremacy. However, unlike Spencer and Sumner, who were anti-imperialists, Kidd and Pearson saw English political, economic, and cultural control of "inferior" races as not only necessary to England's political and economic survival, but also important for bringing civilization to the unenlightened.

The battle for control over Africa, Asia, and South America, in Kidd's and Pearson's view, was a battle, in the Hobbesian sense, of "a war of all against all" among contending European and American governments (Hofstadter, 1992; Semmel, 1968). It was Pearson who raised an issue that is seldom verbalized but often a hidden force in racist thought: the message conveyed to members of the dispossessed among the dominant group that they will be the political and economic beneficiaries of racial discrimination and racial exclusion due to their nation's imperialistic policies. Thus, he surmised that poor and lower-class Whites ought to become partners in the imperialist venture, maintaining that the very survival of Western civilization depended upon such a partnership (Semmel, 1968).

The racial struggle that was designed to prove European and White American superiority over Africans, Native Americans, Asians, and Latin Americans was accompanied by a battle just as important to prove the merits of capitalism, imperialism, and slavery. However, it is evident that the material aspects of racial domination preceded the ideological justification that emerged to buttress the relationship between race and human abilities. In both cases, the Social Darwinist argument was used to prove and validate already existing institutional structures. According to Hofstadter (1992):

Although Darwinism was not the primary source of the belligerent ideology and dogmatic racism of the late nineteenth century, it did become a new instrument in the hands of the theorists of race and struggle. . . . In the decades after 1885, Anglo-Saxonism, belligerent or pacific, was the dominant abstract rationale of American imperialism. . . . The Darwinist mood sustained the belief in Anglo-Saxon racial superiority which obsessed many American thinkers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The measure of world domination already achieved by the "race" seemed to prove it the fittest. (pp. 172-173)

Social Darwinism was accepted in England and the United States because it supported policies and practices that both countries justified as congruent with their national interests. Though England lacked the internal racial problems that existed in the United States, its vast empire required it to develop external racist colonial and imperialist policies based on

<sup>1</sup> During this period, the United States was more interested in colonizing the existing land mass of the North American continent. Notwithstanding, its ventures into Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands, buoyed by the unchallenged hegemony in these regions provided by the Monroe Doctrine, removed it from direct competition with Europeans for the spoils of Africa and Asia.

Social Darwinist principles. In the United States, Social Darwinism was directed internally toward both race and economics. Much of the American literature on the inferiority of African people did not emerge until the 1840s and 1850s, when the institution of slavery was being attacked in the North and when most industrial countries had either abolished the practice or were in the process of doing so (Oakes, 1982).

#### SCIENTIFIC RACISM: THE IDEOLOGY OF IQ TESTING

During the last two decades of the 19th century, the belief in natural selection, racial purity, and racial struggle, elevated to a high level by the Social Darwinists, was given new emphasis by Francis Galton (1892), the father of the eugenics movement. Whereas liberals and conservatives of the time were divided with regard to which force more decisively determined individual characteristics—heredity or environment—Galton supported the former with a vengeance. So convinced was he of the efficacy of eugenics, or controlled and selective breeding, as a tool to racially regenerate his native England that he urged the adoption of the idea as a new religion (Semmel, 1968). Key to Galton's hereditarian ethos was his view that society must dispense with the erroneous idea of natural equality among humans. His eugenics program encouraged childbearing among the "fitter stock" of Western society, namely its wealthy Anglo-Saxon upper classes; and discouraged it among those whom he considered "unfit," namely those of the lower classes and people of color.

In an effort to prove inherent differences between the social classes in England, Galton constructed a series of tests focusing primarily on sensory and motor skills assessment. The movement to scientifically "prove" that hereditary factors were paramount to intellectual endowment was accelerated by the work of two Frenchmen, Alfred Binet and Théophile Simon, who constructed the first practical intelligence test in 1905. This instrument, the Binet-Simon Scale, was later modified and extended by Lewis Terman and his associates at Stanford University in 1916 to yield the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, one of the first to utilize the concept of the "intelligence quotient" or IQ (Shanklin, 1994; Singer & Sattler, 1994; Terman, 1961). The modern fascination with testing was partly a reflection of the growing scientism emerging among the academic disciplines, especially the social or human sciences, which were being challenged by those who viewed the techniques and methodologies of the natural sciences as representative of "true" or "hard" science. As a result, those scholars who studied people were spurred to construct theories and methods that would enable them to operate with the same degree of precision achieved by the natural sciences. For many, reliance on standardized tests such as Binet's and other quantifiable assessments of intelligence was one way of proving that the social sciences could be as objective and impersonal as the study of chemistry or physics (Lundberg, 1939).

Another part of the fascination with intelligence testing is evident in the ongoing search for measures to validate Galton's thesis of Anglo-Saxon superiority. This idea, which sought validation under the rubric of Social Darwinism, was mainly an "after-the-fact" assertion—that is, Anglo-Saxons were believed superior because they enjoyed political, economic, and cultural hegemony over non-Anglo-Saxon people. However, its verification was especially important in the United States during the first two decades of the 20th century. Indeed, racial chauvinism provided a philosophical and moral rationale for differentiating "native" Anglo-Saxon Americans from the millions of eastern and southern European, Asian, and Latin American immigrants who chose to become Americans during that period as well as from the millions of African Americans who were then migrating en masse from the South to other parts of the country (Sowell, 1981). The manner in which the test scores of these various immigrant and migrant groups were

announced so as to give bragging rights to the Anglo-Saxon majority attests to the racist nature of both the tests and their uses (Stark, 1989). Repeatedly, the ideology of ethnic or racial superiority would be called upon to confirm the dominant group's worth and standing, and test results would be cited to validate the rightness of this ideology.

One does not have to engage in extensive debate on the validity of the tests themselves; simple commonsense logic, devoid of class or racial presuppositions, should alert those who assert IQ tests' ability to verify superiority or inferiority to the fact that the largely rural and peasant immigrating and migrating populations were culturally and educationally not akin to the dominant Anglo-Saxons, who had benefit of many generations of selective urban culture and education. Hence, the very basis for such comparisons is null and void. But that perspective would be logical and rational. The early 20th-century belief in the genetic superiority of the Anglo-Saxon was groundless and had more to do with the ethnic and racial politics of the times than with any scientific attestations. Whereas each group had its "slot" in the ethnic totem pole, racial politics gave even the lowest European American the opportunity and right to a sense of racial one-upmanship in his or her contacts with African Americans. Just as Social Darwinist theories were used to justify European imperialism and colonialism, the thesis of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, buttressed by test results, justified racial and ethnic oppression and exclusion in the United States. Yet, like Social Darwinism, the IQ testing movement did not create or cause racial discrimination or oppressive behavior; it simply enabled certain Whites to better justify long-standing ideological assumptions, policies, and oppressive behaviors. IQ tests thus became ideological weapons in the campaign to label certain persons so as to better exploit them.

In the U.S., the growing belief in science and scientific methodology as an avenue to objective truth about human abilities linked the acceptance of IQ test scores to ideas of progress. For many White Americans, the vast coverage given test results only confirmed what they believed only ideologically: that there was a White ethnic hierarchy, and that this hierarchy, despite differences, stood atop all other races, especially the African American. Indeed, the need to believe that African Americans were inferior was a view deeply held by many of their White counterparts during the early years of the current century. The ethos surrounding the scientific racism of the burgeoning intelligence testing movement permitted Whites to know and relate to Black Americans as abstractions and one-dimensional figures. Thus, the tests accomplished two purposes: first, they confirmed White superiority; and second, they strengthened the idea that Blacks should be excluded from the core culture of American society. However, the institution of measures to ensure these objectives also ensured that, among Whites, there would continue to be a degree of collective social immaturity and massive flight from reality with regard to Blacks.

In the late 1960s, much apprehension was generated by the heightened immigration of African Americans from the South to urban southern, northern, and midwestern cities, and by their attempts to translate this population influx into political, economic, educational, and cultural power. Following the tradition begun by Galton, the psychologist Arthur Jensen (1969) declared that not only were African Americans intellectually inferior to Whites, but that there would always be a 15-point IQ differential between the two groups. Though Jensen may have viewed his raising of these issues as exploratory, the negative insights about Black abilities presented in his article were enough to stir the racial pot. In the minds of many Whites, his assertion that Blacks were incapable of attaining the same intellectual levels achieved by some Whites only confirmed Black inferiority. Advocates of segregation used Jensen's tentative data to fight the desegregation cases lodged against many school districts in the South (Turner, Singleton, & Musick, 1984). Opponents of compensatory education were bolstered by Jensen's claim that such

programs, which enrolled a significant percentage of African Americans, were not significant factors in lessening Black–White IQ differences.

Jensen's article, which followed on the heels of Moynihan's (1965) disheartening, government-sponsored report on the Black family and issues related to crime and delinquency, out-of-wedlock births, crime, and poverty in the Black community, was a call for American society to look more deeply at factoring genetics into the intellectual process. One can not help but assume, given the wide circulation of Jensen's article and the national discussion it generated, that his findings no doubt contributed to this climate of fear. Indeed, following his reading of Jensen's study, Moynihan allegedly informed then-President Nixon to follow a policy of "benign neglect" with regard to African American community development.

Like the scientific racism of the earlier intelligence testing movement, the Jensen-initiated race and IQ debate came at a time of massive migration of Blacks from the South to other parts of the United States, but there were other international factors that played an important part in setting the tone and tenor of this debate, at least for Blacks. During the earlier era, Africa and much of Asia were under the control of colonial powers. By the end of the 1960s, most of Africa had been liberated, either through wars of liberation or by recognition on the part of the colonial powers that they could no longer hold on to their African colonies. Additionally, the numbers of cities with Black majorities, Black mayors, and Black city council members had increased geometrically during the period after the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* desegregation ruling. Thus, Black Americans had a frame of reference in the later period that they lacked at the turn of the century. Not only could they see that they had abilities, despite what IQ test scores demonstrated, but they could look around their communities and the world and find evidence of their energies and talents. The claim here is not to assert the absence of negativism in Black life; rather, it is to maintain that the intelligence and ability of Black people cannot be sufficiently understood or described only by the negative, especially insofar as the data on Black performance and potential are often skewed and the results often misinterpreted. Intelligence test scores may be significant, but they represent only a part of the picture of a person's or a group's ability, possibility, and reality.

#### THE BELL CURVE: SOCIAL DARWINISM AND SCIENTIFIC RACISM REVISITED

In the contemporary period, Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve* makes yet another appeal to the American public and its policy makers to elevate genetics over environment as the pivotal factor in determining human abilities. As was also true for previous Social Darwinist and scientific racist analyses, Herrnstein and Murray's book was published at a time when race and racial matters stood at the center of national debate and discussion.<sup>2</sup> Even though racial analyses constitute only about a third of its contents, issues germane to race set the stage for much of the debate surrounding the book.

Essentially, Herrnstein and Murray repeat many of Jensen's assertions in their 1990s study. For example, the matter of the allegedly fixed IQ spread between Blacks and Whites, first enunciated by Jensen, resurfaces in *The Bell Curve*. The book also repeats Jensen's position that compensatory education is both a waste of time and public resources. However, what is most striking about the similarities between *The Bell Curve* and earlier works of scientific racism is that the former so blatantly espouses a form of totalitarian and reactionary philosophy that can only be seen in its purest form through the lenses of

<sup>2</sup> A simple review of American history will reveal that there were very few moments when race was not a major issue in this nation (Gossett, 1963).

Social Darwinism. For example, the argument raised by Social Darwinists is that individual characteristics are shaped by genetics and thus are firm and fixed for all groups at all times. In true Galtonian and Pearsonian fashion, Herrnstein and Murray assert in their work that culture, intellect, and knowledge are racially determined, fixed, and hence not subject to devices of social reconstruction. Moreover, they also maintain that negative aspects of group or individual behaviors are reflections of preordained dispositions unchangeable by the group, the individual, or the society. Like Sumner, they contend that attempts to change the behaviors or improve the intellect of a given group or individual are foolish and destined to fail. In Herrnstein and Murray's view, Nature supersedes nurture, "bright" makes right, and those who have the ability to engage successfully on Nature's battlefield can and should do so, oblivious to the needs of others.

According to the logic of *The Bell Curve*, Blacks or other societal have-nots, because they have failed the Darwinist/Spencerian survival-of-the-fittest test, ought not to be given social consideration, remediation, compassion, or compensation to "level the playing field." This is Malthusian logic personified: Whites owe Blacks nothing because, due to the latter's faulty genetics, any and all efforts to radically change their lives would come to naught. It is a hard doctrine, one possessed by conservative White elites who take their superiority as a given, and who, from their lofty heights in academe or from their protected status at conservative think tanks, issue either veiled or overt declarations of Black inferiority.

### THE SEEDS OF RACISM

The desire to subjugate speaks volumes about the tangible political and economic gains accrued to those doing the subjugating. Attacks on the abilities of the subjugated can thus be seen as merely an attempt to morally justify actions that often run contrary to the stated democratic principles of the subjugators. In such a scenario, more important than merely asserting that subjugated ones are inferior, the subjugator is really boldly asserting his or her need to maintain others in inferior roles.

Many have pointed out the negative consequences of racist social policies and practices for the societies that promulgate them. DuBois (1903/1961) reasoned at the turn of the 20th century that White Americans' belief in their superiority had made them oblivious to the sufferings of their fellow citizens; made a mockery of the values of democracy; promoted dishonesty in racial matters; and contributed nothing toward the development of logic, reason, and rationality in American social life. Hobson (1938) directed his analysis toward the negative consequences of imperialism for imperialist countries. The factors he cites as negative must be viewed within the contexts of the perceived ideas of superiority held by colonizing countries and how those ideas become a motivating force to justify the time, funds, and energy expended to conquer, control, or annex the colonized. For example, Hobson identifies the following harm done to England as a result of its colonial and imperialist policies: greater acceptance of totalitarian policies, a negation of democratic principles, lessened emphasis on internal political and economic reforms, the depression of wages for the average worker, the draining of the national treasury, and the mistaken belief among the English working classes that they benefitted from colonies when in reality the surplus income derived from colonial resources was retained by the imperial and wealthy classes.

The typical White American response to race and racism is denial and an implicit defensiveness; thus, there is a tendency among some Whites to latch onto data that might let persons of European descent off the racial "hook." For these Whites, findings that support inherent and eternal Black intellectual inferiority evoke sighs of relief. Such data

make them feel slightly better and not so guilty about harboring racist feelings or ideas opposing racial inclusion. But these feelings and ideas are not meaningless, hollow abstractions; they have consequences (Dennis, 1981). They are real and frequently come to life in ways not envisioned by their promulgators. Similarly, issues of race and human abilities do not begin or evolve in a vacuum. Rather, they often emerge to respond to tangible political, economic, or cultural situations. The presentation of data asserting Black inferiority or White superiority is bound to cause a reaction and response within the larger society.

Although the average White American will not or cannot read studies such as Jensen's or *The Bell Curve*, after the politicians, policy makers, talk-show hosts, and others have provided their soundbites and synopses of these works, the complex problems and issues they raise will have been unduly simplified and made that much more dangerous. The picture they paint, of Blacks and other people of color as collective biological illiterates—as not only intellectually unfit but evil and criminal as well—will provide the logic and justification for those who would further disenfranchise and exclude racial and ethnic minorities. Such logic would entail a rejection of the idea of the open society. It might also prompt a small minority of Whites to retreat to a pathological and fanatical hatred of non-Whites. Whether the recent burnings of African American churches throughout the South is one of the signs of such a pathological sickness is yet unknown, but, in the name of science, the actions of professional scholars in the present era who feed this racist ideology with unsubstantiated and insupportable data are tantamount to yelling “fire” in a crowded room.

## CONCLUSION

As one navigates the politics of race and human abilities, one is tempted to view the theoretical ploddings of eugenicists and scientific racists like Spencer or Sumner with a degree of sympathy. They, at least, had no data and were largely talking from the tops of their heads; yet they talked so much and so loudly they were able to convince many others that much of what they uttered was based on facts. We know now that this was not the case.

Their contemporary apostles, however, present us with lots of data, much of it mired in pages of jargon, but what is clear in the end is that they know just about as much or as little about genetics as did Pearson or Galton. They seek in the present day to overwhelm us with what they claim is the beauty and purity of their data, but their pronouncements are just as ideologically driven and racially and politically inspired as those of their predecessors. Yet, unlike Jensen, who was and is generally very careful in his extra-data pronouncements, Herrnstein and Murray in *The Bell Curve* do not hesitate to make ideological assertions that cannot be supported by their data. In this sense, they are more akin to Spencer, Kidd, Pearson, and Galton than to Jensen. Additionally, though the surviving author, Charles Murray (Richard Herrnstein died shortly before the book was published), claims not to have written the book with the politics of race in mind, a review of previous works by both authors suggests that quite the opposite may be true. Murray's conservative racial politics were clearly stated in his 1988 book, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*, and many of his earlier arguments are repeated in *The Bell Curve*. Thus, in these and many other ways, scientific racists like Herrnstein and Murray are distant but not strange bedfellows to their philosophical forebears, and they can be comparably viewed as vulgar and dogmatic genetic determinists who appeal to the racial animosity and hatred of dominant groups to push their reactionary political agendas.

That human abilities are diverse seem obvious. What is made of this diversity is often a political issue, especially in a society where race historically has served as a dividing line.

To illustrate this point, closing parallels can be drawn between the continuing volatility of race in American society and the dangers of nuclear war discussed throughout the late 1940s, 1950s, and even today. One of the major themes posed during such discussions was that of the role of the scientist and other well-informed citizens (Lifton & Markusen, 1990). Just as the nuclear threat was predicated on the idea of the nuclear superiority of the East over the West and vice-versa, and just as that nuclear competition often took the world to the brink of nuclear war, contemporary assumptions of racial superiority, based on the politics of genetics and racist ideology, threaten to take our nation and world to the brink of racial guerilla warfare. The appeal to logic and reason made by the scientists and progressive politicians during the nuclear crisis must now be made by responsible social analysts. Their charge is to educate and inform the public, not to fan the flames of racial intolerance.

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