
about to begin." Indeed, Siegel's subsequent experiences in India, such as procuring airline tickets to Kashmir when none were available, often mirror the "wonders and deceptions" in an Indian magic show. Eventually he succeeds in transferring the fascination and complexity of the magic show from itinerant conjurers on dusty street corners to the workings of the society surrounding them. A study of magic becomes a way of understanding, and experiencing, contemporary India.

Earlier belletrists aimed only to think well and write charmingly. *Net of Magic* represents a newer academic genre, in which the scholar leaves his desk and does original field research, and then returns not with a monograph but with literature.

Contemporary Affairs

THE BELL CURVE: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life. By Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray. Free Press. 845 pp. \$30

The Bell Curve is not the seminal, groundbreaking work its authors suggest. Nor is it the semilunatic, right-wing tract that some critics have charged. Herrnstein (who died last year) was a psychologist at Harvard University and Murray is the author of *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (1986); together they have written a sober critique of "the ideology of equality." They argue—not so controversially—that the present, singleminded leveling in *all spheres* is a far, far different thing from the Founders' notion of the moral equality of all men.

Were this all their argument, Herrnstein and Murray would be indistinguishable from a dozen other conservative commentators. What makes *The Bell Curve* the most controversial book of the year is that it places human intelligence at the center of social-policy debate. Herrnstein and Murray have aroused a furor by reviving evidence that black Americans, as a group, score consistently and considerably lower on IQ tests than whites. They further argue that IQ tests measure something real and are

not culturally biased. Finally, they conclude that society's organized efforts to raise IQ scores, such as the Head Start program, have been dismal failures. At this point, Herrnstein and Murray may begin to sound a bit like two good old boys making racial slurs and then claiming they are only reciting the facts of nature.

Yet underneath their sometimes smarmy tone they present an argument that is more qualified, more ambiguous, and not without its ironies. Although they believe that intelligence has a genetic component, they point out that cognitive abilities are hardly immutable. There has been, for example, "substantial" narrowing of the black-white gap in IQ scores in the past 20 years. Indeed, Americans generally are scoring better than ever: "On the average," Herrnstein and Murray write, "whites today may differ in IQ from whites, say, two generations ago as much as whites today may differ from blacks today." That admission could be read as an implicit endorsement of welfare state policies, and in fact the authors do endorse such proposals as a modest income redistribution through increased earned income tax credits.

But ultimately Herrnstein and Murray want to draw the curtain on the welfare state. If they concede that certain societal changes—from the democratization of higher education to better nutrition—have equalized environmental influences and created a meritocracy in America, they also argue that all such possible improvements have by now been accomplished. Any further efforts, they argue, will come up against genetically determined differences in intelligence. This is a point many Americans will not want to hear—certainly not black Americans. Perhaps the case for unchangeable disparities in group intelligence could be made without much ado in, say, Sweden, but to argue thus in a racially diverse, ethnically divided America is like lighting a stick of dynamite. Indeed, if the "science" of *The Bell Curve* has proved debatable, its policy recommendations, under a varnish of sophistication, come close to being politically naive. Though the authors maintain that the welfare state cannot bring us equality, they suggest nothing else for dealing with the entrenched inequality they have described.