BOOK REVIEWS

Instruments of Control

Testing Testing. Social Consequences of the Examined Life. F. ALLAN HANSON. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993. x, 378 pp. $28.

This book attacks testing in modern society. Closely following the work of the French writer Michel Foucault, the author sees tests as "instruments of the evolving system of dominating institutions that act to curtail individual freedom and dignity" (p. 7). Hanson distinguishes between different kinds of tests. "Authenticity" tests try to ascertain a person's character and consequent credibility. In earlier times, witch-swimming or trials by battle, ordeal, or torture provided external evidence of honesty, guilt, or innocence; today we rely on lie-detector probes, drug testing, or written integrity tests to provide clues to a person's inner state. "Qualifying" tests, such as vocational or intelligence tests of various sorts, evaluate one's aptitude and competency to perform any of the myriad of specialized roles in modern society. Typically, organized agencies of some sort asymmetrically administer such formal tests to individuals. And, Hanson points out, tests in general only gather information that "represents" other desired knowledge. Thus, when suspected witches floated in cold water, it was once clear evidence of satanic affiliation in most European countries; when a high school junior scores, say, 1500 on the SAT, it is taken as evidence of great intelligence. Moreover, tests embody the logic and "constitutive codes" of social institutions. Hanson goes on to argue that "institutional analysis" reveals that history can be "read" as the gradual perfection of the manipulation and subordination of human beings to serve institutional ends. Tests are a crucial component of Foucault's notion of the evolving "disciplinary technology of power," which subjects individuals to increasing surveillance and domination. Indeed, Hanson argues: "Power applied through the boiling caldron, the hot iron, the torture chamber, and the executioner's scaffold was comparatively feeble. It has since been replaced with subtler but more pervasive and effective expressions of power. Among these . . . are the tests of industrial and postindustrial society" (p. 47). Unfortunately, one might note, the rack, rope, and other such early tests did not leave behind many subjects able to provide data with which we might assess such a judgment.

Given this perspective, the author advocates the abolition of most contemporary testing. In particular, he wants most drug and integrity tests eliminated or sharply curbed, as happened in 1988 with the legislative prohibition of polygraph testing in the private sector. He also advocates dropping the multitude of standardized vocational and intelligence tests that act as silent gatekeepers to all major institutional arenas. Such tests, he feels, help produce piecemeal, fragmented views of the person; moreover, they dispel the "mystery" of the person by opening the self to the "pornographic" gaze of rational techniques. Further, he argues, tests place premiums on potential rather than actual performances of roles; they enshrine "hyperreality," that is, the ascendancy of the signifier over the signified; and they thwart attempts to "diversify" major institutional arenas by discriminating against some minority groups who often perform poorly on certain standardized examinations.

One can certainly agree with Hanson's critiques of applied positivism and of many of the absurd claims based on data from standardized tests. Every professor knows students and every supervisor knows workers whose performances totally belie, in both directions, test-score predictions.

But, like much of Foucault's work, Hanson's book has the feel of Procrustes's bed. Does the proliferation of tests in our era really evince a secret, evolving, and punitive "disciplinary power," or is it merely one more banal by-product of the general bureaucratization of all aspects of life, in which those charged with organizational authority struggle to develop rationalized procedures both to get their work done and to defend their decisions to others? Is the sometimes reluctant but nonetheless ultimately voluntary submission of self to the maze of tests in our society evidence of "mind control," or simply one index of the depth of conscious self-rationalization that—whether the self-subjection is fueled by great or small ambition, a lust for wealth or influence, or just a desire to do whatever is necessary to be left alone—any bureaucratic system engenders?

Moreover, the author's strict focus on formal tests administered by organized agencies seems designed to ensure a confirmation of his and Foucault's perspective of a society increasingly coordinated by external disciplinary measures. The real world is much more complex. Consider the case only within the large organizations that set the tone and tempo for our social order and that Hanson takes as protagonists in his drama. To be sure, all bureaucracies establish formal screening devices. And some men and women can never jump over those hurdles. Taking an egalitarian standpoint, Hanson seems to feel that this is lamentable; but anyone who, say, makes regular use of the airlines views the sifting of would-be pilots somewhat differently. Through such screening, bureaucracies always play a crucial role in a society's allocation of resources and rewards. But, as it happens, the direction that screening takes always depends on the ideologies, worldviews, and sometimes the whims of organizational leaders. For instance, a few years ago one of the major police authorities in New York City bypassed the actual results of a promotional test and elevated a whole cohort of minority officers to the rank of sergeant, even though many of them had scored poorly. To avoid protests from officers who had scored higher but were not promoted, a hurried promotion ceremony was held on Thanksgiving. The city's fire department, under similar political pressure to make sure more minorities pass its entrance examination, recently devised a test that gave partial credit for wrong answers, a plan that became a laughingstock when leaked to the media. Tests, like all other bureaucratic tools, are never autonomous manifestations of some mysterious, immanent institutional logic; they are simply devices to achieve specific organizational goals, and they are used as arbitrarily and capriciously as organizational leaders dare.

After initial screening is completed, men and women selected for the lower levels of a bureaucracy are indeed constantly subjected to more or less formal tests that act as further sorting and monitoring devices. But anyone who has studied actual social behavior in the lower reaches of organizations knows that people develop ingenious ways of thwarting rational attempts to control them, including cheating on tests or paying others to take the tests or to alter the results. Such measures are wholly rational from the standpoint of the individual, even though they are downright irrational from the perspective of the organization. In this sense, rationality often begets irrationality; the two coexist in large organizations in ways that make assertions of unilinear evolutionary direction perilous.

Still further, even at the lower levels of

organizations, formal tests or other kinds of standardized monitoring are by no means the most important sorts of probation. Instead, completely informal tests, whether of one's "character" or of one's abilities, become the key measures of one's standing in an organization. At the lower levels, probations among peers are especially important. For instance, a detective recently described to me an informal authenticity test that he experienced when he was a rookie uniformed policeman. He and his fellow officers had raided a burglary ring's den and discovered a huge cache of stolen goods. A veteran officer ostentatiously picked up a Rolex watch and pocketed it, clearly a reportable action under departmental rules. The rookie decided to do and say nothing. Three weeks later in a bar, the veteran left his own cronies and approached the rookie and his comrades. He took the watch out of his pocket, put it on the bar, and smashed it to bits with his blackjack. The veteran looked at the rookie and said, "You pass."

When one ascends to the middle and higher levels of organizations, probations become more subtle and ambiguous and often cross hierarchical lines. Managers and professionals alike are constantly gauged by how well they have internalized organizational etiquette. How much does one say to one's boss's rivals? How does one show to superiors the requisite combination of self-confidence and deference? Up the ladder, one must meet exigencies while masking the unpleasantness often entailed in doing so. How adroitly does one circumvent bureaucratic procedures, while seeming to adhere to them, in order to do what "has to be done"? How well, at the highest levels, where one's reputation becomes hostage both to one's subordinates and to often unpredictable events, has one mastered the doublethink and doublespeak necessary to address, with seemingly equal conviction, disparate publics with irreconcilable interests and so outfox the media? Indeed, life within bureaucracies consists of an endless round of such informal probations. These, instead of formal standardized tests, are the key mechanisms by which social groups in organizations are formed, alliances are fashioned, and social cohesion, such as it is, is produced.

The book presents a cautionary tale of the hazards of devoting oneself to working out the overarching schemes of authors like the celebrated but single-minded Foucault, whose own work, one could argue, has done much to erode the distinction between social theory and pure speculation.

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Vignette: Testing Clean

One ingenious technique to identify a guilty party, reported from India, is to bring all those suspected of a crime together before a tent. They are told that inside is a magic donkey that will bray if a guilty individual pulls its tail but will make no sound if the one administering the tug is innocent. The suspects are then sent into the pitch dark tent one at a time and told to pull the donkey's tail. They are not told that the tail (which is actually attached to no donkey at all) had been liberally smeared with lampblack. After the last one emerges from the tent, they are reassembled and ordered to show their hands. The one with clean hands is judged to be the guilty party.

Setting aside the obvious point that this technique could not be used very often because the word would quickly get around, consideration of it reveals one of the prime characteristics of the asymmetrically skewed logic of lie detection . . . . Why should it be expected that only one of the suspects would emerge with clean hands? Any reasonably prudent individual, innocent or guilty, would probably refrain from pulling the tail. After all, why should one trust an ass, no matter how reputedly magic or sage, not to make mistake? If any suspect should in fact emerge with dirty hands, that person might be judged innocent by the investigators but would also have shown oneself to be a fool.

—*F. Allan Hanson*, in *Testing Testing: Social Consequences of the Examined Life*

Affinities and Rationales

The Diversity of Life. EDWARD O. WILSON. Belknap (Harvard University Press), Cambridge, MA, 1992. viii, 424 pp., illus., + plates. $29.95. Questions of Science.

In *The Diversity of Life* Wilson writes with grace and clarity on an issue he believes to be critically important to the quality of human life—the preservation of biodiversity. Rather than providing a resource or synthesis for biologists or professional conservationists, Wilson explains in simple terms the biological processes responsible for the diversification of species and warns that human activities now cause extinctions of species in historically unprecedented numbers. To provide a rationale for efforts to stave off this great loss, Wilson develops the economic worth of biodiversity and, finally, outlines proposals for preserving the earth's rich heritage of its many millions of species of plants, animals, and microbes. *The Diversity of Life* is a moving and persuasive call to arms by one of the most articulate and influential biologists of our generation.

Because Wilson has become a prominent spokesman for biology and conservation to the general public, professionals should take interest in how he represents scientific issues related to the origins of biodiversity, the basis for concern over the loss of species, and the assumptions underlying his valuation of biodiversity.

Wilson's narrative strengths derive from his ability to convey a wonder for natural history; his pen sketches vivid portraits of habitats and organisms and the rhythms and cataclysms of nature. It is clear throughout this book, as it has been in earlier writings, that Wilson regards nature very personally. This is both the strength and the weakness of *The Diversity of Life*.

The first half of the book presents—at the college freshman level—the evolutionary and ecological processes that have resulted in the buildup of biodiversity: evolutionary change, speciation, adaptive radiation, species interactions. The coverage is conventional, controversies are skirted, and scientific endeavor itself does not figure prominently. Distinction between microevolution and macroevolution is erased by placing these extremes on a continuum produced by scaling single-locus population genetics over time and over the entire genome. Speciation is allopatric, species differences arise from adaptation, and competition plays a prominent role in promoting adaptive radiation on species-poor islands while constraining it in regions of high diversity.

Subtle points of scientific controversy cannot be dealt with satisfactorily in a general treatment, but Wilson nonetheless appears to take sides when it suits his purpose. In doing so, he sidesteps such issues as taxon selection ("Highly diversified groups have better balanced their investments and will probably persist longer into the future"), reductionism ("Only with