R. J. Herrnstein: The Perils of Expounding Meritocracy

One recent June morning Richard Herrnstein, Harvard professor of psychology, was discovered bright and early in his office polishing up a letter to his congresswoman, asking that she initiate impeachment proceedings against President Nixon.

Asked if that were not premature, since no presidential wrong-doing had been established, Herrnstein replied that that was the point of impeachment—to find out.

Herrnstein's search for truth has lately led him into controversial waters. He has been the intermittent target of left-wing student agitation and liberal criticism ever since he published an article entitled "IQ" in the September 1971 issue of the *Atlantic*. The article summarized existing data on the heritability of intelligence and was topped off with a syllogism of Herrnstein's own making: "If differences in mental abilities are inherited, and if success requires these abilities, and if earnings and prestige depend on success, then social standing will be based to some extent on inherited differences among people."

He follows up with corollaries which say that, as equal education and opportunities become available across the spectrum of American society, innate differences will increasingly account for differences among individuals, to the extent society will become more and more stratified along the lines of intelligence. And, since the advance of technology has raised, and will continue to raise, the average IQ required for jobs, "the tendency to be unemployed may run in the genes of a family about as certainly as bad teeth do now."

It all seemed pretty obvious at the time to Herrnstein, and it still does, despite the fact that numerous people have claimed his selection of data was prejudicial and his interpretation biased. Herrnstein waves aside criticism. The problem, he says, is that he has directly challenged current social philosophy to the effect that, if a uniformly good environment were provided for everyone, the gap between the haves and the have-nots would narrow. Herrnstein predicts the opposite effect—"the growth of a virtually hereditary monocracy."

Herrnstein thus jumped into the eye of the storm. "I don't like politics," he says (he swore off politics after Adlai Stevenson lost the 1956 presidential election), "but I've been drawn into it again." In fact, he says, "I know of no other subject that has so effectively uncovered the seamy underside" of academe.

The uproar seems to have come as a surprise to Herrnstein, who says he approached the writing of the article as a nonpartisan observer. "I thought of myself as a journalist—like a person visiting a foreign land he has no prior conception about. It was a fascinating body of data, and it seemed like a good time to write it down."

At first his article aroused a good deal of interest and favorable comment from colleagues, but then campus activists got hold of it, and Herrnstein found himself catapulted into notoriety, joining a constellation of "racist" scholars that features Arthur Jensen, the Berkeley psychologist; William Shockley, the Stanford physicist; and other figures, such as James Coleman, author of a controversial report on the failures of American public education; and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who once authored a report describing the "matriarchal" structure of black ghetto society.

While Herrnstein said next to nothing about blacks in his article, and made it clear that his work was based on research done with whites, the activists thought the implications were clear: Herrnstein was saying that if blacks weren't making the grade it meant they weren't born with the brains to do it.

The Harvard Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Harvard University Action Group formed the nucleus of protest. The latter group, says Herrnstein, is made up of SDS members, members of the Marxist-oriented Progressive Labor Party, and "a few serious, earnest radicals." Their efforts were reinforced by abundant publicity in the *Harvard Crimson* and sympathetic liberal faculty members. As Herrnstein describes in his recent book, *IQ in the Meritocracy*, rallies were held to denounce his "fascist" notions, activists sat in on his classes to hurl barbed questions at him, and two long-standing speaking engagements were aborted because there were indications that no one would be willing to listen to the prescribed topic: pigeon vision (Herrnstein's specialty has been learning behavior in animals). At the University of Iowa he was frightened away by a shouting, chanting mob awaiting him in the auditorium; later he declined to go to Princeton because he felt the administration had not taken adequate precautions to ensure his safety.

The radical activity has now simmered down—the last SDS move before school let out was an attempt to have Herrnstein's teaching investigated and restricted, if necessary. The Harvard Commission of Inquiry dismissed this, citing the need for "the free exchange of ideas." But liberal academics, particularly social scientists, continue to dissociate themselves from Herrnstein's theories, applying to them such adjectives as "irresponsible," "naive," or just plain "wrong."

How did Herrnstein, the mild-mannered pigeon fancier, get from there to here? He was born in 1930 in a Bronx slum to Hungarian Jewish immigrant parents. His father was an unlettered house painter, his mother a seamstress. Young Richard percolated up the class structure in accordance with his own theories about the intellectually gifted. He learned to play the violin at the Bronx High School of Music and Art and went on to college in Manhattan, majoring for a while in mathematics. The Korean war drove him to seek shelter in graduate school, and he took his Ph.D. in psychology from Harvard in 1955. His grounding in statistics was good enough for him to teach a course on that subject at the University of Maryland while he was stationed for 3 years at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. He has been at Harvard since 1958.

He became particularly interested in intelligence testing while collaborating on a source book on the history of psychology in the early 1960's. In 1970, says Herrnstein, he helped design and teach a beginning course in psychology, which included the subject

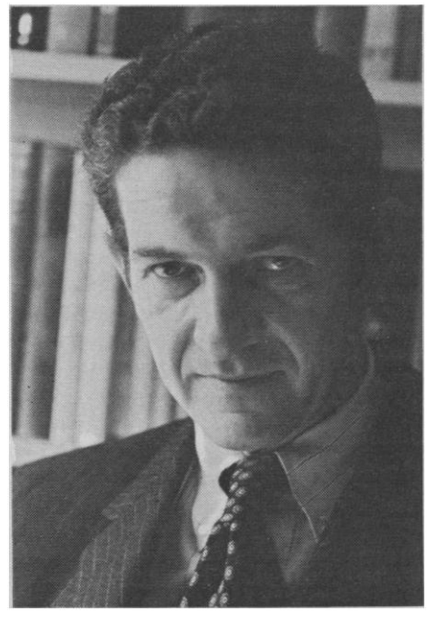
of intelligence testing. This was a mildly radical departure—the subject of intelligence hadn't been taught at Harvard for at least a decade, he says, "because of the taboo that has settled over the subject." Herrnstein said that politics never entered the course, and his students, on being asked, ranked intelligence second only to psychotherapy as the most interesting subject of the course.

The famous syllogism occurred to Herrnstein about 5 minutes before one of his lectures, he says, and struck him, as apparently it did his students, as an excellent way to "drive home the point of the course."

So he wrote the article for the *Atlantic*. Critics have accused him of using an improper, nonscholarly forum for his presentation, but he says these are the same people who believe the *New York Times* has a right to publish anything it can get its hands on (specifically, the Pentagon Papers). Besides, he says, he sent the article around to 27 colleagues—biologists, psychologists, and social scientists—for comment before he submitted it. "I got the most heartwarming collection of letters and praise you can imagine." The shower of praise continued after the article's publication, and included a hand-written note of congratulation from Harvard president Derek Bok. It seemed at last that "intelligence could now be discussed in America," says Herrnstein.

That was before the activists got moving. When the Harvard community got wind of the prevailing radical sentiments, people stopped saying "Hi" in the halls, and social invitations dropped off. Herrnstein didn't mind that too much because he isn't terribly social anyway (his close friends, at least, have "behaved well"). The way people use his work has changed too, he says. Even more disturbing, he says that professors who privately expressed admiration for his article would go back and tell their classes they thought it was "irresponsible."

Herrnstein found himself with a hot potato that it seemed only he was willing to hold. A fairly typical reaction among colleagues was expressed in a critical letter to Herrnstein from Harvard economist Richard Musgrave, who said, "[W]hen dealing with propositions so monstrous and destructive to human relations and the cause of human dignity as that of hereditary racial inferiority, let this freedom [of inquiry] be tempered by the utmost caution and sense of responsibility."



Richard Herrnstein

Sociologist David Riesman, who personally finds Herrnstein to be "scrupulous, intelligent, conscientious, and perceptive," said the attitude of many faculty members has been: "How could he so wound black students?"

Often overlooked is the fact that Herrnstein based his writing on data collected from whites, and he explicitly stated that, "although there are scraps of evidence for a genetic component in the black-white difference [blacks score an average of 15 points lower than whites on IQ tests], the overwhelming case is for believing that American blacks have been at an environmental disadvantage."

Nonetheless, he differs only in degree from Jensen and Shockley. Jensen, who blasted the issue open in an article in the winter 1969 issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, believes it is reasonable to hypothesize that some of the difference in black and white performance on IQ tests is attributable to innate differences in mental ability.

Herrnstein explains that Jensen's hypothesis is solidly based on genetic theory: If a particular trait is in some degree inherited, and it differs in two separate breeding populations, the assumption is that the difference is in some degree genetic. But, says Herrnstein, "Jensen finds genetic evidence more compelling than I do."

Similarly, while Herrnstein has his differences with Shockley, the most he will say is that Shockley's ideas, partly because of the tactless way in which they are presented, are "bound to be misinterpreted." Herrnstein believes in the validity of Shockley's central thesis: that the way people are breeding now, there is a danger of a large portion of the population becoming "genetically enslaved." People who believe in zero population growth, says Herrnstein, are a "radically nonrandom" sampling of the population—that is, they are mostly smart, upper-class people. But he says Shockley's recommendation that people with low IQ's should receive bonuses for voluntary sterilization "is not a politically feasible solution."

The soft-spoken and agreeable Herrnstein has kept his cool under attacks that have sometimes become downright rancorous, but he is growing tired of sitting around and taking it. He says his data are well known and accepted by geneticists and population biologists, and he is being criticized by people, notably social scientists, "who don't have the technical qualifications" for it. "The people who work in this field are hiding under rocks. . . . I'm tired of sitting out front there all by myself. Herrnstein can name a number of colleagues, at Harvard and elsewhere, who have expressed agreement with him in private and have either maintained silence on the subject or actually criticized him in public.

How did all this get started? Herrnstein thinks the activists lit into him because they needed an issue to bring together their raggedy forces. After all, he says, "there is nothing inherently incompatible between socialism and genetics," although socialists are automatically threatened by theories that suggest man's imperfectibility. (Russian communists in the 1930's sought to debunk Mendelian genetics for similar reasons.) The liberals, feels Herrnstein, were driven away from his theories because "they earnestly abhor racism," and some felt obligated to demonstrate loyalty to the sympathies of their students. But Herrnstein feels that the race issue was a red herring, and that what really bothers his colleagues is that he is knocking holes in the "cherished ideals" of egalitarianism. He finds it ironic that the liberals took their cue from the Marxists, even though he feels his ideas are far more inimical to egalitarianism than they are to Marxism.

Herrnstein, while conservative in manner and appearance, regards himself as a "radical" in the true sense be-

cause he has dared broach and expand upon a subject that has been taboo for intellectuals since phony science was used to justify the racist atrocities of World War II. He appears to be a man remarkably free of doubt—he takes a mildly condescending view of his critics and says the more he reads and hears the more convinced he is of the correctness of his thinking.

Critics say he has chosen to ignore voluminous literature that conflicts with or complicates the material he has chosen to support his theories. Many question the entire concept that it will ever be possible to quantify the relative contributions of genes and environment to mental attributes. Many say he is naive and are outraged at his claims that he is unbiased. Psychologist Leon Kamin at Princeton, for example, says Herrnstein has always been an "elitist." Herrnstein's reply is that Kamin is a "fervent Marxist" who "may have let Marxism get the better of his scientific judgment."

The IQ test—which Herrnstein believes to be psychology's "most telling accomplishment"—is now widely regarded as "culture-unfair." Untrue, says Herrnstein. The tremendous "within-class variability" of test scores shows they are not culturally biased. Nor does he think the verbal parts, such as vocabulary testing, discriminate against children with intellectually impoverished environments. "The ability to distinguish between two similar words, such as 'triumph' and 'victory,' gets at something very deep," he says.

Herrnstein doesn't recommend universal IQ testing for children; indeed, he doesn't know the IQ's of his two sons. He says the tests are valuable as diagnostic tools, for comparison of "incomparabilities" (such as two college applicants from differing educational backgrounds), and for research.

It is not the function of scientists to pass moral judgment on their work, says Herrnstein—after all, "nature doesn't give a crap about the character of a scientist. She has hidden her secrets where a creep could find them." Should scientists have misgivings about working on the atom bomb, nerve gas, in vitro fertilization of human ova, cloning? No, says Herrnstein, just because we haven't yet found a beneficial use for nerve gas doesn't mean it shouldn't be developed. "The crunch comes at the level of public policy," and it is up to an "informed public" to make decisions on whether cloning, for example, should be outlawed once proved possible.

Many people think the work of Herrnstein and others will directly influence public policy. A newly formed Committee on Racism at the University of Wisconsin recently issued a press release saying as much: "[I]f people support these hereditary theories, there'll be an end to. . . all programs that assume if you improve the environment, you improve learning ability." Frank Riessman, psychologist and professor of education at Queens College, says that the findings of people like Jensen and Coleman have pervaded federal government thinking on social programs and have provided rationales for their termination. Some programs have been ended because they were no good, but there is an equally strong feeling of "Why should we waste money on poor children when they can't learn anyway?" says Riessman.

Herrnstein says he doesn't know what implications his work should have for public policy, but he does not believe it supplies a rationale for curtailing social programs. He points out that adherents of racism and oppression need no scientific rationale for their convictions.

Herrnstein says he is "utterly agnostic" on the question of whether or not there are innate intellectual differences among races. Ironically, he says, those who claim to fear that the information he has published will be abused are themselves guilty of abusing it. It particularly bothered him to see Alvin Poussaint, a black Harvard psychiatrist, write an article in the Boston *Globe* saying that Herrnstein's pronouncements were "a threat to the survival of every black person in America."

Brezhnev Feasts: Scientists Fast

While Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev and President Richard Nixon were alternately toasting each other and signing accords (see page 39), seven Soviet scientists who had had their applications to emigrate to Israel denied, went on a hunger strike lasting 14 days. In a statement designed to coincide with the publicity given to the summit meetings in the United States, the scientists said, "We are glad of East-West contact. . . . No less than other people, we desire a stable world; but we do not believe that in our time it can be achieved at the expense of anybody's human rights." Citing the problem of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union it concluded: "At the time the two world leaders sit down at the festival table, those who are victims of this selection shall begin the ninth day of our hunger strike."

The scientists included physicists Mark Ya. Azbel, of the Landau Institute of Theoretical Physics; Moisei S. Giterman, of the government Committee of Standards and the Physical-Technical Institute; Alexander V. Voronel, also with the Committee on Standards; and Vladimir L. Roginsky, associated with the State Committee for the Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy. The others were Viktor L. Brailovsky, a computer expert, and two mathematicians, Aleksandor L. Luntz and Anatoly S. Libgober. Midway through the strike Libgober, the youngest, was reported to have been given an exit visa.

The strike's end coincided with Brezhnev's departure from the United States. Before it was over, however, the fasting scientists disputed an issue that has come up previously in the case of Benjamin Levich, another of Russia's most prominent scientists who has been denied an exit visa: whether previous employment in secret government installations is an actual or false excuse by the Soviet authorities for prohibiting scientists from emigrating. The *New York Times* reported on 22 June that the six senior scientists had worked at institutions considered "sensitive" by Soviet authorities.

In one of their frequent telephone conversations to the West, the fasting group denied that they had engaged in secret research or that it is a valid reason for the authorities' denial of their exit visas. Since applying for visas, all had lost their jobs; but three of the physicists were reported as spending their time teaching—by telephone—graduate students in Israel.—D.S.

Inevitably, one must ask Herrnstein what the consequences would be if somehow it were scientifically proven that American blacks had lower average intelligence than American whites. "It doesn't sound very good," says Herrnstein, but whatever the truth, knowing is preferable to not knowing. Nazi Germany, he points out, chose not to know—in order to foster the illusion of uniform Aryan superiority, IQ tests were banned in German schools. Even if the worst were true, it would not necessarily mean a change in social policies, because plenty of blacks would still be smarter than the average white.

Herrnstein does not believe that the truth about race and intelligence would either foster or eradicate racism, since racism is not based on reason, but on visible physical characteristics. He personally thinks that the only cure for racism is intermarriage. Only when people are evenly distributed along the color continuum will they stop being uptight about racial differences. He adds that, even if whites are brighter, intermarriage would have no "dysgenic" effect.

Where do we go from here? Herrnstein is not sure. "Psychology is the science that should find ways to compensate for genetic defects," but "the intellectual muscle in this field is not in psychology." A place to start might be some basic research on compensatory education, which would mean discovering just how the learning process works in people, and then developing a technology to take advantage of the findings.

As he says in his book, "The biological stratification of society looms whether we have tests to gauge it or not, but with them a more humane and tolerant grasp of human differences is possible." He hopes the clouds that prevent the development of such tests are lifting, but he's not terribly optimistic.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Nixon-Brezhnev Summit: A New Clutch of Compacts

If science did not exist, it would be necessary for arrangers of summit conferences to invent it. Together with accords on strategic arms, pacts on matters scientific have formed the bulk of the agreements concluded between President Nixon and General Secretary Brezhnev at their meetings in May 1972 and during last month's summit. The vagueness of the agreements concluded in the past few days leaves uncertain what value they will have in addition to their symbolic role as the icing on the cake of Soviet-American amity.

Of the ten agreements signed by Nixon and Brezhnev or their deputies, four and a half concerned scientific cooperation, and two related to efforts to avoid nuclear war. Scientific accords on oceanography, transportation research, agriculture, and atomic energy formalized extensions of the general science and technology agreement concluded in Moscow last May. Preparatory work on the accords was initiated at a high level some 2 months ago, and the final documents were more or less ready for signing by the time of Brezhnev's visit.

There is certainly an element of the cosmetic art in the agreements. Just how large this element may be, at least in the case of the oceanography agreement, emerged at a press conference held in the State Department just prior to the signing ceremony:

Q: Would you have bothered signing this agreement if there was no summit conference?

Herman Pollock (deputy administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration): I suppose so, because it facilitates the work we have to do. However . . . it is not anything really new for us. But I think the answer is yes—the summit certainly does provide the kind of atmosphere which will give us a more open feeling of joint effort, of cooperation.

Q: In other words, the answer is no—that you wouldn't have really signed it if you didn't have a summit conference.

Pollock did not deny the statement.

The agreements contain the following essential features:

Oceanography, signed 19 June. Cooperation will focus on ocean-atmosphere interaction; ocean currents; geochemistry and marine chemistry; geology and geophysics of the ocean, including deep-sea drilling; biological productivity of the sea; and standardization of instruments and methods. The agreement will be implemented by joint planning, exchange of scientists and information, convening of joint conferences, and so on. A Joint Committee on Cooperation in World Ocean Studies will be established and will meet once a year.

Agriculture, signed 19 June. The agreement defines ten areas of cooperation, including exchange of forward estimates of crop production; forecasting methods; plant science; livestock and poultry science; soil science; mechanization; fertilizers; processing and storage; land reclamation; and use of computers in agriculture. The agreement is to be implemented by the exchange of scientists, information, and plant germ plasm. The two countries will set up a Joint Committee on Agricultural Cooperation, within which there will be two working groups devoted to economic and to agricultural research. From the American side, the agreement will furnish economic intelligence about the state of major Soviet crops, a factor that is said to have been somewhat lacking in last year's wheat deal with the U.S.S.R.

Transportation, signed 19 June. Five areas of cooperation have been selected: construction of bridges and tunnels; railway transport; civil aviation, including problems of efficiency and safety; marine transport, including cargo handling; and automobile transport, with particular reference to traffic safety. The agreement says that scientists and information will be exchanged to this end. A joint committee will be formed to implement the agreement.

Cultural Exchange, signed 19 June. The agreement provides for exchanges in science, technology, education, and culture, through 1979, and stipulates specific numbers for 1974 to 1976. At least 40 graduate and postgraduate students in the sciences or humanities will work in the other country for up to one academic year. At least ten professors will be exchanged, in order to conduct research, for periods up to