

The IQ Meritocracy

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A Frenchman, the psychologist Alfred Binet, published the first standardized test of human intelligence in 1905. But it was an American, Lewis Terman, a psychology professor at Stanford, who thought to divide a test taker's "mental age," as revealed by that score, by his or her chronological age to derive a number that he called the "intelligence quotient," or IQ. It would be hard to think of a pop-scientific coinage that has had a greater impact on the way people think about themselves and others.

No country embraced the IQ—and the application of IQ testing to restructure society—more thoroughly than the U.S. Every year millions of Americans have their IQ measured, many with a direct descendant of Binet's original test, the Stanford-Binet, although not necessarily for the purpose Binet intended. He developed his test as a way of identifying public school students who needed extra help in learning, and that is still one of its leading uses.

But the broader and more controversial use of IQ testing has its roots in a theory of intelligence—part science, part sociology—that developed in the late 19th century, before Binet's work and entirely separate from it. Championed first by Charles Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, it held that intelligence was the most valuable human attribute, and that if people who had a lot of it could be identified and put in leadership positions, all of society would benefit.

Terman believed IQ tests should be used to conduct a great sorting out of the population, so that young people would be assigned on the basis of their scores to particular levels in the school system, which would lead to corresponding socioeconomic destinations in adult life. The beginning of the IQ-testing movement overlapped with the eugenics movement—hugely popular in America and Europe among the "better sort" before Hitler gave it a bad name—which held that intelligence was mostly inherited and that people deficient in it should be discouraged from reproducing. The state sterilization that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes notoriously endorsed in a 1927 Supreme Court decision (with the slogan "Three generations of imbeciles are enough") was done with an IQ score as justification.

The American IQ promoters scored a great coup during World War I when they persuaded the Army to give IQ tests to 1.7 million inductees. It was the world's first mass administration of an intelligence test, and many of the standardized tests in use today can be traced back to it: the now ubiquitous and obsessed-over SAT; the Wechsler, taken by several million people a year, according to its publisher; and Terman's own National Intelligence Test, originally used in tracking elementary school children. All these tests took from the Army the basic technique of measuring intelligence mainly by asking vocabulary questions (synonyms, antonyms, analogies, reading comprehension).

In 1958 a British sociologist named Michael Young coined the word "meritocracy" to denote a society that organizes itself according to IQ-test scores. That term too has entered the language, though it doesn't have quite the market penetration that IQ does—or the disparaging overtone that Young intended in his satiric fable *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033*. Terman and many other early advocates of IQ testing had in mind the creation of an American meritocracy, though the word didn't exist then. They believed IQ tests could be the means to create, for the first time ever, a society in which advantage would go to the people who deserved it rather than to those who had been born into it.

In order to believe this, though, you have to believe that merit and a score on an IQ test are the same thing. Long before IQ was invented, America prided itself on being a country without a class system, in which the talented and industrious would rise and be rewarded. The advent of intelligence tests did not dramatically affect the degree of social mobility in the U.S.—at least not enough for any change to show up in the social-science data. If IQ tests measure a trait that is genetic, and therefore inherited, or a trait that is culturally transmitted by parents and social class, they would, either way, be unlikely to upend the social order in every generation. And they haven't.

What they have done, though, is create a kind of mini-meritocracy for a few people who are very high in one ability. If you score in the top 1% on IQ tests, a system is in place in this country that is amazingly good at finding

you and offering you access to a first-class education that can often lead to first-class job opportunities. People with very high IQs don't necessarily run the country; they do, however, usually have access to a privileged and protected position.

It was the use of IQ tests to limit the opportunities of most other people that led to the anti-IQ rebellion that broke out in the last third of the century. It was probably most intense in Britain, whose public schools at midcentury had adopted a particularly severe system of sorting by test at age 11. By 1971 the U.S. Supreme Court had banned the use of IQ tests in employment except in very rare cases.

But the point is not how much the use of IQ testing has been curtailed but how widespread it still is. IQ tests are more consequential in schools and the military, where large numbers of people have to be processed quickly, than they would be at work, where it's easier to demonstrate ability through performance over time. They also have a more pronounced effect on the lives of people who score very low or very high than on the lives of people in the middle. Still, it's hard to grow to adulthood in the U.S. without ever having taken an IQ-derived standardized test (any test that has words like "ability" or "aptitude" or "reasoning" in its name). In a country with an unusually decentralized education system in which you can't be sure who is studying what where, IQ tests are the easiest way of making straight-up national comparisons.

What we've decided now is that we'll identify, assess and honor a much wider range of human abilities than just whatever it is that IQ tests measure. That's the theory. The practice is that IQ testing—cheap, consistent and established—is still ubiquitous. Even the attempts to supplant it pay IQ the tribute of accepting its frame of reference. We have got used to trying to understand what goes on inside people's head in terms of "intelligences" and "quotients," and there doesn't seem to be any way to put that particular horse back in the barn.

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