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**Review of *The Bell Curve Wars: Race, Intelligence and the Future of America*. Steven Fraser (Ed.) Reviewed by David Stoesz, Virginia Commonwealth University.**

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Steven Fraser, ed., *The Bell Curve Wars: Race, Intelligence and the Future of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

One day in 1984 I squeezed into a standing-room-only seminar at the Heritage Foundation to hear an author whose work was the talk of Washington and would dominate the domestic policy debate for the remainder of the decade. The author was Charles Murray; his book: *Losing Ground*. Conservatives in the audience marveled at Murray's audacity; liberals were flummoxed. Through selective use of data and a "thought experiment" (eliminating public assistance for the employable), Murray reframed the welfare reform debate in such a way that liberals have yet to recover.

Now, ten years later, Murray has presented a sequel, *The Bell Curve* which he coauthored with Richard Herrnstein who died shortly before the book appeared. Once again, artful promotion is serving Murray well; in a feature magazine article *The New York Times* labeled him "the most dangerous conservative in America", and *The New Republic* gave him a centerfold opportunity to summarize the book's contents. Once again, Murray uses ersatz thinking to construct a sinister plot: intelligence determines socio-economic success and disparities along racial lines are dividing American culture into a white "cognitive elite" which is fated to rule over a black underclass.

Steven Fraser's *The Bell Curve Wars* is the liberal response to Murray and Herrnstein. In this anthology, 19 essays by prominent intellectuals rebut various features of *The Bell Curve*. The relatively rapid appearance of the book suggests that Fraser was not about to let Murray go unchallenged. But the contents of *The Bell Curve Wars* are uneven, suggesting haste in the project, a problem that continues to dog the American Left.

Several of the essays Fraser has chosen are gems. Stephen Jay Gould, Howard Gardner, and Richard Nisbett succinctly point out the substantial flaws of *The Bell Curve*, a book that would not pass muster in a good graduate research course, let alone appear on the pages of the refereed professional literature. The essays by Jacqueline Jones, Andrew Hacker, and Randall Kennedy reveal a restrained rage as counterattack to the corrosive consequences of Murray and Herrnstein's work in light of the nation's tentative

progress in racial justice. In an effort to provide balance, essays by conservatives are included, and it is noteworthy that Thomas Sowell and Nathan Glazer express reservations about the analysis of Murray and Herrnstein. The pieces by Martin Peretz, Leon Wieseltier, and Michael Lind are particularly strong and in the best tradition of American intellectual criticism. Interestingly, five of the essays Fraser selected were penned by associates of *The New Republic*, a post facto apology for the gratis coverage afforded *The Bell Curve* in that magazine, perhaps.

The quality of several of the essays is such that *The Bell Curve Wars* could serve as an excellent supplement to a graduate social research course. Too often the research enterprise is couched as an ideal form of rationalization, independent of the historical, social, and ideological context in which it occurs. As critique of *The Bell Curve*, Fraser's collection is a poignant illustration of how badly research can be distorted; it serves as a prophylactic for what Randall Kennedy labels as Murray and Herrnstein's "big, sloppy, poisonous book" (p. 185).

Still, *The Bell Curve Wars* is disappointing. Since the late 1970s much of the nation's social infrastructure, in terms of both social policy and social science, has been under assault. *Losing Ground* and *The Bell Curve* illustrate the strategy that conservatives have deployed so successfully in their crusade to cashier welfare programs: target inadequately funded benefits for the minority poor and highlight bogus social thinking with specious data. When executed under the imprimatur of a well-endowed, Right-wing policy institute, the analysis is assured of quick dissemination through the electronic and print media, and the author becomes a prophet virtually overnight. This, of course, is what has happened with Murray. Through the machinations of the Manhattan Institute, the Heritage Foundation, and the American Enterprise Institute, he has become the American equivalent of the oracle at Delphi.

More than a decade later, the American Left has yet to formulate a coherent response to Murray and his confederates. At best, liberal intellectuals indulge in collective whining, corresponding among themselves through professional journals and progressive

magazines. The result is fragmented and inaccessible to the American people. All the while Charles Murray continues to surf the conservative ideological wave, in the process becoming a bona fide public intellectual.

Thus, it is tempting to speculate what Fraser could have produced had he convinced one of his better essayists to build *The Bell Curve Wars* into a post-conservative manifesto of American social policy. Certainly, many of the ingredients are here: Lind's location of *The Bell Curve* in the conservative ideological campaign; Nisbett's identification of research that contradicts Murray and Herrnstein (especially the work of psychologist Craig Ramey of the Abecedarian Project); the Western philosophical tradition outlined by Peretz and Wieseltier; and an American morality voiced by Jones and Kennedy. Such an endeavor could have generated a unitary affirmation of the future; as is, *The Bell Curve Wars* represents a fragmented reaction to the past.

The continuing failure of liberal intellectuals to respond convincingly to a still-cresting conservatism is predictable enough: 2004 . . . the crisis in entitlement spending is checked by sacrificing much-discredited poverty programs that had served the urban poor . . . movement conservatives purge the Right of mainstream Republicans like Jack Kemp and William Bennett . . . accordingly Democrats shift to the right to avoid being tarred as "welfare state liberals" . . . the intellectual Right boasts new magazines and cable channels to shape public philosophy . . . a third generation of young conservatives have cycled through think tanks into government service and out again . . . Charles Murray is poised to promote his most recent book through a nationwide series of talk shows and book signings . . .

The liberal response?

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