WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO CLASS STRUGGLE?
A REVIEW OF I.Q., HERITABILITY AND RACISM

R. C. Lewontin
Museum of Comparative Zoology
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138


The last ten years have seen the renewed flowering of a mode of social explanation that was popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries but that disappeared for a time around the time of the Second World War. This mode, biological determinism, attempts to explain modern social and political structures as the inevitable outcome of the biological nature of the human species. Indeed, so pervasive has been this deterministic movement that the first issue of this journal contained two articles attacking it, one on sociobiology (2) and one on the claims of the inheritance of IQ (3).

In brief, biological determinism in its various manifestations is the view that the inequalities in status, wealth, and power between individuals, sexes, classes, nations, and races are the ineluctable consequences of biological differences between individuals operating against a background of a universal human nature that guarantees that these biological differences will be translated into a hierarchical society. The conclusion is that social relations cannot be revolutionized because they flow from laws of nature, so we might as well content ourselves with the unchangeable status quo. It is not surprising that the attacks on biological determinism have come mostly from the left of center, ranging from Keynesian welfare economists like Paul Samuelson to Kropotkin anarchists like Noam Chomsky. Yet there has been a lack of serious and detailed treatment of biological determinism from a Marxist point of view, using both a dialectical and historical materialist mode of analysis. Lawler's I.Q., Heritability and Racism is of particular interest, then, since it sets out to analyze one particular form of biological determinism using the tools of Marxian analysis.

Biological determinism, including the claim that inequalities within and between societies have their basis in biological inequalities, has its roots in the bourgeois revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries. Those revolutions emphasized the primacy of the individual and the individual freedom to buy and sell labor power, to move from place to place, to confront other individuals through the medium of the exchange of material objects. Society which was formerly an integrated whole based on status relations became a disarticulated set of individual transactions among independent articulated units. What was an organic body became an analyzable machine, and nature, too, came to be seen as a machine. The present view of nature and how it is to be understood is quintessentially Cartesian, and the method of science is the method of Cartesian reduction. The individual is seen as ontologically prior to society, and the molecule as ontologically prior to the individual. The ideal of bourgeois science is the total reduction of phenomena at all levels to a description of the movement of molecules. Biological determinism is an expression of that reductionist program.

Lawler's book challenges reductionism as a way of understanding society and counterposes, instead, a dialectical viewpoint. In particular, he attacks the notion that IQ tests measure a real innate thing, "intelligence," and that intelligence can be shown to be passed in the genes. In some part his attack is conventional as when he reviews the fraudulent claims of Cyril Burt about the IQ scores of identical twins, and the total inadequacy of other studies that pretend to demonstrate the heritability of IQ. But much of Lawler's analysis does precisely what it promises: to demonstrate the shallowness and wrongheadedness of the reductionist program of measuring and characterizing intelligence and to show why a dialectical view is far richer and more in accord with actual phenomena. Not all these points he makes are new, many of them having been made before by psychologists, philosophers, and biologists (4), but the consistent analysis in Lawler, and his clarification of some new questions, make his treatment important. I single out only a few issues that seemed to me especially illuminated by the dialectical and historical materialism of I.Q., Heritability and Racism.

First, if a test is said to measure something, there must be an independent criteria of judging the thing in order to test the test. This criterion might be an independent theory that generates predictions against which the test result can be compared. For example, a new form of clock could be calibrated against a pendulum whose behavior is predicted by classical physics. There is no independent theory of intelligence, so another yardstick is required. How do we know that someone who scores 135 on the test is "intelligent" while someone who scores 75 is not, instead of vice versa? The answer is that IQ tests have been culled, tested, standardized, and adjusted to agree with the a priori judgment of school teachers about who is intelligent and who is not. Thus, rather than measuring some transcendental characteristic of organisms, the tests are simply an alternative way of making historically contingent, class - biased allocations of individuals into acceptable and non-acceptable categories of socially determined behavior. An examination of the test questions themselves reinforces this analysis of the tests.

Second, there is a confusion between "relative" and "absolute" intelligence. As Lawler points out, the absolute ability of people to carry out arithmetic calculations has increased immensely in history because of changes in calculating technology and education. But IQ tests always compare individuals on a relative scale that has no historical dimension. In fact, by creating a normalized relative scale, history is cancelled out, destroyed, so that only the differences between individuals at an historical moment are measured. In this way, the important social reality, that everyone can carry out complicated arithmetic quickly by a hand-held calculator, is deliberately hidden in order to emphasize a trivial individual difference.

Third, the dichotomy between organism and environment, between individual and society, between organism as the consequence of evolution and the external world as the cause of evolution, is a false one inherent in the alienated view of organism. In fact, organisms and environment interpenetrate each other. The human species (and all other species, for that matter) is both the consequence of evolution and the cause of its evolution because in the course of evolution the organism changes its own conditions of existence by changing the environment. Dry grass is part of the environment of a bird that makes nest of dry grass, because it makes these nests. Before the bird evolved to use such material, its environment was different. Organisms are not the passive receivers of environmental "in-
puts." Humans are not the passive objects of historical processes. The ability of humans to manipulate and recreate their environment, their "intelligence," does not simply inhere in them as a fixed property but is in a constant process of self-alteration.

The problem with *I.Q.*, *Heritability and Racism* is that the commitment to reductionist, atomized explanations is not the only reason that biological determinism is such a characteristic form of bourgeois theory. There are, after all, many possible reductionist explanations of human society. The philosopher Lawler explains the *mode* of thought without explaining its *content*. To understand that we must look at the political and not simply the formal structure of the ideology of the bourgeois revolutions.

What those revolutions strove to create was a society in which the specially privileged position of the landed aristocracy could be challenged by the rising class of merchants and entrepreneurs. All sorts of legal and customary restrictions had to be broken in order to liberate people for their economic activity. Thus, the claim of political and legal *equality* was the major ideological claim of the 18th century. To legitimate the bourgeois revolution its ideologues had to claim that equality was a basic right. "All men are created equal." Of course, it was not literally "all men," since women did not acquire rights, but it was not literally "all men" since slavery, debt peonage, and economic subjection continued. Yet one cannot make a revolution with the slogan "Liberty and equality for some!" So the ideology of equality outstripped the reality of the new society. Inequality remained, classes remained, yet the ideology of equality was constantly proclaimed. Until this very day we live in a society of gross inequality of status, wealth, and power, yet the legitimating ideology of our society is said to be "liberty and equality for all." It is important to understand that this contradiction between ideology and reality, between the legitimating ideal of the society and its legitimate reality, is characteristic of bourgeois society (and of some "socialist" societies as well) as it was not of feudal society. To deal with this contradiction has required putting a gloss on the idea of equality. After all, if people take the idea of equality too seriously they occupy factories, take over prisons, and burn out landlord's property. The new gloss has been to distinguish between "artificial" and "natural" inequality. According to this theory, the bad old days of the aristocracy were characterized by artificial barriers to social movement according to intrinsic merit. What the bourgeois revolutions did was then to abolish the artificial barriers and to allow natural inequalities to assert themselves. This is the theory of the meritocracy. According to it, we live in a society that is about as equal as any society can be. Any residual hierarchy that has remained after true democracy was established in 1776 or 1789 is a consequence of the ineluctable natural biological differences between individuals, sexes, races, etc. Thus, the claim of inborn differences in intelligence becomes a powerful *ideological weapon* in that struggle between "freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed" (5). That is, biological determinism is a leading weapon in class struggle. Yet nowhere in *I.Q.*, *Heritability and Racism* is there a discussion of this overwhelming fact. Biological determinism appears, out of the blue, with no historical context, as a series of philosophical errors. In the last few pages, it is true, we are reminded that racism divides workers and blinds them to their common victimization by the owners of production. But the question of the inheritance of intelligence is more than simply another form of racism. It is part of all the aspects of class struggle because it is designed to convince those who lack social power that their position is inevitable and just. We must not forget that class struggle has repeatedly broken out into violent confrontation and that such violence is deeply feared by those who possess, for violence can only threaten their continued peaceful possession and use. To avoid violence, the struggle must be kept within institutional bounds, the law courts, the legislatures, that are in the control of the possessors. But the legitimacy of those institutions depends, in the end, on the belief in the legitimacy of the social structure as a whole. Thus, ideological weapons are vastly more important than weapons of direct repression in maintaining things as they are.

The absence of the element of class struggle in Lawler's explication represents a trend in the development of socialist thought that seems to me one-sided and erroneous. Marxism is tamed into Marxology, the political is made entirely into the philosophical. I am afraid that a Marxist analysis of IQ, heritability and racism is still to be made, an analysis that will see the historical and dialectical relation between reductionism as a mode of explanation and the political struggle that calls it forth and gives it content.

References


NOTE


32