

Book Review

How Uncivilized! Reconfiguring Narratives of Innateness in Murray's *Human Accomplishment*.

A review of *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800B.C. to 1950* by Charles Murray. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

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Charles Murray, the most influential social thinker in America today, ¹ has published a new book that purports to trace the provenance of genius and accomplishment in the arts and sciences from 800 B.C.E to 1950. The book fails to present a scientifically plausible, logically convincing account of the subject at hand. It depends on highly selective evidence to support the various central claims, and this often-spurious evidence is reinforced with a welter of confusing and sometimes superfluous statistical data that seems beyond the comprehension of the average intelligent reader, and, in some cases, I suspect, the statistical specialist. Moreover, Murray tends to consistently eliminate, diminish or overlook much of the evidence that would weaken or entirely refute his case for absolute Western superiority in both the arts and sciences. But, even given its flaws, *Human Accomplishment* is an unmitigated success, a brilliant shining star in a movement that extends back nearly two centuries to the nascent pseudo-scientific ideologies of “scientific” racism and biodeterminism. The reason it is such a roaring success is that it does not, in the end, intend to illuminate, enlarge, edify or inform, but, rather, to demonstrate and establish the intrinsic pre-eminence of a small group of elites, to differentiate human accomplishment on the grounds of racial and intellectual superiority—which it in no short measure succeeds in doing. It is precisely from this perspective that I wish to examine and critically evaluate *Human Accomplishment*.

The Development of Racist Ideology

Among the several caveats appearing at the beginning of *Human Accomplishment*, Murray stresses that the reader should not confuse his book with those that attempt to give a historical account of the fall and rise of the West—the type of account usually

associated with writers like Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee.² In this regard he is entirely correct. The book is clearly not an attempt to trace, in historical terms, the trajectory of the fall and rise of the West, or to explain Western preeminence from the perspective of comparative history. But, even so, the work is positioned unambiguously in a set of interrelated traditions that aspire to explain the supremacy of Western, primarily white, culture—those of “scientific” racism, inner constitution, innateness, and, ultimately, biodeterminism.

The idea of innateness is hardly a modern invention, as one can find coherent expressions of it throughout the history of Western thought. Aristotle, for example, argued that human difference in intellect and therefore worldly position was entirely the result of a fixed natural order. This characterization of innateness is perhaps most evident in Aristotle’s justification of human slavery. Although human slavery had existed long before Aristotle, and chattel slavery (the ownership of human beings as a form of property) was common from at least 500 BCE, he was the first to develop a systematic philosophical position regarding the nature of the slave and his or her station in the order of things. Briefly stated, Aristotle’s theory of slavery is derived largely from his political thought. For him, the Greek political paradigm was the ultimate indicator of civilization. Greek culture, he argued, had evolved to the point where laws, self-rule and justice had replaced the chaotic barbarism of much of the rest of the ancient world. This idea of the capacity to rule politically extended to individuals and “elements” as well. Civil society was viewed as divided into those capable of ruling and those only capable of being ruled. This distinction also involves Aristotle’s notion of intellect as opposed to physical strength. Some individuals have a preponderance of intellect, others physical strength. Since intellect is supreme in political life, those having mere physical power will naturally fall under the sway of those who exercise intellect: “an element able ‘by virtue of its intelligence to exercise fore-thought,’ and an element ‘able by virtue of its bodily power to do what the other element plans.’”³

Slavery, for Aristotle, is thus a more or less accurate reflection of the natural state of things. Some rise up in nature to rule, others are there but to serve. And the difference is rooted politically in the natural ability to move from barbaric forms of governance to more sophisticated ones, particularly those like the Greek polis. Indeed, the Greek political and civil paradigm was the main indication of the difference between civilized and brutish regimes. Brutish regimes lack the faculty of intellect, living in a primitive state based on natural affinity and sensuality:

And of foolish people those who by nature are thoughtless and live their senses are brutish, like some races of the distant barbarians, while those who are so as a result of disease (e.g., epilepsy) or of madness are morbid. . . It is plain that some incontinence is brutish and some morbid, while only that which corresponds to human self-indulgence is continence simply.⁴

Aristotle also derives this idea of natural superiority and inferiority from his

conception of the relationship between soul and body, since the soul has a natural superiority over the body, and that superiority translates into a principle of necessity: “And it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element over the passionate, is natural and expedient.” What Aristotle is getting at is the “fact” that inferiority is the result of the natural and metaphysical state of things, and therefore irreversible. Those who are born superior will remain superior by virtue of an undeviating, inevitable natural order: “from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” Slaves, like women and lower animals, are thus no more than accurate reflections of their natural inferiority, their set place in the universal order of things. But the ineluctable order of things, this inevitable ranking of individuals, is not at all “natural” in any conventional sense of the term. Rather, it is a fully constructed system, devised and articulated by Aristotle himself. Based on his priorities and biases, the system is designed to coincide exactly with and therefore justify the prevailing Greek political and social structure. Slaves are beneficial to the expansion and development of Greek culture, so they are deemed to be inferior and therefore altogether suppressible—in many respects, even animal like. And this inferior position is guaranteed by the sacrosanct order of nature.

By the nineteenth century the natural order of innateness emphasized by Aristotle was transformed into a biosocial principle. It became a standard in calculating the relative worth of particular people, races and civilizations. Though many utilized the standard in some form or other—including Kant, Lessing, Linnaeus, and the great anatomist Cuvier—it was not directly applied to Western civilization, i.e., white culture and achievement, until the advent of racist ideology in the work of the nineteenth century social and political thinker Arthur Comte de Gobineau. As a racist ideologue, Gobineau did not fall back on classical social and political theory, nor was he concerned overly to find a theory of racial difference in the philosophical tradition as a whole. Rather, he sought a new explanatory racist ideology in what he conceived to be a kind of collective natural, “internal” history. For Gobineau, the peoples composing a nation were pulsating with a certain “germ,” which carried their destiny. This “germ,” though subject to certain types of invasive degeneration, was irreversible and inevitable, sheltered from outside change, coursing through the blood of a particular race or people. Gobineau also rejected the idea of applying external data – particularly, cases of individual achievement within a race--to the explanation of racial inequality, basing inequality on purely physical and mental characteristics that could be determined empirically. The environment had virtually no effect on individual capacity. Each individual within a given racial strain had an innate ability to achieve certain levels of culture and civilization: “The true health of a people and the cause of life and death were to be found, as Kant and Lessing had observed, in ‘inner constitution.’”⁵

Given his “empirical” method, what Gobineau referred to as “elements of civilization” could be classified and expressed in “objective” terms, such as relative proportions. In H. Hotz’s detailed “Analytic Introduction” to the English translation of Gobineau’s *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55), a chart appears that

divides the races into three categories: intellect, animal propensities, and moral manifestations. The relative disproportion of these characteristics in the various races is instructive in understanding Gobineau's general theory, as well as in early biodeterministic thought. The white race is classified as having a "vigorous intellect," "strong" animal propensities, and "highly cultivated" moral manifestations," while the black race has a "feeble" intellect, "partially latent" moral manifestations, but "very strong" animal propensities." With an "objective" unilinear scale to determine the relative humanness of individual races, those judged lowest on the scale were subject to comparisons with the mindless, though instinctually proficient, brutes and beasts. In effect, they were doomed to an imposed set of limitations that could be calculated with mathematical precision. And the only salvation for these lower races was the intervention of the white race, which contained within it the germ of perfection:

Such is the lesson of history. It shows us that all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it, provided that this group itself belongs to the most illustrious branch of our species.⁶

The cultural and political fate of a civilization, then, is largely dependent on its racial composition. The more white germ stock that a civilization can preserve, the greater the possibility of advancement. The greater a civilization is contaminated by impure blood—i.e., that of the black or yellow races—the less the chance of advancement.

The attractiveness of such a notion of racial accomplishment—particularly, to the prevailing Teutonic types—set off a wave of parallel racist conceptions of culture and advancement. Gobineau had generated what at least appeared to be an objective means of classifying and comparing racial characteristics and human development: the exigencies of environment and external conditions in general had been largely eliminated from his calculation, thus rendering human achievement an incontrovertible "fact" of inner constitution. The more scientifically subtle aspects of innateness, however, were left to others—particularly, Paul Broca, the famed French surgeon and anthropologist. His positivistic method in the sciences expanded Gobineau's theory to include newly discovered ways of calculating innate difference. Broca rejected virtually all forms of speculative science, placing his faith in a positivistic, data based approach to scientific research. This fondness for objectivity was not, however, always present in his own research. Most of the results of his anthropological and craniological experiments were simply disguised confirmations of one of the dominant prejudices of the time, that is, white males, Teutonic types, in the vocabulary of racism, were at the very top of the intelligence pyramid and women and the lower races occupied the bottom. His method, based on these prejudices, consisted in formulating a conclusion commensurate with this bias, and then manipulating the facts to fit that conclusion. After having reviewed Broca's research

for an extended period of time, Stephen Jay Gould reached the following conclusion:

I found a definite pattern in his methods. He traversed the gap between fact and conclusion by what may be the usual route – predominately in reverse. Conclusions came first and Broca’s conclusions were the shared assumptions of most successful white males during this period—themselves on top by the good fortune of nature, and women, blacks, and the poor people below. His facts were reliable (unlike Morton’s), but they were gathered selectively and then manipulated unconsciously in the service of prior conclusions. By this route, the conclusions achieved not only the blessings of science, but the prestige of numbers.⁷

Indeed, what Broca had really discovered was a method by which one could make just about any favored conclusion seem correct. Whether the results were arrived at validly or not was of little significance; what counted was that the so-called facts were correctly derived, properly documented, and, most importantly, elaborately quantified. Numbers became a sort of underlying, unchallenged truth of the research, and if one could generate impressive enough statistics regarding the object of inquiry, the validity of the conclusions would inevitably follow.

Needless to say, many, many variations of this self-serving statistical method issued from Broca’s original approach. Comparative anatomists, anthropologists, evolutionary biologists, experimental psychologists and the like generated an immense quantity of statistical data related to universal white supremacy in every conceivable field of knowledge and endeavor. Blacks, women and other races were “proven” to be inferior in the minutest detail, with the “irrefutable” support of objectively derived statistical data. The nineteenth century culmination of this wave of statistical proofs of human worth occurred with the work of the English natural scientist and biometrician, Sir Francis Galton. Galton articulated the modern theory of eugenics in an extended article turned book, entitled *Hereditary Genius* (1869). The gist of the book is that genius, of course, was hereditary, and that those possessed of it should be encouraged to propagate among their peers. Galton even encouraged a national exam to determine genius, whose high-scorers would be brought together, married at Westminster Abbey, and sent off to breed new generations of British leaders, men of genius, and captains of industry. This eugenicist trend led to the creation of various statistical procedures, most of which were intended to provide empirical data about the desirability of inbreeding the genetically superior. With a simmering brew of quasi-science, arcane statistics, and socially agreeable theory, Galton went on to establish entities like the Anthropometric Laboratory for the study of genetic variation, which, in the end, simply contributed to a somewhat new, statistically oriented means of measuring inferiority, and thus reinforcing the perpetual myth of white male superiority.

What is Charles Murray's Stake in Innateness?

Obviously, it is impossible to cover thoroughly the entire history of innateness theory here—a theory that branches off into several disciplines and includes important figures in experimental social science, like H. H. Goddard, Havelock Ellis, and R. M. Yerkes. Suffice to say that Charles Murray has followed a considerable tradition of firm believers in the use and unequivocal truth of statistical analysis in assigning inferiority to certain types and races. Although there are no doubt instances of this approach in Murray's earlier work on social welfare, *Losing Ground*, the most elaborate demonstration of an appeal to statistics as means of black derogation appears in *The Bell Curve*, co-authored with Richard Herrnstein. In his critique of *The Bell Curve*, Gould characterizes the effort as one that “contains no new arguments and presents no compelling data to support its anachronistic social Darwinism.” The “social Darwinism” argument so obvious in Murray and Herrnstein's text lands full force on blacks, assuming that IQ test data is sufficient proof of inferior intelligence in the black race, and that, further, this “incontrovertible” statistical proof empowers an elite class to abandon all efforts to improve the standing of a “black underclass” in society, even sanctions their eventual isolation and, in the end, their internment:

Over the next decades, it will become broadly accepted by the cognitive elite that the people we now refer to as the underclass are in that condition through no fault of their own but because of inherent shortcomings about which little can be done. . . In short, by custodial state, we have in mind a high-tech and more lavish version of the Indian reservation for some substantial minority of the nation's population, while the rest of America tries to go about its business. In its less benign forms, the solutions will become more and more totalitarian. . . One possibility is that a variety of old police practices—especially the stop and frisk—will quietly come back into use in new guises. New prisons will continue to be built, and the cells already available will be used more efficiently to incarcerate dangerous offenders. . . Technology will provide new options for segregating and containing criminals, as the electronic bracelets are being used to enforce house arrest (or maybe “neighborhood arrest”). . . The underclass will become even more concentrated spatially than it is today.⁸

This harsh solution, however, is built upon several false assumptions. To begin with, Murray and Herrnstein, following the abovementioned tradition of innateness, suppose that IQ is a fully objectifiable entity that is situated somewhere in the human brain—in short, they reify intelligence. Arguments against this move abound. Gould ranks the reification of intelligence as one of the two deadly sins of innateness theory, by arguing that intelligence is really a vast array of skills and abilities, immeasurable by any single standard. The psychologist Howard Gardner, likewise, offers a theory of multiple intelligences, employing a complex set of physical and mental skills as standards for measurement. And, more recently, studies on emotional intelligence

have been advanced in the behavioral sciences. Another error of *The Bell Curve* authors lies in their assertion that human worth can actually and accurately be ranked on a unilinear scale. This process of unilinear ranking consists of extrapolating data from various statistical protocols and then arranging them in an ascending order—in this case, ranking blacks well below whites and other groups in intelligence. But their conclusions are, once again, based on a false assumption: that within group heritability can explain differences between groups. Gould explains this fundamental error as the “central fallacy of using the substantial heritability of within group IQ (among whites, for example) as an explanation for average differences between groups (whites vs. blacks, for example).”⁹ The problem with this sort of manipulation is that environmental factors affecting each group vary significantly. To argue that lower black IQ scores are strictly the result of heritable traits within the group overlooks the fact that each of the groups exists under largely different socio-economic, educational, dietary, etc. conditions. If these conditions were improved over a period of time, the IQ disparity might well also improve, which was the case with the minus-fifteen percent immigrant populations entering the U.S. at the turn of century.

In the end, however, Murray and Herrnstein are not really concerned to produce an objective and scientifically sound basis for IQ comparison. Rather, their interest lies fully in using statistical analysis to support a social imperative: class distinctions are not determined by history or socio-economic conditions, but are the result of innate characteristics that are entirely unalterable through external means. Class is a given of biology, and race is a function of biological givens. In short, the white race has earned its dominance, not by repression, exclusion, preference, force or discrimination, but by some irrevocable genetic superiority, one that is buried deep within the minute ganglia and neurons of the human brain.

The Uses of Innateness in *Human Accomplishment*

Although Murray does not use IQ statistics in *Human Accomplishment* to determine Western superiority in culture and science, he does nonetheless create an “irrevocable given” to solidify his position. This time, the incontrovertible proof lies in a vast compilation of entries from source biographies, encyclopedias, and dictionaries of prominent individuals throughout both the ancient and modern history of world science, art, and culture in general. In fact, Murray is able to identify no less than 4,002 worldwide geniuses who have soared above ordinary mortals for nearly three millennia. These geniuses are deemed geniuses not so much due to their basic contributions to culture or science—though Murray does offer a number of criteria for assessing the legacy of genius—but due to the fact that they were given significant linear column space in widely acknowledged and accepted record books of accomplishment. For Murray, it seems that accomplishment bears some resemblance to a road map—an extra inch or so is equivalent to a considerable number of miles. Moreover, with a few statistical adjustments here and there, Murray claims that this

method is entirely objective, eliminating or accounting for any possible variables. The picture of all world achievement, then, is neatly and completely laid out in an “objective” skein of statistics culled painstakingly from the world’s most definitive dictionaries and encyclopedias of achievement and eminence.

If the above method and results seem familiar, they are. This is precisely what Galton attempted to do on a much smaller scale in his *Hereditary Genius*, that is, provide an “objective,” statistical method for determining superiority with, in his case, the use of obituaries and a single biographical dictionary. Murray’s revival of the old eugenicist “axiom” suffers from all of its obvious flaws. Like Galton’s conception of hereditary genius, it is a method that is constructed to realize a presupposition about race, sex and class, and, one might add, socioeconomic standing. The white, mostly male, race is superior due to some irreversible and innate condition—in this case, overwhelming evidence of recorded genius. Other groups are inferior for the same irrevocable reasons. The force of this presupposition is obvious in a number of Murray’s calculated oversights. He does, for example, spend considerable time and space acknowledging the contribution of China to world science and culture. But, in the end, the Chinese contribution is considered inferior to that of the West. Why? Basically, the Chinese were never able to measure their science in terms of a “framework that would enable the accumulation of scientific knowledge.”¹⁰ But the idea of a “framework” presupposes a number of conditions that were largely available to Western science, but did not for the most part exist in China. One of those conditions was effective means of distance communication. China was for most of its history a vast isolated country, divided into numerous districts and provinces, each having its own forms of governance. Communication was thus not in any way uniform or, in many cases, even existent. That a scientist working in Western China, let alone a lay-person, would know of, record, or comment upon the discovery of another scientist working in an eastern province was highly unlikely. Indeed, Joseph Needham, the great historian of Chinese science and civilization, recounts a story in which a group of Chinese scientists were absolutely fascinated by a mechanical clock shown to them by Jesuit missionaries, completely unaware that the Chinese had invented precisely this type of clock two centuries earlier.¹¹ In essence, then, the Chinese may have demonstrated—according to Needham, did in fact demonstrate—significant genius in various areas of science. But this “genius” for creativity and invention is overshadowed by Western science simply because the Chinese were unable to erect a “framework for the accumulation of scientific knowledge.” That is to say, were unable to “objectively” quantify scientific and cultural achievement in some unified, well-structured way.

Murray’s strategy is quite transparent. Without a “framework” for quantification, achievement really does not count. If individual achievements haven’t been minutely and properly recorded, analyzed, disseminated, and set down in writing—techniques much more common in the West than elsewhere-- they are subject to being overlooked, diminished or dismissed entirely. Such is clearly the case in Murray’s treatment of African and Mezzo-American art and achievement. For example, in the

624 pages of text that constitute the body of *Human Accomplishment*, the whole of African culture is given six references—significantly less than the biographical dictionary entries for Forrest Moulton (U.S. astronomer). Africans simply did not meet the standards imposed by Murray for the determination of artistic achievement—in short, the entire contribution of Africa in the arts was merely “decorative,” which, in Murray’s estimation, made them too insignificant to even record as art items. Indeed, Murray tends to reduce thousands of years of African artistic achievement to the mere production of functional items: “Shall we treat functional objects—gracefully designed eating utensils, baskets, warrior’s shields, fabrics from non-European cultures as works of art?” Just in case we do, Murray has a quick remedy: “We will have to include centuries of European production of beautiful things. . . an endless variety of categories of beautiful things coming out of every European country.”¹² Of course, the claim—that Africans merely produced “functional objects”—is patently false: they produced structurally complex and aesthetically striking art objects, including both conventional and monumental sculptures, and numerous other purely aesthetic items that profoundly influenced Western European art from the mid-nineteenth century onward. But to maintain the exclusivity and centrality of “objective standards” for assessing accomplishment, Murray must regard all of African art as devoted to creating basic utensils, just a knife and fork kind of culture, and therefore entirely lacking the intellectual “framework” necessary for cultural accomplishment.

Thus, in *Human Accomplishment*, the traditional theory of innateness is simply transferred to and grounded in a complex statistical model, based on yet another “objective measure.” Virtually all human worth in the arts and sciences is distilled down to a compilation of expert opinion. The compilation is then elaborated statistically, adjusted and weighted to balance out “external” factors, and presented as the ultimate measure of world art and science. But the measure is in itself reductive and closed, in that it is formulated not so much to objectively measure human accomplishment, but to once again confirm an age-old bias about race, sex, and class. This is obvious in the various oversights and exclusions in the book: Black Africans have no science to speak of and are only producers of practical items, like eating utensils, shields and textiles. This notion follows precisely the long-established view of scientific racism regarding inferior cultures. The lack of high art and scientific discovery indicates inferior intellect and sensibility; it is palpable evidence of backwardness, of primitiveness. Or, as Gobineau puts it, “. . . no Negro race is seen as the initiator of a civilization. Only when it is mixed with some other can it even be initiated into one. Similarly, no spontaneous civilization is to be found among the yellow races; and when the Aryan blood is exhausted stagnation supervenes.”¹³ So, even though Murray does not introduce explicit racist ideology in *Human Accomplishment*, he still conveys precisely the same message as thinkers like Gobineau, Broca, the IQ hereditarians, and the like: white males, “Europeans” and “North Americans” in Murray’s terminology, are on top and other races lag way behind. The inviolable order of superiority/inferiority remains, despite the fact that

Murray claims he has adjusted all the relevant variables.

What Agendas Subtend Innateness?

To be sure, inherent White supremacy is not the sole message conveyed by *Human Accomplishment*. The book not only follows the conventions of racial science, but also touches upon virtually all of the ideological points of American reactionary conservatism—largely concealed, I should add, by the statistical jargon of European eminence in the arts and sciences. The prime target of Murray’s conservatism is, obviously, multiculturalism. His support of Eurocentricism is rife in most of the book’s material. Indeed, one could argue that support of Eurocentricism is a principal by-product of Murray’s entire project. He is not shy, however, about demonstrating explicitly the disproportionate superiority of European culture and science, making the claim that 97 percent of the accomplishment in the scientific inventories occurred in Europe and North America. He claims, among other things, to prove this by carefully choosing two books which tend to correspond exactly to his own statistical conclusions, but which, on the surface (the book jackets, to be precise) appear to support a multiculturalist view. After performing what he generously refers to as “literary criticism,” that is, comparing the book jacket copy (which generally tend to exaggerate the book’s purpose and value) to the texts themselves, Murray concludes that the two books on multiculturalism weren’t really on multiculturalism, but, rather, profoundly in support of his own Eurocentric hypothesis.¹⁴

What’s missing here? First of all, Murray attributes absolute statistical certainty regarding European and North American accomplishment to his own compilation of scientific inventories. As we have seen, his compilation is biased from the outset, secreting a long-standing predisposition about race, sex, class and achievement. Moreover, as Judith Shulevitz, in her *New York Times* review of *Human Accomplishment* correctly argues, written scientific inventories were infinitely more common to Europe and North America than to China, the Far East in general, Africa, the Mideast, South America, or the various island civilizations.¹⁵ And to argue, as Murray does, that the fact that inventories did not exist indicates that accomplishment in the arts and sciences in non-European cultures was meager, is patently absurd. The only reasonable conclusion that one can draw from the fact that inventories do not exist is that inventories were either lost, unaccounted for, or, more likely, were just not made. In short, the non-existence of a collection of biographical entries says virtually nothing about whether important scientific and artistic contributions existed in a given civilization. Thus, Murray turns the statistical certainty and preponderance of entries claim against multiculturalism. Without a store of collected entries in a variety of dictionaries and encyclopedias—that is, a fairly large statistical sampling—non-European cultural achievement can only muster a meager 3 percent of world achievement in the arts and sciences. This is a fact that in Murray’s mind, should finally and completely undo the egregious “myths” of multiculturalism.

With the specter of multiculturalism out of the way, Murray takes on another

conservative aversion: Godlessness. Without taking account of Christianity's unparalleled repression of new ideas, the routine imprisonment of humanists and dissenters, the suppression of scientific progress, the burnings at the stake of so-called heretical thinkers, etc., Murray goes on to identify it as the primary source of Western individualism, which, in his reckoning, was handmaiden to accomplishment. One would think that arresting and indefinitely imprisoning Galileo, burning Giordano Bruno at the stake, penalizing every scientist who even breathed the fact that the earth revolved around the sun, would be sufficient reason to at least take pause when arguing for the "inspiration" provided science and art by Christianity. But, as is often the case with Murray, he tends to overlook destabilizing factors, arguing instead for his conception of the big picture, the gift of individualism so generously given by the late Medieval Christian Church to European elites. These elites, moreover, were given an even greater gift once Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the cathedral doors. Accomplishment became a reality of everyday life, and one did not have to wait for some heavenly finger to judge and acquit. Life, so dull and boring before Luther and the reformers, was now given purpose and direction: "The sense that life in general has a purpose, as opposed to being pointless, and the sense that *this* life is uniquely important, and is not just one of an ongoing sequence of lives." ¹⁶

But all of this joy and creativity shared by the European elites came to a somewhat abrupt halt. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, a dark pessimism spread over Europe. The forces of atheism and fatalism, particularly as expressed in the work of Nietzsche and Freud, had, remarkably, convinced virtually all of the European elites that life was now, once again, pointless and, worse, Godless: "After Freud, Nietzsche, and others with similar messages, the belief in man as rational and volitional took a body blow. It became fashionable in the Europe of the early 20C to see humans as unwittingly acting out neurosis and subconscious drives. God was mostly dead among the European creative elites; morality became relative. These and allied beliefs substantially undermined the belief in creative elites that their lives had purpose or that their talents could be efficacious." ¹⁷

Seen from another perspective, however, one might argue that this dark period at the beginning of the twentieth century was not all that dim. After all, virtually every important and influential modernist movement flourished in the period. Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism emerged in the fine arts. Experimental literary forms exfoliated, with unique contributions by authors like Jarry, Joyce, Mann, Pound, Kafka, Musil, and many more. Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Berg, to name just a few, developed brilliant new variations in musical composition and structure. Einstein was even able to envision the new physics in the calamitous darkness of modern irrationality.

Obviously, Murray's analysis of the modern era is patently absurd, a risible misinterpretation to anyone even remotely aware of the modernist contributions to art and science made in the latter part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. But seen for what it is—an attack on modernist agnosticism, Godlessness, and cultural and moral relativism—it makes sense. With his sympathies lying squarely

with the American Christian Right, Murray is compelled to spell out intellectual history entirely in terms of this sort of ideology. In a certain sense, Joyce *must* be seen as an “arid” writer, devoid of the values imparted through the Christian tradition. Cézanne, Picasso, Duchamp, all the modernists, must necessarily be viewed as inferior, as leaders of a great decline in Western creativity. But the claim for the great decline, the “descent of man,” is not the result of some objective historical analysis of the arts and sciences in the modern period; rather, it results from the imposition of a supposition about the role of Christianity in Western achievement. Christianity brings light, inspiration and individualism, modernism brings only darkness and despair. Once again, reactionary ideology perfectly mirrors the entire history and intent of Western creativity in the arts and sciences.

The conservative penchant for the inevitability of absolute—read, white male—authority is also addressed in *Human Accomplishment*. In this regard Murray pays special attention to the extreme differences between ordinary mortals and the 4,002 recorded geniuses, even going so far as to quote a passage that compares the ordinary with worms in face of some of these remarkable men. These giants, Murray argues, are the result of a “magnificent inequality” that is wholly quantifiable, and therefore an indisputable fact. But the “magnificent inequality” is wholly the invention of Murray, and, in this case, used as a means of justifying a set of social relations, which, in reality, are infinitely more complex than Murray leads us to believe. Social and intellectual ranking are largely the result of extraordinarily intricate socio-economic, political, cultural, and historical conditions and relations, not the stipulations of conservative ideology. Moreover, one just might not feel worm-like or have the irresistible urge to prostrate oneself before such giants as Alfonso X of Castile, Karl L. Immerman, Antonis Mor van Dashorst, William McCune or C. H. D. Buys-Ballot, earth scientist.

In the end, one must ask a simple question about *Human Accomplishment*: Why would anyone want to read such a book? It is filled with what turn out to be arcane, difficult, largely incomprehensible statistics, flow charts, bell curves, directional charts, indices, appendices, and so on. Is it really important to the general reader that the combined separate subscores on The Correlation Matrix for the Index Sources for the Astronomy Inventory place Taton two cuts above Wussing? Or that Wussing nearly caught up with Taton on the Chemistry Index, placing just one notch below him? Or that Giovanni Animucchia had only one entry in the Roster of Significant Figures in Music and Giovanni Bononcini had three? Moreover, the book is filled with false and often absurd claims. How could one possibly believe that James Joyce was a ruined, “arid” writer, drawn away from a sense of purpose, goodness, light and Godliness by Freud and Nietzsche? That the vivid, life-affirming canvases of artists like Matisse, Édouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, and Robert Delaunay were the result of a gloomy pessimism that engulfed modernist Europe? Or that over countless millennia the entire continent of black Africa did not create a single artwork? The book is also filled with convenient and obvious omissions—the fact, for instance, that Plato and Aristotle, two of the highest scorers in the world achievement indices, could

never have achieved their towering positions without those lowly slaves who, among many other things, toiled deep in the silver, gold, copper, and iron mines that enriched the Greek states, thus allowing the Patrician class its leisure and learning.

The negatives go on, and on—but it is, strangely enough, a foregone conclusion that the book will be read, and read widely. The main reason for this sort of popularity is the fact that the book fits seamlessly into a long-standing invention of conservative ideology: innateness. And innateness, in its turn, proves what Aristotle had first suggested and Gobineau and others had later calculated: that the status quo was a direct reflection of an irrevocable inner constitution, that certain types and races are destined to lead while others can but slavishly follow. And the attractiveness of this idea is made even more attractive by Murray's persistent claim that *Human Accomplishment* provides definitive proof for what had, up till now, been merely a hypothesis: that elites rule by nature rather than by circumstance. Indeed, it is the final word in the game of finality played out over the past two centuries by the racist ideologues.

Notes

- 1 This statement may sound a bit extreme, but if one looks closely at American sociological and political theory with regard to its effect on actual legislation, then Murray ranks right on top as theorist. For example, his book, *Losing Ground*, served as the model for welfare reform during and well after the Reagan Administration. *The Bell Curve* has often been taken up by the U.S. Congress as a model for educational reform. And his “Bloody Code-like” suggestions for policing and criminal justice reform have been applied by many municipal administrations—most recently, the Giuliani administration in New York City.
- 2 Charles Murray, *Human Accomplishment: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950*, (New York: Harper & Row, 2003), p. xvii.
- 3 Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 53.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 55
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 267
- 6 Arthur Compte de Gobineau, *The Inequality of Human Races*, (New York: Howard Fettes, 1967), p. 210.
- 7 Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), p. 117.
- 8 Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994), pp. 523-524.
- 9 Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 369.
- 10 Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
- 11 Robert Temple, *The Genius of China: 3,000 years of Science, Discovery, and Invention*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 7
- 12 Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

13 Gobineau, op. cit., p. 212.

14 See Murray, op. cit., pp. 254-255.

15 Judith Shulevitz, "The Best and the Brightest," *New York Times Book Review*, Sunday, November, 30, 2003, p. 12.

16 Murray, op. cit., p. 406.

17 Ibid., p. 407.