

Vive la Difference!

Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America, by Christopher Jencks, Marshall Smith, Henry Ackland, Mary Jo Bane, David Cohen, Herbert Gintis, Barbara Heyns, and Stephen Michaelson, *New York: Basic Books, 1972. xii + 399 pp. \$12.50.*

MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED years ago, that great apostle of egalitarianism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, examined some of the barriers to its triumph in *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. Here, utilizing the most advanced statistical techniques available, Christopher Jencks and his associates have reexamined the issue in a seminal book of major importance which may force a new appraisal of the influence of education on society.

In reality, we are dealing with two books. In 1966, James Coleman and associates published the first analysis of the Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey. The conclusions of the "Coleman Report" disturbed American educators who had espoused compensatory educational programs as an instrumentality for social equalization. At Harvard University, Daniel P. Moynihan and Thomas Pettigrew established a seminar to reanalyze the data. The second part of *Inequality*, two 84-page appendices, presents the team's statistical data and conclusions. The text of *Inequality*, comprising a 265-page interpretive essay with policy recommendations, is wholly the work of Jencks.

The major statistical findings refute preconceptions that have gone unchallenged for decades. Jencks asserts:

Poverty is not primarily hereditary.

The primary reason some people end up

richer than others is not that they have more adequate cognitive skills.

[There is] no evidence that school reform can substantially reduce the extent of cognitive inequality, as measured by tests of verbal fluency, reading comprehension, or mathematical skills.

The area of the study which has thus far aroused the greatest public interest is Jencks' frank conclusion that

equalizing education opportunity would do very little to make adults more equal.

For instance, if all high schools were made equally effective, inequalities in IQ would decline "less than one percent." If all barriers to college attendance were removed, "the change would not be large." The academic results scored by a school depend largely

on the characteristics of the entering children. Everything else—the school budget, its policies, the characteristics of the teachers—is either secondary or completely irrelevant.

These conclusions are shocking to those environmentalists who, as Jencks pointed out in an interview in *The Village Voice*, have elevated the hypothesis that schooling can eradicate differences in ability and status into an article of religious faith. Lacking his courage to accept unpalatable conclusions, many of Jencks' fellow radicals will no doubt continue to cling to their old preconceptions.

Based primarily on multiple correlation analysis of the vast amount of questionnaire data gathered for the 1966 EEOS survey, Jencks and his co-workers found that intelligence, as measured by IQ, has comparatively little influence on status, income or promotion within one's job or profession. Even in such fields as medicine and physics, success is not closely related to grades earned in school and college.

The Harvard research team found that a surprisingly large part of the existing dif-

ferences in education, occupational status and income in the U.S. could not be explained by family background, intelligence quotient, race or class. Jencks inferred that this portion of human inequality was probably due to "luck" and argued that government should take steps to eliminate it.

The basic trouble with this approach is that it presupposes that qualities which cannot be measured may be dismissed as irrelevant. Occasionally, Jencks gives lip service to the notion that such qualities as character, perseverance, integrity, ambition and ability to project one's personality may account for much of the difference between success and failure. He finally dismisses the issue with the assertion that no one has proved these factors to be significant. True, but no one has proved the contrary. As far as we know, no study has ever attempted to measure the comparative strength of luck and the positive factors just mentioned. Nor has any analysis been made of the extent to which the traditional Protestant and entrepreneurial virtues are penalized in the contemporary American economic system. (The notion of luck is also an important social control in assuaging envy, as Helmut Schoeck has demonstrated in his classic study. *Envy, a Theory of Social Behavior*.)

Some of Jencks' findings impinge sharply on current political issues:

The average black now has only a year less schooling than the average white. . . . Young blacks have nearly caught up with young whites in terms of educational credentials.

Nevertheless, large differences between "black and white attainment" persist. These, Jencks states, can be explained by the gap between white and black IQs.

What about busing and integration?

taking all the evidence together, we can find no convincing evidence that racial desegregation affects students' eventual educational attainment one way or

another. This holds for both blacks and whites.

If busing does nothing to improve Negro education, Jencks nevertheless opposes the neighborhood school on political grounds. He is against busing because it may lead to more animosity than understanding between the races and because it infringes on individual freedom. Jencks advances the interesting suggestion that all parents be entitled to send their children to any public schools they choose and that the children be transported there at public expense.

What would happen if access to the best jobs in society depended entirely on merit as measured by tests of competence? "The proportion of whites from lower-status families entering high-status occupations" would increase. Within the white community, access to the most desirable positions would be democratized, but "the proportion of blacks in high-status jobs" would probably be decreased.

The quota system for women and blacks now being pushed in American schools and universities may structure society in an anti-merit direction. In many instances, it is not luck which prevents the attainment of a society which rewards its members on the basis of their ability and industry, but government intervention.

The findings of Jencks and associates are valuable. Some of the recommendations which Jencks advances, however, would be disastrous if put into effect. He begins with the premise that "every individual's happiness is of equal value." Proceeding from this to the Benthamite principle, he advocates a society of maximum equality in which superior intelligence, ability and effort are not given superior rewards.

The basic premise is dubious. Is the happiness of a half-naked, microcephalic savage of equal value to that of a Shakespeare, a Leonardo or a Mozart? Men do not act on the premise of any such equality, nor do they really believe in it. The fact that differences in what we may call the degree of humanity of men cannot be reduced to

quantitative terms does not mean that the differences do not exist.

Jencks yearns for the "social justice" of egalitarianism. He finds it morally reprehensible that bright people should get ahead of stupid ones. A possible solution in education would be "that anyone who was reading above the norm for his age should be sent home and the entire resources of the schools devoted to the laggards." Why not carry this splendid idea further and provide that music schools concentrate on the tone deaf and penalize child piano virtuosi by forcing them at all times to wear mittens?

Jencks, at least, is honest in linking his egalitarianism to a socialist society, the only soil in which it can fully flourish. He admits that the American people still believe in equality of opportunity and equality before the law and consider that superior ability and achievement entitle men to superior rewards. He suggests, therefore, that his programs for "compensatory education" be foisted on the public in the guise of equality of opportunity.

The real danger to American society comes from those who advocate egalitarian levelling as part of an American tradition to which it is actually alien. The thrust of Jencks' policy recommendations is toward a nation of mediocrity in which talent is suppressed, creativity hobbled and anyone who stands a head above his fellows is in danger of decapitation.

Reviewed by NATHANIEL WEYL
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