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**"Cognitive Class Theory and American Political Cultures:  
Understanding *The Bell Curve*"**

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An ancient way to justify unequal social relations is to claim that they are part of the natural order of things. If you have read even the preface of Richard Herrnstein's and Charles Murray's 1994 book, *The Bell Curve*, then you have read a contemporary version of this justification that I call "cognitive class theory". *The Bell Curve* begins by offering cognitive class theory in the form of a history lesson. America, the authors say, was founded on "the principles of individual liberty and self-government," but in the last thirty years we have turned to the state to provide equality of outcome. The pursuit of equality has blinded us to the natural cognitive classes that have replaced the social classes of the old world. A "cognitive elite", they say, has become highly educated and affluent. The cognitive elite uses technology to create closed communities that blunt a sense of civic duty. Conversely, a cognitive underclass has "collect[ed] at the bottom of society". They are poor, drug ridden, and congregate together as "the traditional family all but disappears." They procreate great numbers lacking the intelligence to use the freedoms of American society to improve their lot.<sup>i</sup>[i] To gain historical perspective and to better grasp the meanings of the IQ controversy today, this paper examines the influence of Henry H. Goddard, the psychologist who brought Binet's tests to America, and the research bureau that he helped build in Ohio.

Henry H. Goddard's widely read 1912 *The Kallikak Family* that was his most important contribution to the advent of cognitive class theory. One branch of this family was said to have descended from an illicit union between Martin Kallikak and a feeble-minded tavern-woman which produced generations of paupers and criminals; the other branch produced good citizens from Martin's marriage to a Quaker. Like Herrnstein and Murray, when they invoked the idea of an hereditary cognitive hierarchy through *The Kallikak Family* and other texts, early century intelligence testers were claiming that a substantial number of free Americans, especially racial and ethnic minorities, did not have the inherited intelligence necessary to control their passions and that these persons were doomed to social failure. Goddard proclaimed, "[i]t is hereditary feeble-mindedness that is the basis of all problems",... "and it is hereditary feeble-mindedness that we must attack..." Goddard argued that most adult paupers and criminals "have feeble-minded children. We cannot touch these adults. We must somehow get hold of their children." Therefore Goddard proposed that children should be widely tested and the one's found mentally deficient should be sent to sex-segregated institutions.<sup>ii</sup>[ii]

Goddard's opportunity to organize public policy arrived when Ohio Governor James M. Cox looked to him for "inspiration and guidance" to reform the state's juvenile custody system and the Ohio Board of Administration sent Edison J. Emerick, superintendent of the Ohio Institution for Feeble-Minded Youth, to consult with him at Vineland Training School in 1912 and 1913. A reading of the relevant government documents and annual reports verifies that by 1913 Goddard

had developed a cadre of reformers in Ohio who were convinced that "more than 40 percent" of the juveniles at the state reformatory were "definitely feeble-minded -- that it [was] folly to try and reform them... they [were] not immoral; they [were] unmoral."<sup>iii</sup> And so, Goddard's Ohio followers worked to expand the population at the state's institution for the Developmentally Disabled four times faster than general population growth from 1911 to 1922. The Bureau's role in this expansion was to find as many mentally defective youths as possible. And so their tests revealed that between a third and half of the children in county, state, public, and private orphanages, reformatories, and hospitals were feeble-minded. However, the Bureau's mass incarceration effort not only failed to convince most other officials in the custodial system, but served to rally direct opposition united under the political traditions of individualism and domestic virtue.

Time only permits two brief examples.<sup>iv</sup> The Bureau had been receiving a variety of children at their reformatory-base clinic, all while Rupert U. Hastings, the boys' reformatory superintendent, claimed that only a child found by a court to be delinquent could come to the reformatories. As a result of a complex series of bureaucratic volleys in 1916 the Ohio Attorney General intervened and ruled that, "establishing the bureau of juvenile research at the [reformatories] insofar as it related to dependent and neglected children was not only without authority of law, but in direct opposition to the established practice and specific provision of law relative to the care of such children." The Attorney General's decision was not only a matter of following the law because it made law by interpreting ambiguous and conflicting statutes. The conflict rested upon whether psychological diagnosis could supersede the legal framework of dependency versus delinquency. Did the legal framework triumph merely because the Attorney General was a lawyer? Perhaps this was a factor, but more was also at work. The statutes defined a delinquent child as one who was "guilty of immoral conduct." On the contrary, by law, a dependent child was "found in a house of ill fame, [or]... by reason of neglect, cruelty, or depravity on the part of its parent... is prevented from receiving a proper education." The distinction between delinquency and dependency was based upon moral culpability. The state Attorney General re-enforced the primacy of individual agency and parental responsibility as organizing principles of juvenile justice by subordinating the diagnostic statuses from the new psychology.<sup>v</sup> Losing the fight over the reformatory-clinic in 1916 was a blow to their plans, but over the next two years Goddard's friends succeeded in building separate housing for the Bureau and persuading him to come to Ohio and direct the agency. These were important gains, but they were not enough. Eighty-two percent of the Bureau's work was in field surveys that would only provide support for eugenic rhetoric, because it was not directly linked to child placement decisions. The Ohio juvenile courts, who had the most to say about placement, consulted the Bureau in a meager 472 cases between 1918 and 1920. This was only 13 percent of the Bureau's casework. The Bureau was being consulted by the judges in less than 2 out of every 100 youths that came before the juvenile courts when Goddard believed that about a third to half of these youths were feebleminded. Was the Bureau kept away from the decision-making process merely to protect local or professional turf? Localism and professionalism probably did play a role, but the Bureau's troubles were tied to more substantial value conflicts. Juvenile court judges and other key officials espoused ideas of domestic virtue at odds with Goddard's state centered plan of mass custody. The regulations that governed the placement of juvenile wards, the principles of institutional inspection, and the speeches given by superintendents and matrons of local public and private orphanages are filled with reasoning grounded the ideal of domestic virtue. According to Judge George S. Addams, a chief architect of Ohio's juvenile courts, a mother had a right to a pension because it would allow the children to avoid institutionalization, and because "her services in

rearing children are performed for the State; she is caring for its future citizens and doing it as no one else can."vi[vi]

I would like to make several points linking and differentiating the politics of cognitive class theory via Goddard versus cognitive class theory via Herrnstein and Murray. The two version share nearly identical historical narratives of how their respective society's have fallen. Both share the hierarchical belief that racial and ethnic groups possess unequal cognitive endowment. Neither can honestly avoid questioning the underpinning logic and legitimacy of democratic traditions. However, unlike Goddard's more direct plan to use the state and intelligence tests to imprison the cognitive underclass, Herrnstein and Murray are defending testing as a fair means of competition in educational and job opportunities. *The Bell Curve* uses individualism to cloak the hierarchy of cognitive class theory in a way Goddard was not so clever as to do. This is why Herrnstein and Murray highlight their opposition to Affirmative Action. They comply with individualists' belief that granting any group special advantages produces unfair competition by cleverly constructing the cognitive elite (when convenient) as not just another group, but as competing individuals who deserve greater educational investment. Then they reconstitute them in other places in the book as a functioning (even isolated) social group whose leadership should not be challenged, "because, for better or worse, the future of society [is] so dependent on them". Like the juvenile court judges who once doled out mother's pensions to those virtuous enough to raise good citizens, Herrnstein and Murray do not object to public support for children, but only to the AFDC-style entitlement because it negates the leverage social service providers might exercise over the misbehavior of bad families. So too, they tell us the best way to raise IQ is to encourage single mothers from the cognitive underclass to give their babies to parents of the cognitive elite.

Unlike the works of Henry H. Goddard, *The Bell Curve* offers a more subtle vision that nimbly avoids American anti-statism by empowering local elites. It avoids easy reproach from American individualists by constructing the cognitive elite as a natural meritocracy. Murray and Herrnstein say we should recognize and foster the cognitive elite through educational advantages, discipline the cognitive underclass by removing federal mandates on public policies in order to free moral authority at the local level, and finally, because the greatest threat to our society are "isolated" cognitive classes, we should re-establish relationships of deference and obligation between the cognitive classes to insure social stability. Herrnstein and Murray say that we should return to the Union as framed in 1787; in 1996 I hope you will remember that the original Union insured the enslavement of African-Americans and denied women citizenship because the framers convinced themselves that social hierarchy was in the natural order of things.vii[vii]

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i[i]. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles A., Murray *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (NY: The Free Press, 1994), xxi-xxiii.

ii[iii]. Henry H. Goddard, *Feeble-Mindedness: its causes and consequences*, (New York, 1914): 562-566, 573, 585-590.

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iii[iii]. See Patrick J. Ryan, "Experts and Authority: The First Years of the Bureau of Juvenile Research, 1913-1921," M.A. Thesis, Case Western Reserve University, 1994.

iv[iv]. See Patrick J. Ryan, "Unnatural Selection: Intelligence Testing, Eugenics, and American Political Cultures," forthcoming in the *Journal of Social History*, spring edition 1997.

v[v]. Ohio. *Opinion of the Attorney General*, #2047, 16 November 1916, 1799.

vi[vi]. George S. Addams, "Mother's Pensions," *The Ohio Bulletin of Charities and Correction* 21 no. 1 (Jan. 1915): 19.

vii[vii]. Herrnstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 416, 418, 480, 527-552.