

# Talking to the Plumber: The I.Q gap.

John Derbyshire

**Abstract:** Human society stumbles on forward, from imperfection to, one hopes, lesser imperfection. Our cognitive elites are not lovable. Every so often their arrogance and condescension will come breaking through the surface. It's a pity there isn't some way to forcibly mix them with their fellow citizens at some point in their cosseted young adulthood, so that they might at least have a shot at learning how to talk across the I.Q. gap; but in a free society, there is no way to do that. Absent that kind of social engineering, there is nothing for it but to lie back and let them rule us. They'll probably make a pretty good job of it. They are, after all, the brightest and the best ... however much we dislike them.

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The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high or lowly,  
And order'd their estate.

The 1982 Episcopal Hymnal omits that stanza, the second of Mrs. Alexander's original six (not counting the refrain). It also omits her fifth:

The tall trees in the greenwood,  
The meadows where we play,  
The rushes by the water,  
We gather every day ...

Understandable, in both cases. The fifth stanza might possibly be re-cast for a modern child (the hymn comes from Mrs. Alexander's 1848 Hymns for Little Children), perhaps along lines like:

The Xbox and the iPod,  
Computer games we play,  
The supervised activ'ties,  
We're driven to every day ...

There's nothing much you can do with that second stanza, though. Best just flush it down the memory hole. It very likely is the case that some people have higher net worth than others, though it's a bit indelicate to talk about it. Still, even if this is so, no believer can possibly think that these inequalities come about as a result of divine ordinance. Still less can anyone, believer or unbeliever, think that Mother Nature had anything to do with it. Good grief, no! Believers and unbelievers alike are agreed that if there are indeed inequalities in our society, they result from uneven distribution of opportunity, caused by:

Left Believer: Sinful human nature blinding us to the social justice ethic implicit in the Law, the Gospel, or the Koran, depending on your precise confession.

Right Believer: Social pathologies — illegitimacy, easy divorce, feminism, a corrupt popular culture — arising from ignorance of, or wanton defiance of, the divine plan.

Left Unbeliever: Oppression by the various types of human malignity that inevitably arise in capitalist society: sexism, racism, patriarchy, etc.

Right Unbeliever: Insufficiently rigorous education policy, insufficiently family-friendly tax and health-insurance policies, excessive regulation stifling enterprise, etc.

These notions fill the air. They are the common currency of politics, and the basis for innumerable speeches, sermons, opeds, commencement addresses, and academic papers. There are bits and pieces of truth in them. Some believers do not fully respect the Brotherhood of Man; illegitimacy has dumped a lot of kids in bad neighborhoods, to their disadvantage; human malignity does keep some people down (though not only under capitalism); public policy often is not friendly to free people who want to make the best of themselves.

Yet all those bits and pieces of truth together explain very little about social inequality. What mainly explains it is innate ability. U.S. society today is very nearly a pure meritocracy, perhaps the purest there has ever been. If you display any ability at all in your early years, you will be marked for induction into the overclass, especially if you belong to some designated victim group. (We preen ourselves endlessly — and pardonably — on how much more "inclusive" our present elites are than our past ones. This is one of the ways we avoid thinking about the necessity for any elite to be exclusive in some fashion.) There are still trust-fund kids, but they are not very consequential in this meritocracy.

Seek out the rich man in his castle: It is far more likely the case in the U.S.A. than anywhere else, and far more likely the case in the U.S.A. of today than at any past time, that he is from modest origins, and won his wealth fairly in the fields of business, finance, or the high professions. Seek out the poor

man at his gate: It is likewise probable, if you track back through his life, that it will be one of lackluster ability and effort, compounded perhaps perhaps with some serious personality defect. I have two kids in school, eighth grade and tenth. I know several of their classmates. There are some fuzzy cases, but for the most part it is easy to see who is destined for the castle, who for the gate.

Of the deciding factors, by far the largest is intelligence. There are of course smart people who squander their lives, and dumb people who get lucky. If you pluck a hundred rich men from their castles and put them in a room together, though, you will notice a high level of general intelligence. Contrariwise, a hundred poor men taken from their gates will, if put all in one place, convey a general impression of slow dullness. That's the meritocracy. That's where we've come to. As Herrnstein and Murray put it:

Mathematical necessity tells us that a large majority of the smart people in Cheops' Egypt, dynastic China, Elizabethan England, and Teddy Roosevelt's America were engaged in ordinary pursuits, mingling, working, and living with everyone else. Many were housewives. Most of the rest were farmers, smiths, millers, bakers, carpenters, and shopkeepers. Social and economic stratification was extreme, but cognitive stratification was minor.

So it has been from the beginning of history into [the 20th] century. Then, comparatively rapidly, a new class structure emerged in which it became much more consistently and universally advantageous to be smart.

The problem with this smartocracy is, we have this itchy feeling that it's un-American.

We Americans are easygoing about inequalities of wealth, much more so than Old World countries. There is something about inequality of smarts that just sets our teeth on edge, though. One of the first jokes ever told to me by an American was this one:

A man finds an old-fashioned oil lamp on the beach. He takes it home and starts cleaning it up. A genie pops out. Genie: "I've been in there so long my powers are weak. I can only grant you one wish, and it's a choice of two. I can either make you super-rich or super-smart. What'll it be?" Man, after a moment's thought: "Y'know, I've always been bothered about being kinda slow. Always felt people were laughing at me behind my back. Well, no more of that! Make me super-smart!" Genie: "Done!" The genie vanishes. The man smacks himself on the forehead: "Jeez, I shoulda taken the money!"

Until recently there was quite a strict taboo on mentioning the idea that some people might be smarter than others. Remember what abuse The Bell Curve came in for. It seems to me that we are starting to be a little more open and truthful about these matters. Columnist Chris Satullo in the

Philadelphia Inquirer back in May pointed out that the charges of "elitism" then being hurled at Barack Obama were really about smarts.

The charge of elitism isn't about people flaunting income; it's about people flaunting IQ. Americans, as a rule, don't resent people who have more money than them — particularly if the wealth is seen as earned. Envy, maybe, but not resent. You don't resent people whom you hope to emulate. And most Americans dream easily about having much more dough than they do. What Americans more readily resent is someone who is smarter than them, who knows it, who shows it, and who seems to think being smart makes you better than everyone else. A gap in income, you can always dream of closing. A gap in IQ, not so much. It's more personal, thus easier to resent.

A different writer, William Deresiewicz in *The American Scholar*, wrote recently about the difficulty of talking to a plumber:

It didn't dawn on me that there might be a few holes in my education until I was about 35. I'd just bought a house, the pipes needed fixing, and the plumber was standing in my kitchen. There he was, a short, beefy guy with a goatee and a Red Sox cap and a thick Boston accent, and I suddenly learned that I didn't have the slightest idea what to say to someone like him. So alien was his experience to me, so unguessable his values, so mysterious his very language, that I couldn't succeed in engaging him in a few minutes of small talk before he got down to work. Fourteen years of higher education and a handful of Ivy League [degrees], and there I was, stiff and stupid, struck dumb by my own dumbness. "Ivy retardation," a friend of mine calls this. I could carry on conversations with people from other countries, in other languages, but I couldn't talk to the man who was standing in my own house.

It's a horrifying story, but not a surprising one. This is indeed what we have come to. An acquaintance of mine, an academic in the human sciences (not Charles Murray) holds the opinion that across an IQ gap of more than one standard deviation (i.e. about 15 points), communication between two people becomes difficult, and that beyond two standard deviations it is effectively impossible.

I'm not sure I'm ready to believe that. I think there is actually an element of art there. Some individuals have a knack, a way of doing it, that allows them to communicate effectively even across 30 I.Q. points. Then again, some don't. It probably helps not to have been culled out from the herd at an early age, like Mr. Deresiewicz, and segregated off from all contact with poor men at gates — the process known as "an Ivy League education."

It would probably help, too, if intelligence were not heritable to some large degree. (Forty to 80

percent, say Herrnstein and Murray, which agrees with one's rule-of-thumb observations.) This means that our cognitive elites are increasingly inbred. Doctors used to marry nurses, professors used to marry their secretaries, business moguls used to marry starlets. Now doctors marry doctors, professors professors, moguls moguls, lawyers lawyers, etc. Those "modest origins" of our meritocratic elites are less modest by the year. We might be drifting towards a caste system, except that meritocracy requires some openness, some vacuuming-up of high-I.Q. outliers from the lower classes, some dumping of low-I.Q. duffers from the elites.

That's how we are doing things, and the perplexity of William Deresiewicz shows how far we have come. The rich man is in his castle (actually, more likely, his gated community or doorman apartment complex) and the poor man is at his gate. They can't really talk to each other because the poor man is almost certainly a couple of standard deviations below the rich man in I.Q. score. They don't want to anyway, because they don't much like each other. The ignorant condescension of the overclass was exactly what was causing Barack Obama so much trouble back in May — not a mistake he will repeat, I think. He doesn't seem the type to repeat mistakes. There you have one of the advantages of a high I.Q.: You learn fast.

The converse dislike that the nonelite masses feel for their new masters was on display in the Scooter Libby case. From outside the castles, the walled compounds of the elite, it all looked like a storm in a teacup. Libby was one of them, so nothing much would happen to him. They would take care of him. What else would they do — throw him off the battlements? That never happens. Ten years on he'll still be one of them. The guy lost a hand in the poker games that are played between different factions of them, that's all, up there in their castles.

From behind the castle moats it all looked different. Those poker games seem far more important to the people playing them than they look to outsiders (or than, in fact, they actually are) because outsiders are hardly ever thought about. Everybody in Libby's faction of the elite knew him; everybody liked Ol' Scooter. That he had taken a hit from the other elite faction was an outrage, an occasion of high emotion. I thought I detected, here and there, some Deresiewiczian bafflement among the elites that this emotion did not seem to be much in evidence among people living outside the castle walls. But hey, who really cares about them?

This isn't one of those columns where I point out a problem and suggest a possible solution. As I remarked in an earlier piece on this general theme:

I wish these ... elites had a little more color and dash. I wish they were not so academic. I wish there were some sign of a Churchill among them, or a Roosevelt (Teddy for preference), or an Andy Jackson. I wish they had stronger opinions. I wish they showed more evidence of having courage. I wish, above all, that there were fewer of them. But do I have an alternative to meritocracy? Do I think these [elite college] kids are unspeakably awful, and will drag western civilization down to perdition? Would I prefer my own kids not have a shot at joining them, if they decide they want to? No, and no, and no.

Human society stumbles on forward, from imperfection to, one hopes, lesser imperfection. Our cognitive elites are not lovable. Every so often their arrogance and condescension will come breaking through the surface. It's a pity there isn't some way to forcibly mix them with their fellow citizens at some point in their cosseted young adulthood, so that they might at least have a shot at learning how to talk across the I.Q. gap; but in a free society, there is no way to do that. Absent that kind of social engineering, there is nothing for it but to lie back and let them rule us. They'll probably make a pretty good job of it. They are, after all, the brightest and the best ... however much we dislike them.

## 和管子工交谈：智商差异

约翰·德比舍尔

吴万伟 译

**摘要：**人类社会蹒跚前进，人们希望从不完美到比较完美。我们的认知精英并不可爱。他们的傲慢和居高临下的恩赐态度时不时就会浮上表面。很遗憾我们没有方法强制他们在年轻时和同胞混合起来，这样至少让他们有机会学会如何和智商不同的人交谈。但是在一个自由的社会，不能这样做啊。既然缺乏那种社会工程，我们除了乖乖躺下、让精英统治外实在没有其它办法。他们很可能做得很不错。毕竟，精英是最好的、最聪明的人，不管我们多么讨厌他们。

**关键词：**精英；傲慢

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