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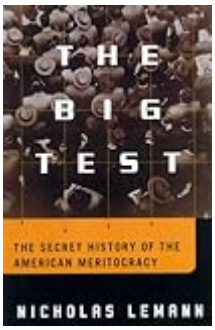

Nicholas Lemann. *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999. 406 pp. $27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-29984-2.

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Testing, Class, and Material Success, or How We Got to BeProfessors

Nicholas Lemann sums up the thesis of *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* in a brief passage in the "Afterword":

Because of the peculiar circumstances of the founding of the American meritocracy, the lack of public debate or assent (therefore the lack of general understanding about its purpose), the heavy reliance on mental tests as a selection device, the steady imperceptible segue in orientation from leadership training to reward distribution, the system seems to be one whose judgments are mysterious, severe, and final. The natural impulse is not simply to accept these judgments as fair. That is why, instead, people worry and squabble over them almost obsessively (p. 346).

On the way to establishing that thesis, Lemann provides the reader with a first-rate history of the creation of the Scholastic Aptitude Test and its parent, the Educational Testing Service, that makes excellent use of extensive archival materials, and accounts of the rise of the University of California under Clark Kerr, the diversification of the Yale College student body, and the struggle over Proposition 209, which banned affirmative action in California – all of which are more journalistic in nature. That is not say, of course, that these latter stories are of less worth than the first. The narrative of the birth, debate about, and eventual triumph of Prop. 209 is an outstanding illustration of the interaction of public contests over issues and electoral politics. It is sobering reading, especially in a presidential election year. The book is a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate over the nature of opportunity in American society and itself will someday be one of the sources from which future historians will write the story of our times. For now, however, historians will be more interested in "Book One: The Moral Equivalent of Religion."

There are two central figures in this first part of the story, one well-known, the other not. The first is James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard. The second is Henry Chauncey, the first president of ETS. Chauncey was a member of an old New England family whose career was not particularly interesting until he discovered the young world of intelligence testing and became an unrestrained advocate of the scientific sorting of society's members. He was also in the right place at the right time.

In the fall of 1933 Conant began his tenure as president of Harvard and his campaign to change the nature of the undergraduate experience. As a first step he wanted to bring to the college young men from outside New England and the preparatory school world. He gave the task to Chauncey and Wilbur Bender, another young assistant dean. They turned to the College Board and the SAT and the rest is history. Or rather, the rest is the story of the creation of ETS and Chauncey's remarkable abilities as a salesman and corporate leader. The story of the ETS is the story of the creation of an institution that grew by cultivating contracts (and contracts) with government, aggressive marketing and salesmanship, and careful nurturing of its public image. Chauncey's contribution to that growth is carefully chronicled. His lack of contribution to the technical side of testing is also set out, as is his almost naive enthusiasm for almost any kind of standardized test that came along. His great goal was to have ETS create and administer a "Census of Abilities" which would test every American and tell every American (or at least male, and probably white, Americans) what career to pursue. Needless to say, Chauncey never got ETS to carry out his grand vision. The vision it did carry out was that of James Bryant Conant.

Lemann puts Conant at the center of the story, ascribing to him the idea that the goal of education was to select the most talented and train them to become the administrators that American society needed. Identifying Thomas Jefferson's conception of the "natural aristocracy" as Conant's inspiration, Lemann faults Conant for exactly the same reason that John Adams criticized Jefferson's notion:

Adams was right to see immediately, when Jefferson suggested to him the idea of a natural aristocracy, that the project of picking just the right aristocrats for the United States is fundamentally quixotic, that it serves only to distract us from the obvious point: a democratic nation shouldn't have an aristocracy at all (p. 347).

The incredibly bad fit between Conant's notion of a small elite group, reformed every generation (Conant opposed the G.I. Bill on the grounds that what the nation needed was fewer, but better, university trained men and advocated a confiscatory estate tax), was badly out of synch with "a clamorous, classless, opportunity-obsessed nation" (pp. 89, 48-49, 110). First, access to higher education expanded greatly, in the first instance because of the G.I. Bill. Second, the newly-anointed elite did not turn to government service, but devoted themselves to material success. Finally, the successful elite not only was not willing to see society "reordered" in each generation, but fought tooth and nail to make sure that their prosperity would be the property of their children. The SAT became the gatekeeper not to service to the democratic nation but to membership in the upper middle class. It is no surprise that SAT scores, created to do something else entirely, measuring aptitudes that may or may not mean anything, tied to the socio-economic status of the test taker and susceptible to improvement through expensive coaching, are at the center of American class anxiety.

The rest of *The Big Test* illustrates the anxiety and tension with the story of the struggle over affirmative action, culminating in the passage of Prop. 209. The story is more journalism than history. Lemann concentrates on the stories of individuals, presents events and analyzes those events through their eyes, and rests heavily on anecdote. It is great journalism, without a doubt, and, as already suggested, presents a large amount of primary material on very current events. To engage it in detail would be to write yet another view, in part complementary and in part competing, of the same subject.

The more historical portion of Lemann's argument lends itself to more cabined discussion. The book's centerpiece is the SAT, and Lemann spends almost no time on the standardized tests that guard the route to professional schools, especially the LSAT and the MCAT. The LSAT is especially important because of the importance that law and lawyers play in the fight over affirmative action. Indeed, almost all the individuals through whose thoughts and actions the later part of the story is told are attorneys. To the extent that he is telling the story of people he describes as "Mandarins," "the products of the new formal education system [who] went to outstanding colleges and then on to professional schools," Lemann is writing about lawyers (p. 188). For lawyers, the law school credential matters more than the college degree, but Lemann glosses over this distinction in an interesting way. In Chapter Twelve he describes the transformation of Yale College, a change in which Henry Chauncey's son Samuel played an important role as a member of the Yale administration. According to Lemann, Yale College came to think of the elite it was training in academic terms. They would graduate with "learned expertise, rather than simply good character" (p. 153).

The effect of the change was neatly demonstrated a generation later, in 1993, when the White House was turned over from George and Barbara Bush – he Old Yale, from Greenwich, Connecticut, a Skull and Bones man, she a [Smith] college dropout who had met him at a debu-

tante ball – to Bill and Hillary Clinton, who, having been plucked out of public-high-school obscurity in the South and Midwest, had met in the library of Yale Law School in the late 1960s“ (p. 153).

Hillary Rodham and Bill Clinton did not attend Yale College, however. Granted, they must have done well on the SAT, but what made their careers was the LSAT and law school. The LSAT was created by ETS, of course, and its content, at least at first, was very much like the verbal section of the older test. On the other hand, the LSAT became more and more independent of ETS, until it came totally under the control of a separate organization, the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC), more closely tied to the law schools than ETS seems to have been to the colleges. In addition, the LSAT was first administered in 1948 and was created in response to the expected influx of applicants related to the expanded opportunities of the G.I. Bill. My own reading of the record of the creation of the test leads me to the conclusion that the law school professors involved were quite consciously trying to expand access to law school and were not at all motivated by notion of “natural aristocracy” that motivated Conant and were quite adamant that the test score was simply one factor in the admissions decision. As the number of applicants to law school increased, of course, the LSAT became a powerful gatekeeper, but perhaps not in quite the same way as the SAT.

More broadly, the story Lemann tells about the creation of the SAT is really a story about one response to the great change in American society which began in the 1920s, was pushed forward by the Depression and culminated, at least in its first phase, with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt’s triumph represented the coming to political power of European immigrant groups who had been excluded from full participation in American political and social life. Full participation would come with the end of the Second World War and the opportunities presented by the G.I. Bill and economic growth. The United States became a middle class society, or, perhaps, more accurately, large numbers of families moved out of the working class into a more middle class existence and many people from formally unacceptable backgrounds entered the professional classes. Conant thought that this new society could be guided and governed by a small number of experts who could be selected on merit and who would allow their status to expire with them. What happened, as Lemann suggests, was far different. The elect turned to personal advancement and the promotion of their progeny.

Lemann’s thesis is that the SAT made the Mandarins and is the key to their children attaining the same status. Because scores on the SAT do correlate with socio-economic status, reliance on test scores to allocate access to high prestige education could do exactly what the test was designed to preventÃ±the perpetuation of a closed elite. Affirmative action, therefore, is a serious threat to the birthright of the children of the Mandarin class, and because socio-economic status and race are so closely linked in the United States, the place of the SAT is American life is contentious and deeply intertwined with electoral politics. The more journalistic portions of *The Big Test* make the relationship abundantly clear, and make one aspect of the historical narration an especially intriguing might have been. In the early 1990s, Winton Manning, a researcher a ETS worked on creating the MAT, or Measure of Academic Talent, “which would be an SAT score weighted and revised to account for background factors” (p. 271). According to Lemann’s reading of the record, ETS squelched Manning’s work. Had it gone forward, the struggle over race and opportunity might look quite different. As it is, the struggle continues into the new century. Nicholas Lemann has made an important contribution to understanding the maneuvers that have lead to the current battle lines.

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