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REFLECTIONS ON THE PERPETUAL MYTH OF THE UNIVERSITY AS SEEKER OF TRUTH

*MICHAEL I. KRAUSS**

The average African-American has a lower IQ than the average Caucasian American. The average Jewish-American underperforms on spatial intelligence portions of aptitude tests, when compared with his or her performance on math and linguistic segments. The average female scores lower, and expresses less interest in, areas involving scientific aptitude than does the average male.

Several questions arise from these presumably undisputed empirical statements. Here's a sampling:

- How much of the differences observed traces to cultural influences (“socialization,” “nurture”) and how much to biology (“nature”)?
- Is it even possible to separate the former from the latter? Might Jews’ confinement in urban ghettos, for example have resulted in a biological selection away from spatially oriented people? Might female nurturing (while males hunted and gathered) also have selected for certain biological characteristics?
- Since our polity rightly insists (or at least claims to, when it is not involved in the massive cognitive dissonance of affirmative action) on *individual* achievement and *individual* testing, why should we care what the answers are to the above questions?

It is this third type of question that has been foremost in my mind since the hullabaloo that followed Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers’ speech at the “Diversifying the Science and Engineering Workforce” conference in January 2005. Summers wondered why it was so hard to attract good women to these fields. He mused that men might, on average, have an innate advantage over women in scientific aptitude. Presumably, his point was that females, like males, tend to prefer to work at things they are good at, and since fewer females are really good at scientific endeavors, that might explain their under-representation in those fields. I have no known relatives in the NBA for, I think, similar reasons.

Why did President Summers’ speech provoke ire? Likely because it violated a fundamental tenet of post-modern American academe: that markets fail except when they favor others than white males. The dogma, I take it, is that whenever females or minorities are over-represented in “desirable” jobs, this is an efficient

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consequence of their superior skills. But when they are under-represented at “desirable” jobs, or over-represented at “undesirable” jobs, this is because hateful, irrational employers are discriminating against them. President Summers dissed the discrimination-*über-alles* crowd when he suggested a possible efficiency explanation for female under-representation in science and engineering.

What was President Summers *thinking* when he made that statement? Did he actually believe that the “constituencies” that blasted him for insisting on scholarship from Cornel West, that excoriated him for condemning the anti-Semitic pro-Palestinian faction that demanded a Harvard stock divestiture from companies doing business in Israel, and that clucked their disapproval when he deplored Harvard’s rampant and famous grade inflation would let this pass?

As the New York Times has recently pointed out, Larry Summers is no conservative. He was chief economist for the very same World Bank that the Paleo-cons hate. Then he was Treasury Secretary under President Clinton. Despite these credentials, Summers apparently just doesn’t get it. He wants to impose on the university the *true* diversity of excellence it claims to cherish, not the pseudo-diversity it really wants. For instance, President Summers would like to see R.O.T.C. (which was banished from Harvard during the ironic “free-speech” sit-ins of the ’60’s) restored to campus. He would like to beef up Harvard’s core curriculum. He would like to hire the best academics for each department, even if they are not of oppressed races or of the oppressed sex or sexual orientation.

As the Summers sit-com makes obvious to all but the most blinkered observer, universities and their dominant voices do not have the toughness and resiliency to face up to great questions today. Truth? They don’t need no friggin’ truth. They can’t handle the truth, and knowing they cannot, they naturally take self-protective measures, just as a man with a degenerating spine stays off skis.

President Summers’ sin, in a nutshell, is that he just keeps getting back on those skis.