

“Commentary” is one of the most respected and influential monthlies in America. It has a comparatively minuscule circulation of about 32,000 but it publishes and is read by the crème de la crème of American intellectual elite. I get a dire feeling of magazine guilt when my monthly copy arrives – I know that I will not be able to plow through it as soon as I should and I feel guilty that some of it will remain unread in the stack of “I will get to this soon” literature.

As an example of its content, here is my condensation of “Jewish Genius” by Charles Murray, a Scots-Irish Gentile from Iowa and a most distinguished scholar and author. He examines a truly fascinating question: the possible reasons for the apparently superior intelligence of Jews.

The author addresses three topics: the timing and nature of Jewish accomplishment; elevated Jewish IQ as an explanation of this accomplishment; and current theories about how the Jews acquired their elevated IQ.

The most obvious Jewish accomplishments are in the religious realm: monotheism and Christianity that have fundamentally impacted the development of Western civilization. But other than that, prior to the first millennium C.E., when much was happening in Greece, China and South Asia, Jews did not appear in the annals of philosophy, drama, mathematics or natural sciences.

In his book, *Human Accomplishment*, Murray compiled an inventory of “significant figures” between 1200 and 1800, those who are mentioned in at least half of the histories of their respective fields. There were only 7 Jews among them and only two whose names are easily recognized: Spinoza and Montaigne.

This minuscule representation of Jews at that time was caused by legal and social exclusion. The 1700s marked the beginning of emancipation that was largely completed by the 1870s. This period presents an extraordinary story that isn’t duplicated in human history.

Between 1830 and 1870, when the first Jews born under emancipation reached their 40s, 16 significant Jews appear. In the next four decades, by 1910, this increases to 40. During the next forty years, 1910-1950, despite the devastation of European Jewry, the number had tripled to 114!

Between 1870 and 1950, in proportion to their numbers in the population, Jews were represented 4 times more than would be expected in literature, 5 times in music and visual arts, 6 times in chemistry, 8 times in biology, 9 times in physics, 12 times in mathematics and 14 in philosophy.

Jews who are just two-tenths of 1% of the world's population won 14% of Nobel Prizes in the first half of the 20th century, 29% in the 2nd half, and, so far, 32% in the 21st century.

Why is this happening? Since the first samples were measured, Jews have been found to have unusually high IQ scores. The numbers are not totally reliable but it is usually accepted that 110 is a useful mean number. Given the standard deviation of 15, this means that the proportion of Jews with IQs of 140 or higher is somewhere around 6 times the proportion of everyone else.

The imbalance is even greater for higher IQ's. In 1954, in New York schools, 28 children with IQs 170 or higher were identified. 24 of the 28 were Jews.

Exceptional intelligence is not enough to guarantee exceptional achievement. There are other factors but intelligence is probably the most indispensable one. A randomly selected Jew has a much higher probability of possessing exceptional intelligence than a randomly selected member of any other ethnic or national group.

All of the above is scientific fact, but there is much disagreement about how and when this elevated IQ came about.

Genetics are an important factor. High income, presence of books, parental influence are less so. It is known that children adopted at birth do not achieve the IQ predicted by their parents' IQ. There are indications that Gentile children brought up by Jews will not assume Jewish intelligence and that, therefore, there is something in Jewish genes that is responsible.

Two popular explanations for the Jewish "smart" genes are the selection by persecution when only the smartest Jews survived, and marrying for brains – scholars and children of scholars were desirable spouses. The problem here is that rabbinic knowledge and commitment to Judaism could not be factors in surviving mob violence. On the contrary, the most successful and visible people

would probably be more likely to be targeted. Gypsies were persecuted for centuries without developing superior intelligence.

Marrying for brains is also problematic: it seems that rich merchants were often quite reluctant to entrust their daughters to penniless and unworldly scholars whose reasoning ability was remote from practical intelligence.

In 2006, a major study of Jewish intelligence found that elevated Jewish IQ is confined to Ashkenazi Jews of Northern and Central Europe, and developed from 800 to about 1600 C.E.

The authors concluded that occupational selection was the key factor in Jewish intelligence. From 800 C.E. European Jews were restricted to occupations in trade, finance and sales where intelligence is a factor. The occupation of non-Jews was primarily farming where less intelligence was required. Jewish economic success produced lower infant mortality and a strong selection for traits that were needed in Jewish trades. In addition, there was little intermarriage with non-Jews and no “contamination” of the gene pool.

Sephardi and Oriental Jews were also engaged in urban occupations. But there is evidence that they were more concentrated in craft trades that did not stress intelligence. Thus elevated intelligence did not develop – contemporary tests in Israel indicate that the IQs of non-European Jews are roughly similar to those of Gentiles.

Here is a quote from this study:

The suggested selective process explains the pattern of mental abilities in Ashkenazi Jews: high verbal and mathematical ability but relatively low spatio-visual ability. Verbal and mathematical talent helped medieval businessmen succeed, while spatio-visual abilities were irrelevant.

Murray presents a challenge to this, otherwise reasonable, hypothesis: Jews who remained in the Islamic world showed an extremely high level of accomplishment in the beginning of the second millennium. These were not Ashkenazim, who were still largely excluded from intellectual pursuits, but Sephardim in the Iberian Peninsula, Baghdad and other Islamic centers. After being expelled in the late 1400s, Sephardic Jews rose to distinction in many of the countries they settled in. Some historians trace the decline of Spain and the

rise of the Netherlands to the Jewish migration from one to the other. In England as well, descendants of Sephardis made major contributions – Benjamin Disraeli is just one example.

Murray's explanation for the currently lower Sephardi and higher Ashkenazi IQs is that the Jews, circa 1000 C.E., had higher intelligence everywhere but that it was subsequently elevated even more among the Ashkenazim while declining among the Sephardim. He suggests that DNA testing would find that the Ashkenazi Jews who are closest to the Sephardim of Spain's Golden Age have an elevated mean IQ, not much lower than the Ashkenazi IQ.

Murray also suggests that some of the elevation in Jewish intelligence occurred because of the shift in ancient Judaism from a rite-based to a learning-based religion. He points out that all scholars agree that about 80-90 % of all Jews were farmers at the beginning of the Common Era but that only 10-20% were farmers by the year 1000 C.E. Furthermore, this didn't happen because Jews were prevented from farming – the same transition from farming to urban life occurred among Jews who were free to own land and work in agriculture. Murray suggests that the shift was caused in 64 C.E. by an edict by Palestinian sage, Joshua ben Gamla, who mandated universal schooling for all males starting at the age of six. The ordinance was overwhelmingly implemented and the Jews, uniquely among all of the world's people, achieved almost universal male literacy and numeracy.

Education was an asset that was valuable in urban occupations but worthless in farming. Over the centuries this caused the Jewish shift to cities and to trade and sales.

Between the 1st and 6th centuries C.E., world Jewish population plummeted from about 4.5 million to 1.5 million or less. About 1 million Jews had been killed in Roman rebellions, others were forcibly converted, but that still leaves a huge number of Jews who simply disappeared. Where did they go? One reasonable explanation is that Jews who remained farmers derived no benefit from education and simply drifted away from Judaism. Another explanation is that with the destruction of the Temple, Judaism became a religion centered on prayer and study of the Torah at decentralized synagogues and study houses. Rabbis and teachers became leaders of the communities. All Jewish males, if they were to

practice their faith, were expected to read and understand what they were reading, not only in private but aloud, in the presence of others.

They had to be literate, they were required to teach their children – in short, to be a good Jew meant that a man had to be smart. Murray suggests that those who could not cope with the intellectual requirements drifted out of the community while those who remained already had elevated intelligence.

Murray asks: Is it the case then that before the 1st century Jews were intellectually ordinary? The Babylonian exile was another earlier factor in increasing intelligence. We are told that Nebuchadnezzar, “carried into exile all Jerusalem: all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans...Only the poorest people of the land were left” (2Kings 24:10) A century later, when the exiles returned, they found that most of the population left behind had been absorbed into other religions. The returned descendants of the elite were plausibly more able than the pre-captivity population.

Here are the two closing paragraphs of the fascinating and brilliant study by Charles Murray which I have shamelessly abbreviated and re-written:

“...I am naked before the evolutionary psychologists’ ultimate challenge. Why should this particular tribe at the time of Moses, living in the same environment as other nomadic and agricultural peoples of the Middle East, have already evolved elevated intelligence when others did not?”

“At this point, I take sanctuary in my remaining hypothesis, uniquely parsimonious and happily irrefutable. The Jews are God’s chosen people.”

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