
The Politics of Ability and Online Culture Wars

STEVEN WATSON

ABSTRACT Conversations about ‘fixed’ or innate ability in relation to schools and education have generally considered – though not exclusively so – the psychological and sociological basis of ability, the practicalities and policy formulations. In this article, the author considers the emergent politics of ability and the culture war on social media which appears to be driving the discourse. He draws on his own research in this and presents an article which is intended to highlight the nature of the politics of ability and offer some insights into how practitioners and academics might move forward in a more productive way. Essentially, sustained debate over the nature of ability as fixed or as a flexible characteristic can prove to be irresolvable. He argues that what can potentially unite both sides of the debate is a greater sense of justice in terms of social class and political economy.

The Politicisation of Genetics and Ability on Social Media

In August 2017, David Didau, an education blogger well known to those who are active on social media in England, published a blog about IQ and genetics.[1] Didau is part of a network of activists who profess to be the voice of the ordinary teacher [2] – teachers who, they argue, have been subject for many years to the imposition of progressive teaching approaches. And while he and his cohort claim to be the voice of the grassroots, Nick Gibb, the Minister of State for School Standards, has frequently heaped praise on Didau’s writing in his speeches. Didau presents himself as a transgressive liberal, seeking to debunk the myths of progressive education, yet he is strongly promoted by a government minister. The title of his book, *What If Everything You Knew About Education Was Wrong?* (Didau, 2016), typifies his rhetoric. The publication of writing on IQ and genetics, alongside a general attempt at the popularisation of genetic determinism (see e.g. Plomin, 2018), marked a new turn and an escalation in the rhetoric – an escalation that we must subject to scrutiny in any

exploration of the idea of 'ability' in relation to education. This discourse of ability and genetics, I argue here, is intended to provoke and escalate a culture war for political purpose. It serves to promote division within the teaching community which makes it easier for the interests of capital to exploit public education as grassroots resistance becomes divided.

In this issue of *FORUM* the focus is on 'ability'. Ability in contemporary educational contexts is often seen as a neutral, quantifiable measure (see e.g. Herrnstein & Murray, 1996). That is, learners can be subjected to a sophisticated psychometric test or assessment and a metric can be assigned to that learner. While it is argued that such assessments can be highly valid and reliable, questions about what education is for, what learning involves and what should be learnt are put to one side in preference for judgements about a learner's 'ability'. This is especially true in my own subject of mathematics, where in England setting and streaming are common practice. While I have sympathies – having been a mathematics teacher – given the demands on teachers and mathematics departments in our contemporary surveillance culture of hard accountability, I am also very concerned about the politics of ability. Didau's strong position on the relationship between ability (or specifically IQ) and genetics perhaps highlights a move to the popularisation of such views through exploiting the facilities of social media.

After reading Didau's blog in August 2017, I was motivated into a burst of research activity which kept me busy, almost full time, through August and September (see Watson, 2017 for an account of this research). I was disturbed, not simply by the discussion of ability and genetics, but by the combination of the style of rhetoric, the politicisation of the issue and the use of social media. As a teacher educator, I was uneasy, given Didau's reach and status on social media, about the influence of such an uncritical account of IQ and genetics. Supplementarily, Didau's representation gave new life to Toby Young's 'progressive eugenics' (Young, 2015) in what appeared to be a worrying resurgence of interest in eugenics, ability and genetics.

I responded with a blog post in which I offered a more critical account, and historical consideration of the discourse and research into heritability.[3] The scientific evidence, based on twin studies, is not as clear-cut as people like Didau and Young would have us believe. And indeed, any scientist worth their salt recognises the fallibility of their methods and claims. Moreover (and as I speak to in this article), conceptualisations of ability are discourses that are deeply embedded in political economy and within liberal economics. The hypothesis I held then was that the rhetoric around ability was not focused on the science or even the philosophy of intelligence, but rather, what was driving the articulation of these positions and the subsequent debate was down to politics and political economy (for a detailed account of my position, see Watson, 2017).

The Affective, Social, Political and Economic Basis of Culture Wars

I contend that Didau's purpose was to promote a culture war, to publish a provocative and controversial piece which prompts an affective response – either: 'Oh yes! I agree with that, thankfully, somebody has said that!' or: 'No way! That is abhorrent and unacceptable!' It is about position, attitude and affect. Hunter (1996) characterises culture wars in the USA as competing views of political dispositions: cultural conservatives versus cultural progressivists. Inglehart's (1990) analysis of attitude change in the USA identifies 'the decline of economic criteria as the implicit standard of rational behaviour' (p. 3). This 'shift' in advanced industrial society represents a move from a political struggle based on material politics and class to an attitudinal polarisation. Individuals and collectives engaged in class struggle find meaning through political economy, through changing their material conditions. A culture war is a political antagonism focused on attitude rather than material politics. Baudrillard (1983) presents this transformation in terms of the emergence of a silent majority, who have no source of meaning and are 'bombarded with stimuli' (p. 21). The silent majority, instead of engaging in a revolutionary project or class-based struggle, are seduced into a simulation of meaning and emotional commitment as part of a culture war.

A culture war heightens an emotional experience of injustice, but instead of a political confrontation oriented around capital and labour, the antagonism is in the hostility towards a notional other. The polarisation in a culture war can be based on different causes or themes, but the division represents the oppositional identities of social conservatism and social liberalism. In Nagle's analysis of the alt-right in the USA, she identifies the proliferation of a culture war via social media and echoes the changing nature of political antagonisms, claiming that 'culture wars discourse is based on a political compass that has long been reorienting, rethinking and reconstituting itself' (Nagle, 2017, p. 61). In *Kill All Normies*, Nagle's analysis of an online culture war shows the perpetuation of division by a transgressive, irreverent – and ironically – socially conservative 'alt-right' on social media, which manufactures consent and imbues an emotional commitment to a project in opposition to a perceived oppressor or other – the perceived oppressor being post-war social liberalism, 'cultural Marxism', anti-egalitarianism and political correctness (Nagle, 2017). While in the UK, the traditionalist teacher movement, which Didau identifies himself with, like the alt-right, is preoccupied with innate ability, IQ, free speech and the decline of the western culture, it has much less in common with the alt-right's overt white supremacy and racism. However, its reactionary stance is ambivalent about states and institutions with embedded racist cultures and therefore shares something with the alt-right in the USA. Terms such as 'muscular liberalism' (Jose, 2015) or the 'extreme centre' (Ali, 2015) or even the 'alt-centre' have been used to characterise a reactionary liberalism that is populist but wants to preserve traditions of state, hierarchy and institutions. As I demonstrate in my working paper, Didau et al are fellow travellers with the

online magazine *Spiked!* and its network, including the Institute of Ideas (see Watson, 2017 for more details). *Spiked!* represents a British alt-light project; it strongly defends free speech, challenges political correctness and concerns itself with the decline of western culture. According to Spiked-Watch, their strategy is to draw attention to themselves by publishing provocative articles online and prompting a reaction from liberal-left progressives (Spiked-Watch, 2017). Culture war provocations – or ‘trolling’ progressives – strengthen support for the reactionary position, while provoking and consolidating an opposing cohort.

Prior to this focus on ability and genetics, the central preoccupation of the ‘traditionalist’ teachers and bloggers was ‘knowledge’. While this, in itself, appears to be no bad thing – for who teaches without the transmission of knowledge or in the absence of knowledge? – the source of such thinking follows the work of Michael Young (*not* Toby Young’s father Michael D. Young) and his edifice, *powerful knowledge* (Young & Lambert, 2014), and is also heavily influenced by American cultural theorist E.D. Hirsch (1988). Shrouded in arguments for social justice is a strong emphasis on traditional canons of culture and knowledge. The leaning, then, is towards a more reactionary view of curriculum. The rhetoric around genetics and ability represents a lurch to a more traditional and authoritarian education philosophy.

A Historical Materialist Account of Ability

It does not take much of a stretch of the imagination to envisage how, from the time that living things became self-aware and self-conscious, there was some sense of the individual’s own ability and, importantly, a sense of the ability of others. The capacity to conceptualise in the abstract gives human beings, and other animals with the facility for conscious thought, the potential not only to use tools but also to design them. Evolving tools and technologies, that became increasingly abstract, as well as sophisticated, permitted agrarian societies to transform into feudal societies and then into industrial capitalist ones. Through this long process, the role of conscious and rational thought becomes increasingly important. As the ability to abstract and construct mental models evolves, human beings begin to predict and anticipate their environment. The early modern period in Europe sees the slow progress towards industrial production and expanding competition and trade. There is increasing demand for educated courtiers and a middle class who have the training and education to manage finance, to engineer productive technologies as well as weaponry and who have the intellectual capacity to defend monarchs’ divine rights to their regional monopolies. It is estimated that in the 1300s in England about three per cent of the population was literate (Lawson & Silver, 1973). Through the sixteenth century there was growing interest in schooling, and the ‘new’ grammar schools were, unlike their predecessors which were largely run by the Church, effectively joint ventures between Church and State (Gillard, 2018).

A historical materialist account reveals the emergence of a stratified class-based society. The contemporary social media ruckus about ability and knowledge tends to ignore this dialectic, but it is nonetheless important. Cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) usefully explain the differences in taste and ability in a stratified society; these concern not just economic status, but knowledge of culture and literature and the possession of influential family and wider social networks. While Bourdieu explains how class-based society reproduces itself and maintains distinctions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), nineteenth-century scholarship used the differences in observable characteristics in stratified society to postulate a science of ability and heritability. Francis Galton (1822-1911), a cousin of Charles Darwin, and inspired by the *Origin of Species* (1859), investigated the heritability of ability and intelligence. In 1869 he published *Hereditary Genius*. Using the method of historiometry, he examined the achievements of relatives of eminent men. He observed that among more distant relatives there were fewer eminent people and he concluded that ability is heritable. Importantly, it appeared to Galton that it was science and mathematics that had led to the derivation of the facts about heritability. And he argued that we must, for the sake of society, ensure that democracy is 'composed of able citizens' and that we must be aware of 'the true state of things', even though his own methods were inconclusive.

Undoubtedly Galton was an accomplished individual, and he is generally characterised as a polymath. His contributions are startling and impressive. Galton developed the ideas of regression to the mean and standard deviation. He also pioneered the use of questionnaires. What he seems to have been unaware of was alternative causes of the conditions of society. While Galton assumed that inequality in society was natural selection – the cream rising to the top – Karl Marx was explaining the existence of poverty as a result of the failings of liberal economics. The free market kept the rich rich and the poor poor. The conditions of the poor ensured that they were starved, overworked and poorly housed, and consequently they were wretched examples of humanity. While Darwin's natural selection takes place over thousands of generations, the conditions of the working poor in Victorian Britain had developed within a few generations. There is nothing natural about what Galton observed of lunacy, feeble-mindedness, habitual criminality and pauperism – these things were entirely man made. Galton gave – and it is pretty much unforgivable – those who benefited from the economic status quo scientific 'facts' to justify and explain the tracts of squalor and depravity across industrialised Britain. It was, they could say, just a matter of heredity: the well-off are well off because of their genetic superiority and the poor are that way because of their inferiority. But the story becomes more sinister. There were programmes of sterilisation in some European countries and some states in America in the early 1900s. Adolf Hitler was inspired by eugenics: consequently, the Nazis killed thousands of disabled people in the 1930s and murdered millions of Jews during World War II.

How the Politics of Privatisation Has Promoted a Divisive Culture War

The feature of the twentieth century that has resulted in a politics increasingly oriented towards identity and culture, rather than leading to a material class-based politics, is alluded to in Baudrillard's account of the silent majority. It was wrestled with by various members of the Frankfurt School as they established critical inquiry, bringing together Marx and Freud. Increasing consumption and private debt manufactured consent in a popularised form of participant capitalism, where, apparently, our needs are met, and there is no longer a need to collectivise in order to promote the rights and fair treatment of all in society. We are, as Mark Fisher would say, in a state of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009), a neo-liberalism in which the free market, debt and a speculative economy supposedly assure us of a merit-based equality, with Adam Smith's invisible hand guiding us towards a liberal rational morality. There was, as Margaret Thatcher declared, no alternative. And for Francis Fukuyama, liberal democracy, social democracy and mitigated capitalism represented the 'end of history' (Fukuyama, 2012). While many of us in advanced western industrial societies may have felt the uneasy accord between liberal economics (the free market) and social liberalism (multiculturalism and progressivity), the 2008 global financial crash brought with it a catastrophic end to the 'end of history'. Even before 2008, culture wars had been developing over free speech, over multiculturalism, and in education. Dyson and Cox published their first series of reactionary Black Papers in 1970, to manufacture outrage about the predominance of child-centred progressive education. In the sixties, the Math Wars were a culture war over the nature of mathematics pedagogy in the USA – progressive and traditional. However, these were sideshows to the main events, where global capital has been creeping into and appropriating public institutions. The forward march of parental choice and private outsourced provision seemed interminable until 2008. Since that time, the crisis of capital has been exposed for all to see, and the consent for economic liberalism allied with social liberalism has all but evaporated. Witness the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump. This was the assertion of a transgressive right which takes issue with what it sees as an establishment liberal identarian centre. In order for the neo-liberal and capitalist system to be defended against a resurgence of class-based politics, the only option is to promote a culture war [4] – that is, to ensure that class antagonisms remain focused on social attitude – socially conservatives and reactionaries firmly locked in conflict with social liberals and multiculturalists. We fight among ourselves rather than assert control over capitalism and a capitalist class.

In England, former Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove, in collaboration with the free-market think tank Policy Exchange, set in motion a project to further privatise and marketise public education and skills, at the same time promoting a culture war to defuse any widespread opposition. Didau was a fellow traveller and outrider who perpetuates a culture war through social media and through an 'astroturfed' teacher movement, and in my view he is valued not

for what he says but for how he says it – his is an uncompromising reactionary project that exists to oppose liberal-progressive identities, claiming to be the voice of teachers to support them in regaining – or taking back control of – classroom authority and the right to transmit knowledge. But as the financial crisis and the austerity that followed bit in, the consent for liberal economics has fallen back, and the void is filled by a culture war. Hence the escalation in rhetoric about ability and genetics. This is the ramping up of a culture war, a polarisation that cannot be resolved through rational debate in liberal terms or through free speech. It is not about understanding the other side, it is about holding firmly to something, holding on to something seemingly firm – an illusion of scientific truth (much like Galton) – and on to some established principles, an established social order and an established hierarchy of ability. And importantly, this illusion ‘feels’ more real by perpetuating conflict with those who apparently oppose these values.

While schools struggle to cope with increasing demands to address inequality and promote social mobility, and while budgets diminish in real terms, there is a temptation for teachers to look inward, to be utilitarian and adopt authoritarian approaches to maximise their impact with dwindling resources. Meanwhile others deepen their commitment to liberal progressive values, to recognising and valuing all in society and promoting egalitarian views about ability. Either way, there are serious limitations and dangers in that a culture war over ability and intelligence just deepens and becomes increasingly aggressive. Both sides of a culture war have grounds to claim the moral high ground, yet neither can claim to address the fundamental drivers of inequality – they simply respond to and become symptoms of the underlying political economic causes, where a wholesale commitment to free markets and globalised liberal economics fosters a colossal stratification and leads to material divisions. Inequalities, derived through the unequal access to cultural, social and economic capital, lead to abhorrent claims about ability and intelligence, and even race, based on dubious scientism.

The *real* politics of ability is not about fighting a culture war or defending an identity that has become classless, it is about challenging class interests and privilege and ensuring wider access to material opportunities and fairer conditions in society.

Notes

- [1] This is a revised version of Didau’s blog on IQ and genetics (<https://learningspy.co.uk/research/differences-and-similarities/>).
- [2] I refer here to Tom Bennett and researchED, and the network and associations are set out in my working paper (Watson, 2017).
- [3] <https://stevenwatson.co.uk/2017/08/the-heritability-of-intelligence/>
- [4] Bernie Sanders in the USA, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK.

References

- Ali, T. (2015) *The Extreme Centre: a warning*. London: Verso.
- Baudrillard, J. (1983) *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or, the End of the Social, and Other Essays*, trans. P. Foss, J. Johnston & P. Patton. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Bourdieu, P. (1986) The Forms of Capital, in J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, pp. 241-258. New York: Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.-C. (1977) *Reproduction: in education, society and culture*, trans. R. Nice. London: SAGE.
- Didau, D. (2016) *What If Everything you Knew about Education Was Wrong?* Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.
- Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: is there no alternative?* Winchester: OR Books.
- Fukuyama, F. (2012) *The End of History and the Last Man*, reissue. London: Penguin (original work published 1992).
- Galton, F. (1869) *Hereditary Genius: an inquiry into its laws and consequences*. London: Macmillan.
- Gillard, D. (2018) *Education in England: a history*. www.educationengland.org.uk/history (accessed 6 October 2018).
- Herrnstein, R.J. & Murray, C.A. (1996) *The Bell Curve: intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hirsch, E.D. (1988) *Cultural Literacy: what every American needs to know*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hunter, J.D. (1996) *Culture Wars: the struggle to define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Inglehart, R. (1990) *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Jose, J. (2015) A Liberalism Gone Wrong? Muscular Liberalism and the Quest for Monocultural Difference, *Social Identities*, 21(5), 444-458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1093739>
- Lawson, J. & Silver, H. (1973) *A Social History of Education in England*. London: Methuen.
- Nagle, A. (2017) *Kill All Normies: the online culture wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump*. Winchester: Zero Books.
- Plomin, R. (2018) *Blueprint: how DNA makes us who we are*. London: Allen Lane.
- Spiked-Watch (2017) How to Counter the Deceptive PR Produced by @Spikedonline (et al), 14 August. <https://spiked-watch.tumblr.com/post/164176271645/how-to-counter-the-deceptive-pr-produced-by> (accessed 7 October 2018).
- Watson, S. (2017) Culture Wars, Teacher Identity and Online Microfascisms. Working paper. <http://bit.ly/2P4WAKx>
- Young, M.F.D. & Lambert, D. (2014) *Knowledge and the Future School: curriculum and social justice*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Young, T. (2015) The Fall of the Meritocracy, *Quadrant*, 7 September. <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2015/09/fall-meritocracy/>

STEVEN WATSON is a university lecturer in education at the University of Cambridge. He previously worked as a mathematics teacher in state schools in England. His current research interests are in the culture and politics of teacher education and development and the role of new media. *Correspondence:* sw10014@cam.ac.uk