

The Social Basis of Stupidity

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James F Welles

East Marion New York, USA

Recognizing, much less dealing politically with economic waste and inefficiency is complicated by the confusing number and nature of roles individuals can assume as their identification with different social groups shifts hither and yon. Any human society is a welter of associations. The basic human social unit is the family, which is based on kinship. Beyond this, there are formal and informal associations designed to foster cooperation and restrain disruptive behavior [1] for the good of the dominant power group. Obviously, under certain conditions, a subgroup may find it- self driven to disruptive behavior (as were trade unions around the turn of the 20th century), but this is usually a last resort, when orderly means of attaining a group goal are thwarted by the prevailing, established power structure.

Not only are societies assemblages of overlapping and sometimes contradictory associations, but they invariably have some form of class structure as well, with each class system supported by a formal ideology and set of rituals. The verbal doctrine emphasizes and the program of stereotyped behaviors reinforces the ideal virtues of the lower social orders, especially of those stupid enough to accept their inferior position and resigned to defer their rewards until later like in their next lives[2]. The presumably more eternal values of obedience and spiritual devotion are sanctimoniously contrasted with the crass materialism of those who indulge in the luxuries made possible by the degrading practice of manipulating worldly power to their own benefit.

Classes become castes when they become rigidly defined to the point that membership is a birthright and intergroup mixing prohibited. Caste societies are not human universals, but they are common enough and represent extremes of the class system so that their intense stupidity warrants our attention. At all levels, caste position is ritualized so as to exaggerate awareness of separate group identity. There is usually little in the way of yearnings for upward mobility or improved status, as everyone's position is preordained.

Along with ordained rituals, supernatural powers are at the disposal of the establishment and may be called upon by priests to punish anyone who breaks the rules [3]. when religion is the establishment, as in eastern countries, critics may be motivated to proselytize, but ideological and social development is usually rigidly circumscribed. Thus, a caste system is often the social structure of a self-contained theocracy.

Even more rigid than designations of class or caste are those of race. Unfortunately for racists, there has been so much interbreeding among the races that there is no genetic basis for making clear distinctions among them. Nevertheless, human groups are not only separated but invariably stratified by racial identity. All hierarchical rankings of race have one thing in common: those passing judgment are always in the top group. When feasible, those in power will use racism to preserve their economic advantages [4], but there are long-term losses to such a system in the protection afforded the inept of the dominant race is complemented by the suppression of the gifted of others. The sad thing about the long history of racism is that it is an important issue only to and because of those determined to make it one. In almost all matters of public importance, if decisions could magically be made on the basis of relevant criteria, race would be one of the last considerations in any culture. Nevertheless, racism hangs on tenaciously in part because racists tend to be at the lower end of the I.Q. scale and favor conservative ideologies which feature structure and order in a complex world hype the social quo and embrace popular, self-confirming prejudice [5].

*Corresponding author: James F Welles, P O Box 17,
East Marion, NY 11939, USA

Beyond consideration of caste or race, differentiation of individuals is a given of the human condition to the aggravation of egalitarians everywhere. Those who are

most skilled or who possess some admired attribute are treated as important or socially valuable and are granted a larger share of available economic, social and political rewards[6]. This is discriminatory as well as universal in human culture.

Unfortunately, the cognitive basis for much social stupidity is not discrimination based on ability but the human tendency to generalize behavior of differentiated members of a group into the form of a representative stereotype. This streamlines social decisions, as individual variation can be ignored and reactions keyed to specific characteristics deemed definitive for behavioral interaction. However, the loss to stereotyping is obvious: individuals are raised up or put down not because of their abilities but because they are lumped into a particular cultural/linguistic category. Women, for example, have been universally and eternally victimized by stereotyping[7] to the degree that 400 years ago, no less of an expert on females than Cardinal de Richelieu concluded that "Intellect in a woman is unbecoming"[8].

It is alleged that the female psyche has somehow been permanently shaped by the oft noted ability of women to bear children. It may well be that there is something to this for mothers (who do usually tend to be female) who spend more than 24 hours a day in the presence of children. Anyone subjected to such a situation might have to sacrifice something to emotional stability, and it may be a bit of logic and sanity. Recent research indicates there are real differences between male^a and female brains [9], so there may well be a special brand of feminine stupidity. However, before we venture too far into the uncharted domain of comparative idiocy, let us indulge in a bit of diplomacy and allow that the two sexes are, in their own aggravating ways, equally stupid or at least appear to be so to the advocates of the presumably equal other.

Be that as it may, it turns out women make better cops, doctors, drivers, gamblers, spies, world leaders, beer tasters, hedge fund managers and just about everything else—e.g., mothers—than men[10]. The inferiority of women in matters of physical strength apparently led males to slight them in all other respects. Further, using race as a basis for stereotyping has been denounced as the stupidest idea in history, being much more a cultural indulgence than a scientific process [11].

Likewise, the downtrodden, the poor, the workers, all have been stereotypically regarded as social elements which somehow fail to fulfill the cultural ideal of success. At best, a culture will exploit those it has disenfranchised. Throughout history, workers have been systematically fatigued, starved and forced to live in generally unhealthy conditions [12]. Anyone so suffering might indeed be better off being too dull to realize his own lot: ergo the basic undercurrent of tragedy in the human drama that those hardest hit by social iniquities are almost blessed if they can accept their fate without being aware of their helplessness. Certainly, many reform movements (i.e., abolition, mental health, etc.) derived considerable impetus from upper class ideologues who were outraged to the point of action by the discrepancies between what society promised and provided to those less fortunate and powerful than themselves [13].

On the other hand, there are always people who amass wealth and then use it, along with their superior political and social positions, to consolidate effective control over existing productive resources. They then further their interests by using

their enhanced influence to gain even more power [14]. An inherent part of this process is the isolation of the rulers from contact with the people and their ordinary lives and problems [15]. This positive feed-back system routinely makes ruling easier than effective. It does so by creating social inequities which are compounded by laws passed and enforced, in the name of justice, to protect the special advantages and power of the few rather than to secure a minimum standard of decency for the right less many [16]. Differential access to privilege and power thus produces and perpetuates social stratification because the material prosperity of the upper class is usually created and maintained by the debasement of all others. Such a system may go to excess as the mighty reinforce their own self-confirming, self-serving perceptions, attitudes and beliefs at the expense of objectivity and justice.

Frequently, such ruling groups are also in charge of the theological establishment, so they control access not only to natural but supernatural resources as well. By using all the means available to them, leaders can assure themselves that the prevailing ideology sanctions their privileged status, economic influence and political rank. Not only do the established powers maintain the stratified system which supports them, but their position is further secured by popular belief in the system [17]. Modern societies have thus secularized religion while becoming religious about secular systems. 'All these factors can make the mighty self-assured to the point of blatant stupidity.'

a. As psychologist Justin Timberlake observed when reflecting on his fling with Cameron Diaz: "I learnt a lot. But I'm still a man, so I have some kind of learning disability." As an inducer of stupidity, sex does narrow the focus of those involved to a single-minded pursuit of self-gratification, so let us give a slight edge to men. (Lendram, *et al.* **BMJ** 2014; 349: g 7094.)

Clearly the institution of marriage is a miserable failure in serving the sex urges of overwhelming numbers of people—especially single males and spouses. Marriage should be a child rearing but not necessarily sexual institution. Marry for children but, like the ancient Greeks stay open on sex and sex partners: Forsaking most others most of the time should be enough and usually is. Btw is it not odd that free sex is legal, but prostitution is a crime? It is the only thing for which one cannot charge but can give away.

b. One of the lesser known reform organization was the Female Retrenchment Society, which defended women against the temptations of tea, coffee, rich cake, pastry, preserves, snuff and tobacco as well as wine and cordials.

c. A good example of this phenomenon would be the obviously religious tone of the efforts of President Reagan's budget director, David Stockman, to convert the "Modern secularists" of the Washington Post to Reaganomics in 1981. (Stockman. p. 89.)

d Unfortunately, this problem pervades the academic discipline of sociology, which has become a repository for Marxist critics of the establishment for whom every social ill is reflexly attributed to a failing of capitalism.

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