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The Manufacture of Intelligence

He... gave us not that capability and godlike reason to fust in us unused.

William Shakespeare

In the progress of the division of labour... the man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations... generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.

Adam Smith

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In 1867 Horatio Alger published his first book Ragged Dick, which was aimed at teaching the virtues of enterprise, responsibility, patience, hard work, honesty and ambition to juveniles who would shape the American nation. The main characters in Alger’s books, and there were many, all achieve success through the victory of character over social circumstances. In Ragged Dick, the wealthy benefactor Mr Whitney tells the dishevelled Dick ‘I hope, my lad, you will prosper and rise in the world. You know in this free country poverty in early life is no bar to a man’s advancement... Remember that your future position depends mainly on yourself and that it will be as high or low as you choose to make it.’¹ Less sanguine observers of American life such as Alex de Tocqueville also reported that America, as the ‘first new nation’, lacked the rigid class barriers that he had observed throughout Europe. Personified in the experience of American presidents such as Abraham Lincoln’s social sojourn from a Kentucky log cabin and Benjamin Franklin’s elevation from an apprentice printer and tenth son of a Boston candle-maker,
equal opportunities for all had become ‘America's promise’. As Lloyd Warner and his colleagues observed in the 1940s, ‘It was on the lips of every humble fireside. Every business man, industrialist, and politician proclaimed it and believed it.’2 In Britain, in the aftermath of the devastating destruction of war, there was also common agreement that the reconstruction of society must include new opportunities for all in a ‘land fit for heroes’.

The renewed sense of optimism which gripped the Anglophone countries encouraged the belief that social justice could be secured through the breakdown of social barriers to opportunity. These new opportunities would in turn lead to a blurring of social, cultural and racial differences as people were assimilated into what amounted to the white, male, middle-class ideals which dominated these societies. It was also to serve as a tool of assimilation by giving different class and ethnic groups common prizes to aspire to and achieve in industrial society. This would allow people to forget their roots in the making of ‘all Americans’ as everyone would have a chance to prosper. But it was the economic argument that advanced western societies could no longer afford to waste the limited pool of talent evident among working-class and ethnic minorities which was to have the most significant impact on the shaping of opportunities at mid-century. In a technological age the idea of log cabin to President had become implausible without access to education. As Talcott Parsons noted at the time:

The legend of the ‘self-made man’ has an element of nostalgic romanticism and is destined to become increasingly mythical, if by it is meant not just mobility from humble origins to high status, which does indeed continue to occur, but that the high status was attained through the ‘school of hard knocks’ without the aid of formal education.3

This emphasis on opportunity through education had considerable political appeal because it did not involve taking from the ‘haves’ to improve things for the ‘have nots’. This enabled Western governments to preserve a core cultural assumption that people could be fairly rewarded on the basis of their individual efforts, knowledge and abilities without a significant redistribution of wealth and income. What Michael Young had famously coined ‘meritocratic’ competition had therefore come to offer a way of selecting individuals for education and jobs on the basis of abilities and efforts rather than social class background, race or gender.4