COMMENTARY

Rhetorical Analysis and the Ideology Behind “Bell Curve” Statistics

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The nomination of federal appeals judge Sonia Sotomayor to the United States Supreme Court reignited old debates regarding affirmative action. Sotomayor herself said that she was “a product of affirmative action” who was admitted to two Ivy League schools despite scoring lower on standardized tests than many classmates, which she attributed to ‘cultural biases’ that are ‘built into testing’ (Savage, 2009). A stout defense of affirmative action policies – and, more specifically, against those who misuse statistics to undermine such policies or to subvert the candidacy of qualified persons like Judge Sotomayor – is provided by Professor Stephanie Houston Grey (1999) in her important essay, “The Statistical War on Equality: Visions of American Virtuosity in The Bell Curve,” published in this number of DataCrítica. Grey rhetorically analyzes Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s controversial 1995 bestseller, The Bell Curve. Rhetorical analysis is the process of investigating, explaining and evaluating symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding how individuals influence one another (see Foss, 1996, 6-7). The practice of rhetoric itself – the wielding of emotional, ethical, and logical proof to gain adherence - is an ancient art traceable back to the Classical period. But the ways in which modern social science has been called into service, rhetorically, to promote political ideology is the subject of Grey’s essay. More particularly, she brings together the “rhetoric of inquiry” movement (a group of interdisciplinary scholars interested in the rhetoric of scientific and historical discourse) with the “new historicism” to demonstrate how The Bell Curve creates a powerful “spatial rhetoric.” This rhetoric, she shows, employed statistics and the corresponding visuals of bell curve imagery to challenge the so-called “welfare state,” by arguing “for a scientifically verified, natural, and hierarchical relationship between the races which liberal politics unwisely disturbs” (p. 5). Grey reminds us that, when it first appeared, The Bell Curve was almost universally vilified by political commentators and social scientists alike, the latter of whom worried over recapturing “the [social scientific] methodologies that [Herrnstein and Murray] …polluted with their misguided racial politics” (p. 5). Meanwhile, many conservative observers appropriated Herrnstein and Murray’s argument to support their own hierarchical renderings of society and critiques of liberal social policy.

After tracing the various ways in which social science became entangled in social policy during the 20th century, Grey sets her critical sights on The Bell Curve. She identifies three “socio-graphic dynamics” in the text, which conditioned how readers understood the material instantiation of statistical variations across ethnic and racial populations. The first dynamic depended on a process of visual abstraction that implicated observers “in an idealized middle constituted through statistical procedures” (p. 7). The resultant universalizing
average reinforced certain societal notions about what constituted normalcy, stability, and tradition “by distributing society around a spatially projected mean” (p. 7). The second dynamic centered on the way variable formation and standard deviation created the basis for ethnic difference and ranking of intelligence. This rhetoric segmented populations – namely African Americans and dominant whites – into “greater or lesser social desirability while naturalizing racial differences and existing class disparities” (p. 7). Hence, rather than depicting identity as what Grey calls a “creative individual process,” Herrnstein and Murray suggested that identity was “determined by epistemic methods that define group experience in terms of their variance from mainstream, universal standards” (p. 14). (One wonders the extent to which Judge Sotomayer viewed her own identity as “creative” and thus as a positive force behind her social/professional mobility).

For those African Americans who did obtain higher social status, a kind of paradox ensued wherein they appeared to be working against their very nature as an ethnic/racial group. The third dynamic relied on spatio-temporal motion to create the illusion of social mobility by applying “linear dynamics to ideologies of merit” (p. 7). So, while many Americans believe that anyone can move up or down the social hierarchy, in reality movement upward is negligible for most African Americans. According to Herrnstein and Murray, this is because the lower IQs (and subsequent deviant behavior) of African Americans forced them to do little more than play out their predetermined roles in the lower echelons of the hierarchy. Thus, as Grey explains, Herrnstein and Murray would see any government policy designed to push African Americans upward as fostering “social instability” (p. 20). Grey summarizes Herrnstein and Murray’s position this way: All persons must quietly accept “their allotted place upon the social ladder for the good of the country to avert the apocalypse of racial bifurcation where the cognitive elites withdraw their resources from the middle-class due to the unfair requests of ethnic minorities” (p. 20).

Grey concludes that, by using visual techniques that normalized subjectivity, the bell curve implicates spectators as both subjects and objects and, in the process, masks political commitments “in an epistemic vocabulary” (321). This is especially troubling because, as Grey (following Donna Hughes) points out, statistical techniques can play a crucial role in preserving power relationships “where the process of identifying and describing ‘normal’ phenomena can be seen as an effort to exclude otherness by defining it as abnormal” (p. 21). In practical terms, this means that opponents of affirmative action can justify stacking institutions like the Supreme Court with whites while excluding most minorities. They can argue that stacking is “natural” and preserves social stability.

Grey’s study is an excellent example of the power of rhetoric, both as a mode of academic inquiry and as a political tool in the hands of ideologues like Herrnstein and Murray. Indeed, of the many studies emanating from the rhetoric of inquiry movement, Grey’s is the best analysis of statistical rhetoric that I have so far read. She illustrates how, as a critical orientation, rhetorical analysis neatly deconstructs the ways ideologues use statistics to promote their socio-political agendas. Yet rhetorical analysis also identifies various means for disrupting the deceptive utilization of statistics. For example, Grey’s study leads her to call for a systematic appraisal of ideological projects that infuse social policy with a form of social determinism that replaces “possibility” with “probability” and for a newly invigorated debate over affirmative action and equality. This requires (1) an “open debate” where individuals do not objectify either themselves or self identity as deficient. “Rather than fixing groups in some lateral superstructure, equality must integrate political critique and action by disrupting the restriction placed on identity by social epistemologies” (p. 23). And (2) a deeper
understanding of “the historical implications” of social science methodologies employed in the service of politics along with “their full rhetorical impact on the formation of identity” (p. 23). In this way, Judge Sonia Sotomayer and others like her would have more opportunities to imagine alternative social identities along with unconstrained access to the social structures that would reward them with the fruits of their labor.

References


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