

March 15, 1992 (Vol. 7, no. 14)

Dear Colleague:

I wonder whether one of the intractable problems of American society is its overvaluation of intelligence? The nation is unique in that it was founded by intellectuals. Its founding documents were acts of abstract intelligence. "We hold these truths to be evident, that all men are created equal" sounds like a proposition in geometry. The English have not held intelligence in comparable awe. Its aristocracy took courage to be the nobler and greater virtue until the sixteenth century, when it started to send its sons to Oxford and Cambridge so as to acquire the basic skills of administration.

If someone tells me that I am a better athlete than most of my classmates because of the length of my thigh, which in turn has something to do with my ancestors, all of whom were likewise endowed, I would be deeply insulted and I would be right to condemn that person as a racist. But if someone says that I am cleverer than most of my classmates because of the size of my brain, which in turn has to do with my ancestors, all of whom were probably brainy, I would be flattered. Who won't?

A world champion in boxing can say, "I am the greatest," and no one takes offense. A Nobel laureate in physics cannot say, "I am the greatest," without arousing intense unease. Either the guy is mad, or he is claiming to be some sort of God, who can see more penetratingly into "the nature of things" than ordinary mortals. American society takes every opportunity to denigrate the intellectual, the scholar, and even the scientist (who is often considered a little mad), not out of contempt, but out of awe. A baseball player or a rock musician can be idolized, precisely because he is not feared, not held in awe, but rather seen as fundamentally "just like folk," only more skilled. A rock star, paid a million dollars a show, is still an entertainer--there on stage, all decked out in diamond studs or in exaggerated sexuality, to please us. By contrast, an intellectual, when he is on stage, pretends to teach rather than entertain, and he is decked out accordingly--turtleneck and old loafers.

American society can be more at ease with itself if it puts intelligence in its proper place, and given the respect that any excellence deserves, rather than hoisting it on the highest pedestal, where it is constantly exposed to envy and pigeon-droppings.

Best wishes,

