

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Idiocy. Or, what "oligophrenia" tells us

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Abstract. The Greek term *ἰδιότης* was used to indicate someone who looked after his or her own affairs without taking an interest in the management of the *polis*, and originally held none of the decidedly negative connotations we ascribe to it today. From the twentieth century onwards, various attempts have been made at *identifying and measuring* idiocy in the name of world *sanitization*, still a pervasive phenomenon at the present time, albeit with differing terminology. Following through from this, stories unravel of dramatic intolerance in the guise of research. Stories in which clinical and racist interests underlie the formulation of disturbing *scientific hypotheses*. Such accounts should not be considered simply in a historical context, as if such matters have now been superceded. They show, instead, that in one way or another those things that happened in the last century still take place today, although the modality may have changed. Coercion and authoritarianism, tenacity and instructions are iatrogenic. Due to a particular trait of the world of mental life, the reflective self, the mind may react in ways that are relentlessly paradoxical. Radically disobedient in the face of impositions, or, on the other hand, paradoxically understanding, able to drive the authoritarian principle to the most extreme consequences. The following work should be placed in the context of tendencies in research that have already produced interesting observations and noteworthy results (Carey, 2009; Carlson et al. 2010; Dale and Melling, 2006; Goodey, 2011; Johnson and Traustadóttir, 2005; McDonagh, 2009; Rapley, 2004; Wright, 2001).

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Degeneration

The term *degeneration*, introduced into psychiatry during the nineteenth century, was proposed by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752-1840), a pupil of Linnaeus. Among other things, God had also *created* superior and inferior types of human. From this point of view, not all rational animals would have the same ability to reason. The superior race would have derived from a type of man created in the area of the Caucasians. Thus the myth of the *white Caucasian* was born, with Anglo-Germanic traits. Blumenbach asserted that human beings originated in Europe and then spread outwards, undergoing the effects of climate and varying degrees of degeneration. For this reason, the original "standard" race would have declined, on the one hand, into the *American race* and, further down the scale, into the *Mongol race*, and, on the other hand, into the *Malayan race* and, further down, into the *Ethiopian race*. However, besides the five hierarchically ordered human races, Blumenbach lists a series of further "degenerations" of a residual kind: the *Patagonian Giants*, although, from the time of Magellan to the period in which Blumenbach wrote, they had grown steadily smaller so as to reach little more than average height; the *Madagascar Quimesi* [?], a race of *cretins* similar to those also widespread – according to the author – in Piedmont and among the inhabitants of Salzburg; the *Blafard Albinos* or *White Negroes*, also described by Linnaeus in terms of *Homo Troglodytes*, creatures defined as *unfortunates*; finally, Feral Children, much discussed in the eighteenth century in connection with the French episode of the medical doctor Itard, who had attempted to educate the Wild Boy from the Aveyron woods. Feral children were described as intermediate beings between man and animals. Blumenbach was popularised by Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), and then by Francis Galton (1822-1911), a cousin to Darwin who gave a misleading idea of Darwin's theories and founded *eugenics*.

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Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809-1873), Valentin Magnan (1835-1916) and Max Nordau¹ (1849-1923) applied this reasoning to *psychiatry*. They did not consider *degeneration* as a specifically racial state, but rather as an individual's potential state of flux, with the risk of contaminating a *healthy* community at a biological level and *normal* society at an ideological level. *Degeneration* is referred to as an *internal* process of Western individuals caused by *blood* (nowadays we would say *genetics*). With this particular understanding of *dementia praecox* in psychiatry as a starting point, *eugenics* was transformed into a programme of prevention and discrimination: improve the socio-sanitary conditions of slums, exclude potentially unsuitable individuals, place them in institutions, separate middle-class residential areas from *degenerate* areas.

In the United States, from the start of the twentieth century onwards, racist theory spread via a transformation of the European concept of *degeneration*. Armed with these European theories, an anti-immigration movement arose in the United States, its mission being to protect America from an invasion of *degenerate and mentally inferior immigrant groups*; Italians, the Irish, Poles, Jews, etc., as well as to protect themselves from colored and indigenous groups in America itself. Francis Walker (1840-1897), president of the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, wrote the following words towards the end of the nineteenth century, later quoted in the *so-called* scientific essay by Ayres, *Laggards in our Schools*:

«These immigrants are beaten men, from beaten races, representing the worst failure in the struggle of existence. Europe is allowing its slums and its most stagnant reservoirs of degraded peasantry to be drained of upon our soil.» (In Ayres, 1909, p.103)

The practice of administering an IQ test to all immigrants to the United States began in 1917. In 1922, Carl Brigham wrote:

«The migrations of the Alpine and Mediterranean races have increased to such an extent in the last thirty or forty years that this blood now constitutes 70% or 75% of the total immigration. The representatives of the Alpine and Mediterranean races in our immigration are intellectually inferior to the representatives of the Nordic race which formerly made up about 50% of our immigration. In addition, we find that we are getting progressively lower and lower types from each nativity group or race.» (Brigham 1922, p.197)

Besides supplying totally unchecked data, Brigham's test insisted on treating the terms "population" and "blood" as synonyms. With the image of "inferior" blood flowing from one continent to the other, the metaphor of an invasion to be beaten arises, a concept that plays a significant role in subsequent American cinematography. It is nowadays possible in New York to visit Ellis Island, the former immigration office that has given way to a museum bearing this name. The IQ tests that were administered to all immigrants in the past are on display. However, an imaginative effort is required to go beyond the glass of the display cases so as to understand the anxiety felt by immigrants when faced with this iniquitous test, administered in large halls seating fifty or more people at a single session.

At the time, this *scientific position*, dominant in the Western world, was designated by the term "social Darwinism". The sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was the inventor of social Darwinism; a *scientific canon* that talked in terms of the *struggle for survival*. A form of *naturalism* in which society is self-regulating without interference in private concerns, so that if someone dies, falls ill, or finds this struggle especially difficult, it is a matter of destiny. A community is preserved and improved by sacrificing certain of its individuals. There is no joint responsibility, no programme for maintaining a balance. Injustice among individuals guarantees social progress. For at least two hundred years, from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, the Caucasian human prototype was centre stage: the *superior race*. Other races were considered *degenerate*.

¹ Max Nordau is not considerable a racist at all, he has been a leader of Zionist Movement. Nordau, as many other scholars in different fields, was part of the *Zeitgeist*. So was also the case of Ernest Renan (1823-1892) who, presenting the famous discourse on *What is a Nation?* became a champion of liberalism. Nevertheless Renan position towards the issue of "human races" it has never been clear, he was in fact an admirer of Gobineau. So happened in many other cases.

The extent to which such ideas have continued to dominate in postwar years can be judged from more recent political experiences towards the end of the last century – the Thatcher government in the United Kingdom, the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the United States – and from the neoliberalism dominant today.

Even before Fascism and the *Manifesto of Race*, matters had not gone very differently in Italy. One may visit the Museum of Anthropology in Florence, with display cases housing the skulls of members of *different races*, with relative measurements, and photographs of the process of measuring skulls and making facial casts, undertaken in Africa by Lidio Cipriani (1892-1962), who held the chair of Professor of Anthropology at the local university during the Fascist Era.

The academic career of Mario Canella (1898-1982) began under Fascism, and, with him, *racial psychology*. This was intended as the study of levels of mental plasticity, instinctive tendencies, potential abilities, the innate possibility for the intellectual and moral development of races (Volpato, 2000)². Research into racial psychology was interrupted abruptly in Italy following the end of the war, being abandoned in all haste. Canella, who held a post in *biology of the human race* from 1938 to 1945, which is to say during the period in which race laws were introduced into Italy, then taught as professor of zoology from 1962 to 1973. This silent neglect, this negationist repression, would have an important aftermath even later. In 1965, the *Encyclopdia of Science and Technology* (Tofini, 1965), when touching upon *anthropological traits attributed to human racial types*, once more has recourse to Gobineau, mentioning his *psychological traits*.

To be fair, the author of the article concedes: “The considerable difficulties in collection and evaluation... mean that the content [of what he writes] should still be considered unsystematic and extremely debatable”. But despite this he goes on to state:

«Traits attributed to populations belonging to the negroid branch include mental instability, short-lived and violent passions, a lack of deep feelings, a certain submissiveness, a passion for dancing and rhythmic music, a reduced tendency towards speculative reasoning... With reference to the Chinese and Japanese, some consider the mental traits of these populations to consist in “slow mindedness” (bradipsichismo), introversion, torpid emotionality, mental greyness, undisguised apathy. However, the intelligence is lively and memory generally good... the Nordic type is considered of lively intelligence, rational, master of himself, energetic, active, fairly unemotional, the Alpine type is critical, of average intelligence, not especially lively, determined and industrious; the Mediterranean type “fast minded” (tachipsichico), not given to reflection [...]

Primitives... (Australians, Melanesians, Pygmies, Bushmen, Hottentots, etc) are characterised by a dull intelligence, a limited ability to concentrate, mental instability, extroversion, emotionality, unaffectionate...» (Tofini, 1965, p. 575)

When radicalised, social Darwinism leads to the devising of health programmes that go to the extremes of the sterilisation of those who are mentally retarded, the suppression of those considered *unsuitable, maladjusted, demented, mad, perverted, incurably sick*, etc. *Active Eugenics*.

These two tendencies find their synthesis in what must be the most horrifying example of the *bad measurement of human beings*: the mass extermination of the handicapped and psychiatric patients under the Nazis and Fascism. An example that would have been unthinkable without genetic and biological race theories, without Morel’s metaphors concerning degeneration and theories on measuring intelligence. Over the previous two centuries, this *science* exercised the maximum influence on health practices, and social Darwinism was transformed into the practice of mass extermination. Extermination was justified via two arguments, one of a *distinctly scientific* character, the other of a *bioethical* type.

The first: *nature* evolves by means of a selection of species, races and the best-fitted individuals. Residual and degenerate elements remain, which are best eliminated so as to favour the *natural* evolutionary process.

² Chiara Volpato is to be thanked for the historical rediscovery of the Fascist psychologist Mario Canella.

The second: if *mentally degenerate* individuals possessed enough self-awareness to decide on their own lives, they would immediately demand euthanasia. In a well-known Nazi propaganda film, a professor of medicine explains this idea to his students, the teacher adding that once a mother, in reference to the elimination of her own handicapped child, told him “don’t tell me about it, do it”.

Mass extermination is presented as *necessary for scientific progress* and *questions of bioethics*. It should be remembered that those defending Nazi criminals, during the trials, spoke of the Final Solution as a *health matter*. With the *Final Solution*, the problem of extermination was transformed from individual euthanasia into total extermination. Shifting from the nature of individuals to that of the *community*, terms such as *degeneration*, *deterioration*, *contagion*, *disinfestation* play the role of metaphors in transforming the phenomenon of mass elimination into a *health* issue. To tell the truth, although *attenuated*, the discrimination of the handicapped has continued even in the post-war western world: in Virginia, up until 1972, the sterilisation of so-called *morons*, those diagnosed as mildly mentally retarded, was allowed by law, and in Sweden up until the Eighties.

The infamous IQ

It is surprising to find certain forms of the subject of this study schematized in the introduction to the most difficult book by the most brilliant and cutting edge present-day philosopher, Slavoj Žižek. The fact that it opens a work on one of the pinnacles of the history of thought (Hegel, for many, *the pinnacle par excellence*), discussing forms of intellectual disability, is in the spirit of Hegelian dialectics. Hegel had a high opinion of Pinel, the father of the modern psychiatric category of idiocy. Starting from here, the first pages of *Less than nothing: Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism* (Žižek, 2012) follow, in which three forms of stupidity are identified. Žižek’s argumentation is, as is usual for the author, both serious and ironic.

The first form identified is present in hyper intelligent individuals who understand perfectly at a logical-explicit level, but fail to understand non-explicit contextual rules, “this is precisely the *idiot’s* type of stupidity. Alan Turing was an exemplary idiot, a man of extraordinary intelligence although a proto-psychotic unable to deal with implicit contextual rules” (Žižek, 2012). The second form, according to Žižek, the opposite of the previous form, is the *moron*, being the obtuse individual crammed with common sense; the Watson of Sherlock Holmes, the Hastings of Poirot, Stradler in *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger, stupidity as absolute syntony with a minimum intellectual common denominator. However, this polarized couple fails to exhaust the field of possible stupidity. The third form given is Kafka’s completely normal and conventional idiot, who for Žižek corresponds to the imbecile. As confirmation of this semantic partitioning between levels and forms of stupidity discussed so far, Wikipedia comes to hand:

«Imbecile is a term for moderate to severe mental retardation, as well as for a type of criminal. It arises from the Latin word *imbecillus*, meaning weak, or weak-minded. ‘Imbecile’ was once applied to people with an IQ of 26–50, between ‘moron’ (IQ of 51–70) and ‘idiot’ (IQ 0–25).»

Žižek then continues, fascinating as always, towards destinations, Lacan, Hegel, dialectics, which are not ours. What remains for us from a reading of the introduction to Žižek’s text? A tripartition to be analysed, idiot, imbecile, moron. And the scale across which these are distributed: the *IQ*. These are categories with a history, performative categories, where the declaration and the thing itself combine as a single unit. In recent years, the attention of the social sciences has focused increasingly on intellectual disabilities, and we are able to see how the historical recognition of the genesis of these categories and their connotations in itself serves to highlight related complexity and problematics. A particular aspect of *modern health* comes to light in practices for measuring IQ. Has this culture become widespread in the way the human mind thinks? Certain concepts, expressed in front of the coffee machine in the corridors of health and scholastic institutions (“Not all there”, “He’s not got it in him”, etc.) give food for thought.

Furthermore, as certain authors insist (Patel, V., Saraceno, B., Kleinman, A. 2006, pp. 1312-

1315) the dominant trend, including that of the new DSM, is to continue to discriminate between universal disorders (notably typical in the advanced areas of the world) and cultural disorders (specific for the emarginated areas of the world). The modern era sets up collective mental frameworks that even today impact on the individual *habitus*. This goes well beyond the practices of rhetoric eloquence aimed at persuasion; it is a question of *social internalisation*.

The North American system for the mass measurement of intelligence, which for a while was widespread among all the population, had two purposes: to discriminate in the case of immigrants and assign differentiated work tasks and positions in the army, using the IQ of each individual as a starting point. It was presumed that, besides individual skills and abilities in different fields (music, mathematics, language, spatial orientation, motor coordination, etc), there was a single factor of intelligence, known as *Factor G*. This factor would be measurable via a test organised in an *ad hoc* way. Even now, though used differently, IQ tests exist, as well as general ideas about intelligence, and even a *club for a new nobility*, admission being on the basis of the *size* of an individual's IQ. A club for superior beings.

The brilliant book by Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002), on the history of statements concerning intelligence, has the eloquent title of *The Mismeasure of Man*. It deals with the history of scientific prejudices that drive biology and psychology to consider inequalities in the human race. Before the Nazi extermination of the handicapped and mentally ill, the ambition of Eugenics was to breed intellectually *superior* people and to protect the so-called Caucasian race via discrimination. Reductionist biology and purely quantitative psychology, combined with reactionary sociology, served to keep cultural environments and power out of reach of the poor, members of other ethnic groups, women, elements defined as inferior, especially Afro-Americans and Latin Americans.

At a health level, Eugenics follows two lines: Morel's and Magnan's ideas lead to the concept of *superior man*; Blumenbach's notion of degeneration brings about a program of social protection against *other races*, considered to be an *external threat*, a polluting factor.

The extermination of the handicapped has the task of protecting the race, the first stage in the *fight against degeneration*. The mass administration of IQ tests for immigrants has the task of holding them back at the borders, the second stage in the *fight against degeneration*. The mass extermination of entire populations represents the lunatic synthesis of both. A madness we risk falling subject to once more, though madness of another type: *scientific*. Where what is meant by science is its alignment with, and subjugation to, market practices (pharmaceutical, insurance, etc): neo social Darwinism.

The first IQ tests subdivided the mentally retarded into *idiots*, *imbeciles* and *morons*. In the USA, the measurement of intelligence was carried out with questionnaires in English, which clearly favoured speakers of the language. Faced with early objections to this method, the sections in English were reduced, though the test was evidently devised with a middle-class American in mind. Gould gives the example of a test in which the aim is to supply the missing part of an object, the drawing being of a small house. The correct response would be to add a smoking chimney: we are in New York and it is cold in winter. For many Sicilians, the response includes the addition of a cross. A phenomenon inexistent in the United States, though widespread in Sicily. There, a small building of this type suggests a Christian chapel. Naturally, such a response is considered wrong and this is considered a lack of intelligence, rather than being indicative of cultural and environmental differences.

Individuals with difficulties or a cognitive deficit, at least as diagnosed by the IQ tests, are called *idiots* in the most serious instances, *imbeciles* for medium seriousness, and *morons* (Italian would also use *cretins*, "*cretini*") in the least serious instances. For *less serious* cases, the term is *stupid*, being those with a low IQ *but not pathological*; these seem to be insults rather than diagnoses and they are used as such in everyday speech. A more or less identical system of classification was to be found in Great Britain; 'mental deficiency' was subdivided into three categories: *idiot*, in the most serious instances, *imbecility*, in intermediate instances, and 'feeble-mindedness' for the least serious. A subdivision of this type already appears in an article in the British Medical Journal for 1894 (Jackson, 2000).

Diagnoses of idiocy and imbecility are still present in the seventh edition of the World Health Organization manual, the ICD VII, published in the Fifties. Cretinism has its own particular history, and Blumenbach already defines it as endemic in Piedmont and Salzburg, more generally in the Alps, and correlated with the presence of a goitre (a serious dysfunction of the thyroid caused by lack of iodine) (Blumenbach, 1828).

Oligophrenia

The term *oligophrenia* contains the story of how mentally retarded met with autism. *Oligofrenia* is a compound term from the Greek *oligos* (little) and *phren* (mind). Other terms are created by using *phren* as a suffix or prefix: phrenasthenia, phrenopathy, schizophrenia, hebephrenia, frenzy (with a modification of *phren*), phrenology, phreniatry. *Phren* is not significant for its sound alone. In antiquity, *phrenes* indicated two parts of the body: the brain and the diaphragm. The diaphragm is a membrane forming a *separation* between the higher, ethereal, parts of the body and the lower, visceral, parts. The brain is given the name of *phrenes* because in ancient times it was believed that ideas derived from the air, one of the four elements that made up the *kosmos* and the most rarified. Air is cold, linked analogously to phlegm, winter and death. The diaphragm, and therefore also the brain, takes in air. Air is rarified, suffocating the newborn child at the moment of birth, when the cutting of the umbilical cord severs it from the protection of amniotic liquid. Following on from this, the discovery of perinatal suffocation. Fetal suffering may well give rise to *oligophrenic* individuals.

In Italy, at least until the end of the Sixties, children presumed to be the product of extramarital, incestuous, scandalous relationships were interned in institutions known as “*brefotrofi*” (orphanages for abandoned children). Incestuous cases were given a predetermined diagnosis: *oligophrenia*, *phrenasthenia*, *cerebropathy*. Quite often such diagnoses were not even supported by an observation of symptoms, it was simply assumed that, being the product of incest, genetic and hereditary defects must necessarily be present. In certain instances, those involved in a sexual relationship were not even blood relations, intercourse between stepfather and stepdaughter also falling within the category, and it became a case of *concealing perversion*, or better, *suffering the consequences*. At times, genetic theories count for nothing, but rather questions of *moral necessity*.

Diagnosis is present as a *self-fulfilling prophecy*, clinical expectations coinciding with the results of life confinement within an institution. The situation of being detained from birth generates maladjusted and deteriorated behaviour not dissimilar to that produced within mental institutions. Overcrowded institutions, where children grow up without proper attention. The intelligence quotient takes on a hidden link with more serious forms of autism, as was recently testified by reports arriving from orphanages discovered in Romania and Bulgaria following the fall of Communism.

In contemporary diagnoses, *autism in a real sense* may be viewed as a companion to *oligophrenia*. Some consider *oligophrenia* to be a symptom, rather than a diagnosis, a trait present in various types of infant pathology. It is not easy to distinguish oligophrenia from autism. Leo Kanner (1896-1981) made this distinction in the Fourties (Kanner, 1943): differential diagnosis would consist of noting ritual movements in autistic children that are absent for oligophrenic children.

What is today’s metaphor for *oligophrenia*? How widespread is it in the media and among the population, with neither having any understanding of it? How is it that such children were kept hidden from outside view for the entire nineteen hundreds?

Nowadays oligophrenia is a rare topic of conversation, it is little discussed and when spoken of is mentioned in the same breath as sanitary and religious institutions, mental asylums and the special schools of Giuseppe Montesano (1868-1961). Nevertheless there are references in everyday conversation. Below is an example found on the internet. It is taken from one of the many sites of the type: *questions for the expert*.

«I wish to ask for an opinion on behalf of a dear neighbour with *an oligophrenic daughter*, this situation having recently *driven the mother to taking antidepressants*. The subject: a 45-year-old woman with *oligophrenia confirmed since infancy*, who we may call Xxx. The family has always tried to render Xxx “normal”, having also had her follow a working career for many years without problems. The *daughter's behavior was gentle and submissive*, making her *easily manageable*. When nearly 40, Xxx met a man and from that moment on she has sought full autonomy, which her family feels unable to concede given that her unemployed “fiancé” exploits her to live, squandering all the money the daughter earns. The family has tried everything to separate Xxx from her boyfriend, but with no success. Following a court order, the family now handles the daughter’s wages. *Having witnessed her mother's depression*, the sister has used “violent” means to manage Xxx and the mother’s worries have greatly increased as she fears that Xxx could become even more attached to her boyfriend. Question 1 – can violence prove counterproductive in the case of an oligophrenic subject? 2 – given the situation, should Xxx remain involved with her boyfriend? If so, only the court can issue a judgment... thanking you for your reply, with best wishes».

This text is recent and speaks for itself; the anonymous writer appears to be in completely good faith, the expert on duty limits advice to discouraging the use of violence. The questions posed by the person seeking clarification are legitimate: may an *oligophrenic* person be beaten because of her behavior? Does an *oligophrenic woman* have the right to fall in love and have sexual relations (implied), even if the man takes economic advantage of her? If she did not suffer from oligophrenia, could we even pose such *moral* questions?

Giuseppe Montesano believed it was a matter of creating an educational partitioning analogous to the partitioning represented by a mental asylum. The creation of a methodologically specialised space in which to apply psychology and pedagogy to mentally retarded children. Such differentiated classes soon took the form of discrimination: small scholastic mental asylums for oligophrenic children, albeit they represented an attempt to teach children who would otherwise have been abandoned. Between the two wars, Italian and German psychiatry was wedded with specialised education. Discussion revolved around the education of oligophrenic children, their learning abilities, and new educational approaches were experimented with.

However, the history of these experiences begins much earlier, in the eighteenth century, with feral children, described as being intermediate creatures between man and animal. The case of the wolf child from the woods of Aveyron, in France, is paradigmatic. Victor is most famous as the *Wild Boy*. For many years, he was believed to be a child raised by wolves. His posture and movements evoked the Illuminist fantasy of the wolf child, the noble savage.

In 1989, Uta Frith wrote a book called *Autism. Explaining the Enigma* (Frith, 2003). In this work, as in Gould’s book on the measurement of intelligence, a different story is finally told. The Aveyron boy is evidence of events taking place in the European countryside in conditions of poverty. Children were abandoned because they were autistic or retarded. The fact that their parents abandoned them was the consequence of the shame and burden they represented for families that scarcely managed to sustain even normal individuals, those being the work force. For the most part, such children died once abandoned. The few survivors, such as Victor, stimulated the curiosity of intellectuals, educators and medical doctors.

Victor, the wild boy, became the subject of study for Jean Marc Gaspard Itard (1775-1838), who attempted to educate him and integrate him into *civil society*, not without interesting results.

The history of specialized education began in the mid-nineteenth century with Edouard Séguin (1812-1880), who applied to *idiots* (Séguin, 1846) the same Moral Treatment already known thanks to Pinel and Esquirol in the context of madness.

Research into retarded children expanded in the twentieth century, leading to the experimental educational practices of Montesano and Montessori and, earlier still, to the studies of Alfred Binet (1857-1911). Binet’s interest in intelligence may be described as the non-ideological part of the question of *mental retardedness*. Binet states that learning literacy and technical skills takes a long time to acquire and require certain specialised abilities. To become an adult, a child needs to complete its itinerary in learning to read and write, as well as in acquiring those mental techniques necessary to solve problems. Over the course of a lifetime – during the first 10-15 years, at least –

there are certain differences in the way problems are dealt with and solved. Binet invented a test to evaluate a child's mental age so as to attempt to increase it.

A series of questions and performances are used to evaluate the mental age on the basis of numerous preceding observations which give a score of 100 when there is an equal balance between mental age and chronological age. Scores lower than 100 indicate a mental age inferior to chronological age and vice versa. Scores obtained in this way are given by the following equation:

$$\text{Mental age/Chronological age} \times 100$$

For example, if the test indicates a score for a mental age of 15 and the subject is 15 years old, the score will be 100 and be among the average; on the other hand, if the score indicates 10 and I am 15 years old, my score will be roughly 66 and I am slightly retarded.

Binet's interest is entirely clinical and research-based, *genuinely scientific*, and he aims to discover in what way, and within which limits, a child who is different, with learning difficulties, can acquire new models of understanding. Furthermore, Binet's test constitutes a model for localized measurement, limited to the infant period of development. Binet's intentions are completely different to those involving the mass measurement of *IQ* in the United States. He has no racist motives for proposing the test; quite the opposite, since he is dedicated to the possibility of helping disadvantaged children. Binet has no interest in the social promotion and glorification of intelligence as a genetic factor, but rather in the study of the mental functioning of handicapped children. Binet and Montessori have passions to satisfy, *IQ* salesmen have privileges to defend. It continues to happen today, and we might define this phenomenon using the diagnostic category *health narcissism*.

Conclusion

«Intelligence stands at the core of modern lives. It marks us out from the rest of nature. It is crucial to our sense of self and an instant yardstick for sizing up others. Psychologists measure it, biologists search for its DNA, women demand it of sperm donors; learned professors from Harvard to Heidelberg foresee our descendants turning into transhuman, bodiless intelligences able to migrate as software to other planets. If these are the dreams of intelligence, the nightmare is its absence» (Goodey, p. 1).

Thus wrote Goodey (2011) in the introduction to his work on the history of intelligence. Goodey at once draws attention to how the "intelligence" mechanism is still pervasive in the contemporary world, in our days. It is not just a question of reconstructing a hidden and forgotten story, of returning it to the light. It is above all a question of marrying it with the cultural unconscious of the contemporary Western world. As is always the case, the story has not yet concluded, it is still alive in the dominant mentality, and it informs our daily expressions and is deeply rooted in them. The degree to which a hierarchy of intellectual abilities defines our social roles is demonstrated by insults, being sensitive indicators of cultural axiology and which for the most part (in practice, all those that do not involve the sexuality or near relatives of the person insulted) stigmatize the limits of an individual's cognitive abilities, such as idiot, cretin, stupid, retard, imbecile, dolt and many more: being at the center of the bell curve is still the essential key to citizenship. Goodey's work on the cultural history of intelligence develops in synergy with a spectrum of especially relevant research undertaken in recent years. From a historical viewpoint, James W. Trent's work (1994) on the invention of the *feeble minded* in America is becoming a classic, as with the more recent history of idiocy undertaken by Patrick McDonagh (2009). Trent retraces policies informing the handling of intellectual disability, from Séguin's arrival in America to the twentieth century, indicating the complexity of, and fluctuations in, the cultural, institutional and ideological determinants that gave rise to the figure of the "feeble minded"³, while McDonagh's book reconstructs the genesis and

³ His work supplies other indicators to corroborate the interpretation we have given in this article. For example, a

development of “idiocy” via a wide spectrum of popular, scientific, socio-political and literary arguments⁴. Wright (2001) and Wright and Digby (1996) are also concerned with historical research, as well as Rapley (2004)⁵, though from a more markedly social constructivist viewpoint. Other studies of particular interest in unraveling the ideological tangle surrounding the discussion of intellectual disability focus on the theme of “competence”, as in the essays contained in the volume *Questions of Competence* (1998), edited by Richard Jenkins, and in the question of full citizenship in relation to cognitive limits (Carey, 2009). A further area of discussion that merits special attention is the specifically philosophical aspect of the ethical relationship with intellectual disability, a complex theme and, as highlighted by Licia Carlson in *The Faces of Intellectual Disability*, almost never adequately or pertinently contextualized in the history of philosophy, including contemporary history. Together with the New York philosopher Eva Kittay, Carlson has edited an especially praiseworthy collection of writings, if for no other reason than the high quality of contributors (Hacking, Bérubé, Nussbaum, Peter Singer, among others), on the ethical questions posed by intellectual disability, *Cognitive disability and its challenge to moral philosophy* (2010).

Intellectual disability is coming to the fore as one of the most interesting focal points of contemporary social science, and our paper hopes to contribute in highlighting its importance; not from the self-referential viewpoint of the history of ideas, but in terms of questioning the relevance of any naturalized cultural hierarchy aimed at an objective dislocation on the social ladder. We believe that a study of the history of IQ, imbricated with those of psychiatry and racism, is useful in grasping and comparing those forms of prevarication fully in effect at the present time.

All the more so given that – as Ian Hacking writes in one of his 2005 lessons at the *Collège de France* on the history of racial classification – new genetic discoveries seem to indicate the selective effectiveness of certain drugs and interventions in curing the specific diseases of various groups whose genome may be distinguished independently of a common origin and geographical provenance. In 2004, for example, a drug was approved for congestive cardiac failure only for black Americans (Hacking, 2005, p.159). As the French Canadian philosopher notes, websites belonging to white supremacy organisations already contain statements on the distribution of HLA (Human Leucocyte Antigen) factors for bone marrow transplants as genetic and scientific proof of the fact that races are different. Hacking’s lesson entitled “Why is racial classification always with us?” indicates the dangers inherent in naive constructionism as well as in uncritical naturalism. Hacking’s intention is to reconstruct certain moments from the scientific history of race and its relationship with the “science that classifies people”, and to revisit some of the sad episodes we have written about, thereby warning us of the dangerous epistemological error that lies in separating nature and culture. A dualism of this type may help feed the eternal human desire of oppression. Faced with the medicalization of the psychological sciences, we hope that our fragment of cultural history might contribute in countering “the revived spectre of a return to the fraudulent use of nineteenth century race science...” (Hacking, 2005, p.159).

reading of an early-twentieth century classic such as Henry H. Goddard’s *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* is interesting, being a classic in Eugenic theory in which the author follows the forks of a family tree where the original ancestor has children with two different women; one the legitimate wife, a Quaker (giving rise the healthy family branch – Kalli), and the other a weak-minded barmaid (giving rise to the degenerate branch – Kak). The work considers itself to be scientific, the result of historical research starting from a patient interned in the institution Goddard worked for. A scientific exposition of degenerative theory, useful in involving legislators in Eugenic policies. In the book’s illustrations, the features of those belonging to the Kak branch appear less scientific, seemingly altered to highlight asymmetry and vacuity.

⁴ McDonagh specifically develops an analysis of *The Idiot Boy* by William Wordsworth, although literature is rich in representations of intellectual disability; Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner or Lennie Small in *Of Mice and Men* by Steinbeck both come to mind.

⁵ In the midst of his sacrosanct arrows aimed at Social Constructionism in *The Social Construction of What?*, Ian Hacking still recognises the value of certain studies undertaken in this area, as is most certainly the case for the writings of Trent and Rapley mentioned here.

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