

Book Review

At Our Wit's End: Why We're Becoming Less Intelligent and What it Means for the Future

Edward Dutton and Michael Woodley of Menie
Imprint Academic, 2018

A previous book by Woodley of Menie, *Rhythm of the West* (Council for Social and Economic Studies, 2017), outlined the rise and fall of general intelligence in the West, extrapolating from historical, behavioral, psychological and phenotypic data obtained from Britannics (meaning the British and those descended mainly from British colonists overseas). The current book, co-authored with Edward Dutton, reiterates the observation that general intelligence is currently declining and demonstrates the decline with data that did not appear in *Rhythm of the West*. The current book goes further than the previous book, addressing the source of the decline, lucidly spelling out what is in store for western civilization if current trends continue unabated and suggests what could be done to halt or at least retard the decline.

That there is a decline in average intelligence may surprise the casual observer, as even the most pedestrian member of Western civilization has a smart phone and rudimentary understanding of using a personal computer to browse the Internet. Also, though we may not completely understand the underlying engineering of these devices, it seems that every year their versatility and complexity increases by several orders of magnitude. Compared to a few generations ago, more people today have college degrees and many people today view the natural world in "scientific and analytical" (what the book calls "scientific spectacles"), rather than in supernatural or religious terms. One may even raise the point that people today are healthier and wealthier than those of previous generations. Therefore, one could argue that intelligence is rising instead of falling.

As the book points out, however, these observations gloss over key details. Rather, the authors demonstrate that general intelligence is decreasing and has been in decline since the Industrial Revolution, particularly in the number of the "macro-innovators" or elite geniuses who are largely responsible for the "significant innovations" in science and technology that have led to fundamental changes in our lives (e.g. the telephone, vaccines). The overall decline in intelligence and its projected effect on society at large may be surprising, but the

authors see the decline in the number of high-IQ geniuses and their never-to-be-realized innovations as the bane of Western civilization. The authors express doubt in even the possibility of maintaining Western civilization in the future at its current level.

One could point out, however, that IQ test scores, as proxies for intelligence, have increased over the course of the 20th century in both developed and underdeveloped countries, commonly cited as the Flynn Effect. To this observation, the authors suggest that specific, narrow cognitive skills, rather than general intelligence, appear to have increased. The authors further point out that these narrow cognitive skills are the least-related to general intelligence and most malleable to environmental manipulation such as practice. Improvements in nutrition and universal education have also helped to increase IQ test scores, but only on those parts that are least related to innate cognitive ability.

While writers in the past have also noted the gradual decline of intelligence and hypothesized that this was due to a concurrent decrease in those genetic alleles that underlie IQ, few, if any, had supporting genetic evidence.¹ With the advent of large-scale studies that have identified genetic variants associated with educational attainment, a proxy for intelligence, the authors present such evidence. The authors note that in the Icelandic population, the frequencies of genetic variants that associate with high educational attainment have declined over a period of 80 years. Citing work with ancient DNA from Bronze Age Eurasian remains, the authors go further to show that genes associated with higher IQ had been increasing slowly before starting to decline in the 19th century. With identification of many genetic variants associated with intelligence, perhaps ancient DNA from non-European locations would show changes in IQ over time for each race — have other races undergone similar IQ transitions?

The authors point out declines in macro-innovators and their macro-innovations since the end of the Industrial Revolution as evidence for declines in general intelligence. While the authors demonstrate this using three different sources, the definition of “macro-innovation” and the distinction between these and micro-innovation are not entirely clear. It has been noted elsewhere that micro-innovations are incremental adjustments to macro-innovations. It is possible that surveys may have missed macro-innovations that no one but specialists know about but are nonetheless revolutionary to the field. For example, it is difficult to argue that new methods of gene editing, such as

¹ Itzkoff, S. (1994). *The Decline of Intelligence in America*. Westport, CT: Praeger. Lynn, R. (1996). *Dysgenics*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

CRISPR-Cas, are micro-innovations, refinements of previously available and less precise tools used in genetic engineering. They more likely should be considered to be macro-innovations, with far-ranging implications in the prevention and treatment of genetically mediated diseases. Whether these tools in current form or with further refinements eventually see widespread use as safe and effective tools for editing out genetically-mediated disease or to modify physical or cognitive functions that are significantly genetically mediated is not yet known. Researchers appear to be reluctant to test this technology on living embryos, so we will have no idea how safe and effective such technology really is. Would widespread adaptation of micro-innovations move them to the macro-innovation category? While intriguing, the decline in macro-innovations and geniuses would be a highly subjective measure.

The current book is replete with data and concepts that may be familiar to readers of *Mankind Quarterly*, but is written in a style approachable also for those not familiar with topics such as evolutionary genetics and theories of personality. While the book presents data demonstrating declining general intelligence that provokes considerable reflection, what is striking for the current reviewer are the tangible examples which provoke further consideration. One fascinating example is the demise of the Concorde. The Concorde supersonic airliner made it possible to fly between London and New York in only three-and-a-half hours, far shorter than the usual eight hours. While Concorde ridership was limited to the very wealthy, it was nonetheless a “major breakthrough”, as the authors put it, and was not merely a “minor update to existing technology” (micro-innovation). Following the grounding of the Concorde in 2003, no commercial supersonic transportation has taken its place; there has not been any improvement in the duration of intercontinental flights. The authors suggest that the main reason for this is that we no longer have the cognitive ability to create and maintain commercial supersonic flights.

Furthermore, the authors point out that what ultimately led to the demise of the Concorde was “incompetence” (or more bluntly, stupidity). What led to the spectacular 2000 Air France Concorde disaster that killed all on board and four people on the ground was a piece of make-shift repair on an aircraft that preceded the Concorde which fell onto the runway. Prior to this disaster, there were no fatal Concorde accidents. The technology itself, the authors point out, worked for 30 years. A more recent example of possible “incompetence” could be the grounding of all of Boeing 737 Max.² Indeed, given how much redundancies are built into

² “Boeing 737 MAX crashed after system forced its nose down ‘uncommanded’, Ethiopia says” <http://time.com/5564224/ethiopia-boeing-737-max-crash-report/> “After two fatal

complex systems, one wonders how much of today's apparent failures of technology are in fact due to uncomprehending operators rather than a failure of the technology itself.

The book's overall message, that the West will fail due to its own success, should be remembered upon reviewing current events, particularly the political turmoil in the US. As intelligence in post-industrial humans is in decline, as suggested by recent studies in European countries, there appears to be greater adoption of "anti-rational ideologies" such as nationalism, described in the book as the romanticization of "folk culture" and an appeal to live in groups "bound by shared blood, soil, language and history". At the same time, the presumably more intelligent, the cognitive elite, as Charles Murray called them,³ are also afflicted by anti-rational ideologies such as the notion that biological reality can be ignored while expecting, even demanding, equal outcomes in every aspect of life. The foolish and highly divisive idea is that everyone is equally capable were it not for "racism" and "sexism", which need to be suppressed using old-fashioned totalitarian methods pioneered by the likes of Hitler and Stalin. Indeed, the authors foresee more extremist thinking of this kind on the part of the socio-political elites over time. The reader is left wondering how anti-rational ideologies managed to latch onto Western people with their "scientific spectacles".

In the field of behavioral genetics, for example, there is still resistance against attempts to elaborate the relationship between genes and behavior; and legal restrictions on human germline genetic engineering are still universal although this technology can greatly advance individual health and, more broadly, the well-being of humanity. Most Westerners, influenced either by traditional religious ideas (especially Americans) or by postmodern, anti-rational ideologies (especially the educated), disapprove of the notion of genetically modifying embryos to improve physical and intellectual functioning, although genetic modification would be alright for the purpose of eliminating genetic disorders.⁴

Western quasi-religious and metaphysical hand wringing over embryo selection and genetic screening have yet to appear in China.⁵ Indeed, the

Boeing plane crashes, the world turned on the US" <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/17/two-boeing-737-fatal-plane-crashes-the-world-turns-on-the-faa.html>

³ Herrnstein, R. & Murray, C. (1994). *The Bell Curve*, NY, NY: Free Press.

⁴ Pew Research Center, July 2018, "Public views of gene editing for babies depend on how it would be used." www.pewresearch.org.

⁵ "China's embrace of embryo selection raises thorny questions" (August 16, 2017). <https://www.nature.com/news/china-s-embrace-of-embryo-selection-raises-thorny-questions-1.22468>. "China's genetically edited twins may have enhanced brains 'by accident'," <https://nextshark.com/chinese-gene-edited-babies-brain/>. Israeli health

People's Republic of China, which is facing an increasing population of elderly with an overall decline in population, appears to have thought in generational terms with respect to preserving and improving its germ line. The Chinese government is promoting the use of preimplantation genetic diagnosis and in vitro fertilization to its citizens and encouraging its scientists to improve upon Western genetic innovations. By contrast, other East Asian countries that are also facing aging and shrinking populations are being shamed into following the West's lead and import as many genetically distinct peoples as possible, lest they be called "racist".⁶ The current book points out that the ongoing importation of non-Westerners into Western countries, an almost inevitable response to intractable sub-replacement fertility, is in fact a key factor in declining levels of intelligence in Western countries. It is conceivable that a similar reduction in intelligence will occur, or is underway, in some East Asian countries as well. In any event, it seems that some but not all East Asian countries understand the root of the problem as outlined by the current book.

Whether East Asian countries will follow the path of decline as outlined by Dutton and Woodley of Menie is unknown. A key difference between East Asian countries and Western European countries is their historically shallow rooting in western liberal democracy, from which individualist and egalitarian ideologies originated, displacing bonds of kinship and in-group cooperation. It is possible that these two characteristics, kinship and in-group cooperation, could have important roles in shaping East Asia's response to their own decline and their role in a world with the West in decline.

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insurance covers "pre-embryo" screening as well as in vitro fertilization: <https://www.health.gov.il/English/Topics/fertility/Pages/ivf.aspx>

⁶ "Immigration the solution to Japan's population problem," <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/10/26/immigration-the-solution-to-japans-population-problem/>. "Multiracial Korea as solution to population decline," https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/11/356_257820.html