

Book Review: Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture

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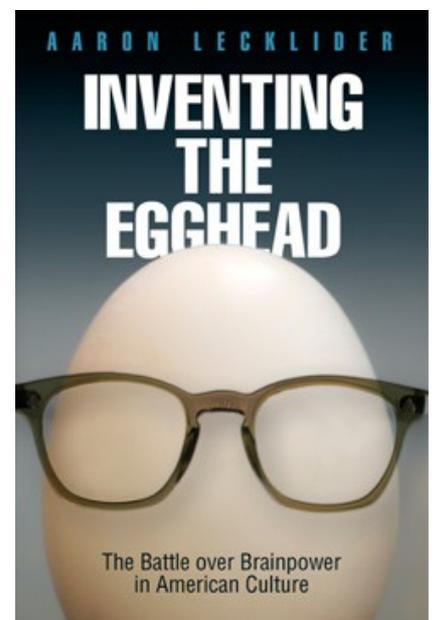
Throughout the twentieth century, pop songs, magazine articles, plays, posters, and novels in the West have represented intelligence alternately as empowering or threatening. In ***Inventing the Egghead***, cultural historian **Aaron Lecklider** explores ideas of intelligence, social transformation, and education in the US. Many readers will enjoy this book, especially those interested in American history and culture, science and technology, or issues of social class, writes **Jennifer Miller**.



Inventing the Egghead: The Battle over Brainpower in American Culture. Aaron Lecklider. University of Pennsylvania Press. March 2013.

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In 2011, more than [150,000 students](#) around the world enrolled in Stanford's [Introduction to Artificial Intelligence](#) course taught by leading experts in robotics, Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig. While access to this level of expertise on possibly the nerdiest of topics had been confined to a handful of privileged students, the technological and social innovation of the massively open online course, or MOOC, brought access within reach of the world's estimated 2.7 billion Internet users (Source: International Telecommunications Union). The media broke the news with a flash and followed with a steady drumbeat. Expansive promises of a vast democratization of knowledge have been in relentless competition with a chorus of cheers and laments for the impending doom of traditional higher education.



Does [Aaron Lecklider](#), a professor of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, write about MOOCs in *Inventing the Egghead*? No. He approaches the topic of brainpower as a historian of the 20th century, culminating in the 2000 election of George W. Bush – a deciding moment in America's brainpower battle, I presume. Yet I was surprised to see how much Lecklider's historical account echoed today's debates about technology's impact on democratization of knowledge.



Lecklider defines brainpower as “the complicated ways in which intelligence was invoked to empower the wide swath of Americans who did not necessarily have access to the institutions of higher education” (p. 4). The book offers a historical exploration of the many ways intelligence has been represented in American culture, with a close examination of groups marginalized by gender, race, or class. Ultimately, Lecklider elucidates the construct of the egghead as the personification of “subversion, queer sexuality, whiteness with uncertain racial alliances, and intelligence” (p. 220).

It was in Chapter 1, “Aren’t We Educational Here, too?”: Brainpower and the Emergence of Mass Culture’ that I was most struck with parallels to the current debate about access to knowledge. I could almost see the words “Aren’t we educational here, too?” – attributed to an amusement park owner decrying excessive regulation in the early 1900s – forming in a speech bubble above the head of a spokesperson for the University of Phoenix, or any of the online, for-profit universities. I also learned that Disney’s EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) was not, as I had always believed, innovating by building a theme park around educational content. Rather, Disney was carrying on a tradition of the amusement park as a setting for regular folks wary of elite institutions to engage with knowledge. And what was the early [Chautauqua adult education movement](#), if not a precursor to [TED Talks](#)?

In particular, it was hard to believe that this quote, from a magazine editor in 1919, was not ripped from today’s headlines: “I believe that our educational system is rotten from the bottom to the top. It crushes, in the vast majority of cases, all initiative and power of independent rational thinking. Our universities are the worst in the world, and the presidents of our universities are not chosen for their scholarship but for their success in begging money from the rich” (p. 34). I’m not sure whether to take comfort in the fact we’ve been down this road before, or to see this as evidence that, having failed to learn from history, we’re doomed to repeat it.

Chapter 3, ‘Knowledge is Power: Women, Workers’ Education, and Brainpower in the 1920s’, rang less true to me. The chapter chronicled several initiatives to provide working-class women with access to education, either as a liberal arts respite from factory work or as knowledge to be directly applied to labour organizing. As a woman and someone who studies workforce issues, this chapter spoke to me much more about experiences of the working class than it did about my experiences as a woman. The chapter was about women, but seemed like it could have been about men. There was little of the sentiment behind the quote, attributed to Mae West, “Brains are an asset to the woman in love who’s smart enough to hide ‘em.” Quite a bit seemed to be left unsaid about the ambiguity of women’s brainpower and why, while the egg is biologically female, the egghead is understood to be male.

The text is peppered with photographs, cartoons, and other images that visually represent the evolution of the egghead. Chapter 5, “We Have Only Words Against”: Brainworkers and Books in the 1930s’, includes several striking prints of Works Progress Administration (WPA) posters promoting public libraries and adult education. Not to be missed are the images in Chapter 7, ‘Inventing the Egghead: Brainpower in Cold War American Culture’, of two consecutive Newsweek covers from 1956, the first a conceptual image of a literal egghead and the second of Estes Kefauver, the Yale-educated lawyer and Senator from Tennessee.

I believe many readers will enjoy this book, if they are interested in American history and culture, science and technology, or issues of social class. Perhaps the most practical value of the book for those with an interest in public policy is the insight it offers into American attitudes toward technocratic solutions. We distrust the ivory tower, the elite, the intellectual—the egghead—and we always have. During the Great Depression, however, we placed hope in the “brain trust” to deliver political and economic solutions. The book also suggests the possibility of gaining broad support for technical solutions to the enduring problems of our current economic recovery through populist appeals in non-traditional venues. Whether the MOOC will deliver on its promises of democratizing higher education remains to be seen, but even the nerdiest eggheads of the 20th century might be surprised at the brainpower of the mobile phones in the hands of today’s working class citizens.

Jennifer Miller is an Assistant Teaching Professor at the University of Southern California’s Sol Price School of Public Policy. She received her doctorate in public policy from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research interests focus on the scientific workforce. She has also written about collaboration among universities, industry, and government in university research centres. Before pursuing her doctorate, she worked for IBM in human resources. [Read more reviews by Jennifer.](#)

