

SOCIAL SCIENCE

Dealing with Differences

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All societies make decisions about the distribution of goods and services. Despotic regimes allocate them in whatever manner they see fit. Governments based on egalitarian principles, however, cannot act capriciously. Their policies must be predicated on justice and fairness. But how can states create such policies when individuals obviously differ from one another? How, in other words, do societies committed to equality deal with differences among people?

In *The Measure of Merit*, John Carson, a historian at the University of Michigan, offers an informative, exhaustively researched account of how France and America each addressed this challenge. His narrative reveals how positivism, the rise of social science, and cultural beliefs converged to shape our modern notions of intelligence.

Enlightenment-era thinkers scorned the advantages and disadvantages that flowed from one's economic status or family background. They believed that a more rational and just social order could be constructed on the basis of merit or, to use a more historically accurate term, "talents." To express this view, Condillac, Helvétius, Rousseau, and other philosophers systematically analyzed a broad array of human aptitudes. Their discussions were important for two reasons. First, although they did not always agree on the particulars, they tended to define talents as a multivalent phenomenon that could be enhanced by various means, including education. Second, as Carson notes, it was primarily philosophers who undertook the early investigations of intelligence (the term that would replace talents by the mid-19th century).

In perhaps the book's strongest section, Carson examines how positivism transformed the study and perceptions of human intelligence. Associated most closely with the French philosopher Auguste Comte, positivism sought to apply the scientific method to social problems. Comte himself emphasized the need for social theories to be predictive,

empirically verifiable, practical, and materialist (not metaphysical). Emphasizing these criteria, Comte laid the foundations of modern social science. Positivism's legacy, however, would intensify a growing apprehension within the nascent social sciences over experimental methods that departed from strict, almost mechanical, objectivity. This near obsession with objectivity could distort, as well as clarify, the phenomena being examined. (Testing something—intelligence, for example—suggests that there is a tangible entity to examine, sometimes a debatable proposition.)

The French psychologist Alfred Binet did more than any other individual to apply positivism's dictums to the study of intelligence. Binet, with his colleague Theodore Simon, devised the most comprehensive intelligence test to that date. Yet, as Carson insightfully notes, the first version of the test (1905) was never meant to generate a single number to describe an individual's mental acumen. However, for reasons that are not clear, between 1905 and 1911 Binet revised the test by reducing the test administrator's discretion (a certain amount of subjectivity was inevitable) and placing greater emphasis on the instrumental outcomes (the test's ability to precisely locate an individual

on an intelligence continuum). Further revisions, including introduction of an "intelligence quotient," by Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman in 1916, produced a test that envisioned intelligence as biologically determined, unitary, hereditary, and fixed throughout an individual's lifetime.

Carson offers intriguing explanations for why France and America reacted differently to intelligence tests. The French placed less importance on them for several reasons: professional antagonisms, e.g., doctors and teachers were unwilling to cede their authority to psychologists; intellectual trends, French scholars began to emphasize subjectivity (most notably, intuition) over rigid objectivity;



Locating differences in head shapes. Phrenologists, such as William Bally, argued for "cerebral localization of mental functions."

institutional exigencies, the French Army (unlike the American military) never adopted and thus never validated the use of intelligence tests; and the presence of fully functional sorting mechanisms in France (a national system of secondary schools and universities). Americans, on the other hand, confronted different circumstances and were therefore more willing to confer intellectual and practical value on intelligence tests. Also important were anxieties over the increasing heterogeneity of American society and the need, expressed by some, to create intellectual and racial hierarchies to maintain social order. Even so, Carson concludes that Americans have never fully accepted intelligence (as measured by narrowly designed tests) as the only criterion of merit. Although Carson does not fully explicate this ambivalence, he correctly notes it is manifest in current debates over the Scholastic Aptitude Test.

The Measure of Merit offers a useful supplement to books by Stephen Jay Gould (1) and Steven Pinker (2). One might wish that Carson had devoted less attention to the 18th century and more to the 20th—especially to political scientist Charles Murray's contentious assertions about the distribution of intelligence (3). Nonetheless, scholars in several disciplines will find Carson's arguments relevant and engaging.

References

1. S. J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (Norton, New York, ed. 2, 1996).
2. S. Pinker, *The Blank Slate* (Viking, New York, 2002); reviewed by P. Bateson, *Science* 297, 2212 (2002).
3. R. J. Herrnstein, C. Murray, *The Bell Curve* (Free Press, New York, 1994).

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Republics, 1750–1940

by John Carson

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