Book Review

John Carson. The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750–1940. 422 pp. Cloth $39.50

The significance and complexity of equality during the revolutionary era is commonly recognized, yet the underpinnings of this concept are often overlooked. John Carson’s The Measure of Merit, therefore, makes a valuable contribution to understanding the role of merit and its impact on democracy, the organization of schooling, social stratification, and so forth. Even today, as Carson notes in his introduction, affirmative action cases illustrate the precarious relation that our beliefs about equality hold with concepts of merit. With this in mind, he examines France and the United States from 1750 to 1940, exploring how intelligence was linked to earlier notions of merit and social equality, achieved scientific status, subverted the longstanding questions central to the philosophy of mind, and became an integral part of contemporary society. This book is not simply a history of intelligence or merit but rather an ambitious examination that helps to unravel the matrix of beliefs intertwined in the science, theory, and social implications of merit as it infused modern democracies, as well as beliefs about race, class, and gender. Using an impressive range of sources, including philosophic and scientific texts, newspaper articles, and asylum reports, this intellectual history examines the influence of key figures as well as disciplines such as psychology, anthropology, and biology. In his own words, Carson argues that, “The Measure of Merit tells the story of how the American and French republics turned to the sciences of human nature to help make sense of the meaning of human inequality” (p. 1). In addition, a more complex theme runs throughout the book, captured in Carson’s suggestion that, “Examining and understanding the public discourses that have framed concepts such as talents, merit, and intelligence, ... helps to unearth a culture’s presuppositions, the boundaries within which individuals operate while persuading one another, or themselves, to act on or think about the word in particular ways” (pp. xiii–xiv).

The book is organized chronologically but also has a thematic structure, dividing six chapters and an epilog into three sections. Chapters switch back and forth, comparing and contrasting France and the United States Part one, Mental Abilities and Republican Cultures, centers on the ideology of merit and the formation of modern democracies. This section, which explicates dynamics of early Republican culture and the philosophical underpinnings of mental ability from figures such as Locke and Rousseau, as well as the social implications seen in the debates of individuals such as Mary Wollstonecraft, DuBois, Jefferson, and others. This does not lend
itself to a comprehensive understanding of these figures but does allow for a more comprehensive understanding of their beliefs and context. Furthermore, it indicates that even before the formal applications of IQ were established, the notions of mental ability were inherently linked to these debates. Part two centers on the development and legitimization of intelligence and how the concept achieved coherence, a broader application, and was used to normalize cultural values. Carson also notes the failure of earlier methods of mental measurement of intelligence and the eventual triumph of IQ testing. This section traces the connection of various ideologies, such as neo-Lamarckian evolution, degeneration theory, and positivism. The third section examines the contrast and interaction between the institutional and social uses of IQ, noting the role of World War I and the Army $\alpha$ tests. This section also traces the academic debate that was waged over the use of a single unified notion of hereditary intellect in the United States and France.

A distinct aspect of the book is the focus on France and the United States, which illustrates the extent to which social and political factors shaped scientific development of intelligence. In both countries, the concept was never purely interpretative or shaped by experimental practices, and Carson argues that although there was a network of scientific exchange, different outcomes were related to the countries' unique social factors. For example, France is regarded as the birthplace of IQ testing, but social dynamics and psychiatric practices made its application more popular and influential in the United States. Carson emphasizes four primary distinctions between the two countries. France maintained a reliance on the state as the guarantor of rights, whereas the United States maintained an emphasis on the individual. Although both countries advocated public education from the outset, the French education system was national, universal, and comprehensive, as opposed to the United States, which maintained localized private education into the mid-to-late nineteenth century. France had developed schools in the revolutionary period seeking to eliminate aristocratic rule, valuing uniformity over individuality. Subsequently, the Simon-Binet scale of intelligence was very influential in U.S. society. A good example is Jefferson's education plan and desire to establish a natural aristocracy, which was adopted and infused with the belief in objective measures of merit. Another difference Carson suggests is the centrality of race in the United States as a catalyst for scientific explanations for inequality and social stratification. Both countries maintained gradations of racial superiority, and intelligence was central to the justification for racial hierarchies in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Carson argues, however, that the U.S. public based more emphasis on the scientific justification of racial segregation whereas France relied on the cultural justifications of racial homogeneity and
cultural superiority. The fourth difference Carson emphasizes is the momentous social and cultural transformations over the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century. Immigration, urbanization, and industrialization had a more profound effect in the United States, in addition to beliefs about individuality and expertise. Unlike the United States, the comprehensive education system in France served as the gatekeeper for educational outcomes. In both societies, debate waged over the justification and basis of social hierarchies along with the dynamics of mental ability and the implications for democracy.

The book is a welcome addition to the critiques of IQ testing by scientists such as Stephen Gould and Ned Block and adds historical context to the examination of eugenics, meritocracy, and other related issues (Block and Dworkin, 1976 and Gould, 1996). Carson goes far beyond the critique of the statistical methodology and does not portray a distinct line of racist evolutionary science. Rather, he examines craniometry, physiognomy, anthropology, and the development of IQ testing but avoids simplistic dichotomies between the absurdities of discredited science and the role of more valorized science. Furthermore, he avoids explicit assertions of causation, integrating science, and the social factors facilitating the application of intelligence without reducing it to any single aim or event. Gould, for example, has shown that value-laden science was produced by individuals who saw what they wanted to see in the data, correlating various measurements such as brain size, ear shape, and so forth, with intelligence. Carson notes IQ testing was largely accepted and contested among both proponents and critics.

An interesting aspect of the book is the extent to which individuals and even the prophets of IQ testing questioned the validity of IQ as an indication of ability and yet accepted its application for political reasons. One example, which Carson explores at length, is the Army z tests, where officials were reluctant to cede authority to psychologists but eager to adopt a mechanism and justification for sorting and arranging individuals. Historically, debate has not centered on whether or not intelligence exists but rather, the extent to which it accounts for future success in life and therefore justifies educational allocation and inequality. The divide was between those who saw intelligence as natural, teleological, and not significantly altered by education, and those who saw intelligence as a vast array of traits directly impacted by environmental factors and opportunity, seen with figures such as Dewey who favored a mind-in-action (developmental) view of intelligence versus those such as Terman who promoted a mind-in-content (static) view of mental processes. Many critiques have adopted this same line of debate, but Carson focuses on a larger more tangible topic. Namely, how did intelligence reshape the concept of merit, the overall debate, and infuse beliefs about race, gender, and equality. This perspective allows
him to examine how intelligence and merit were fundamentally linked to education, immigration, industrialization, public perception, institutional utility, urbanization, as well as prostitution, drunkenness, and delinquency. The book implies that intelligence as a biologically based determinant of ability has shifted, but these shifts are linked to social and cultural factors more than any single scientific revelation or development. For example, scientists embraced the idea that intelligence varied according to race without a general consensus for the belief in a general hereditary IQ, especially for learning and development. IQ testing developed according to existing social norms and theoretical assumptions about the nature of humankind.

The Measure of Merit has established fertile ground for additional consideration. The book provides an overview of notions of abnormality, eugenics, Social Darwinism, racism, and so forth. These topics, however, are broad and complex. Eugenics has been researched in many forms, so Carson’s decision to avoid a detailed examination is understandable. Still, readers unfamiliar with this topic should note that by the interwar period, where Carson concludes, eugenics had achieved widespread scientific and social acceptance. By the mid-1940s, the work of Henry Goddard and others was incorporated in Nazi propaganda, and the concept of merit was transformed from a justification of inequality to the belief in a biological struggle between races. Many scientists involved in IQ testing played a primary role in eugenic science and embraced forced sterilization and segregation, lobbied congress to reject immigration of those deemed mentally deficient, and wrote extensive biographical descriptions of individuals attaching everything from a disorderly house, pauperism, criminality, and promiscuity to the concept of intelligence and abnormality. Although Carson draws many of these connections, the scope of intelligence in this context is difficult to fully account for. Carson rightfully notes, for example, that WWII and the Holocaust did not end eugenic research—as commonly suggested—but the extent to which hereditary notions of IQ and intelligence has shaped contemporary beliefs is speculative and not fully undertaken here. The book also allows more room to fully examine the institutionalization and manner in which intelligence was normed and constructed. As previously noted, the focus on France and the United States is advantageous in many respects. However, this study equally lends itself to more broad philosophical studies, as well as more localized and focused historical consideration. Nonetheless, this is the most accurate and comprehensive work on this topic to date.

This book is useful for anyone seeking to better understand equality and merit in the post-revolutionary period. With a complex examination of issues such as positivism, factor analysis, and
operationalism the book will also interest scientists and sociologists of science. The technical terminology includes enough contexts to make the book accessible and relevant for understanding ability grouping, tracking, and other practices used in contemporary schooling. The book is indispensable for anyone interested in the history of those denied educational opportunities. It provides a better understanding of popular perceptions involved in higher education, as well as the professionalization and disciplinary formation of modern psychology.

Carson ends by challenging us to consider how we’ve come to know our intelligence and what purpose this knowledge serves. Pushed to its logical limit, this is precisely what formal notions of intelligence deny us, namely the right to question for ourselves the value of what we think. If we take this seriously, the next challenge might be acknowledging that inequality is rooted in the beliefs we’ve inherited and to envision a future for human potential that allows for uncertainty and change.

References