sis on the concurrence of science and more unorthodox “pseudoscientific” practices not only in the popular imagination but also in the work of Quiroga and Arlt. Blurring the traditional distinctions between high and low culture, these writers dwell quite comfortably among quacks, parapsychologists, and pseudoscientific periodicals. Readers who are perhaps better versed in scientific development and technical practices are sure to enjoy different aspects of the book. Although the focus can get blurred by the vast number of anecdotes, Sarlo manages to make an overwhelming amount of data come to life in witty accounts of Argentina’s technographical modernity.

Erudite throughout and quite entertaining at times, this book also includes a generous critical apparatus. Sarlo moves beyond the common view in literary critical practice of science and technology as mere discourses—having little real existence outside the field of language—to an empirical demonstration of the writers and the populace’s very real link with what would become one of the dominant modes of the early-twentieth-century literary and cultural imagination.

MELISSA M. CULVER

Melissa Culver is a doctoral candidate studying literary discourses of women writers of the nineteenth century at State University of New York at Stony Brook.

The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750–1940.


John Carson’s meticulous and engaging book describes the “edifice of merit” in which all readers of Technology and Culture perforce live today: the 250-year-old accretion of social relations and political ideologies built around Western ideas regarding human intellectual capacity. The Measure of Merit offers a history of what counted as intelligence in France and the United States from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, including a fluctuating set of personal traits believed to be related to intellect, such as virtue, self-discipline, and race or gender. The book follows dozens of celebrated and lesser-known French and American intellectuals through their thinking about thinking: Is human cognition a unitary phenomenon, or is it made up of many discrete mental processes? Is it subordinate to one’s moral, or psychological, makeup? Related to brain size? Throughout, of course, the “nature/nurture” question remains central: Are individuals’ manifest intellectual abilities the result of inborn talents, social conditions, or some combination of the two?

That debate has always had huge policy repercussions, as observers have asked what responsibility a republic, or for that matter a single public
school classroom, might bear for the mental attainments or deficits of its constituents. From Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the marquis de Condorcet, and Thomas Jefferson through Herbert Spencer, Francis Galton, Robert Yerkes, and Alfred Binet, Carson provides a timeline of tremendous specificity, tracking both his subjects' original doctrine and audience reactions to those ideas over time. A host of less prominent figures from eighteenth-century government functionaries to nineteenth-century college presidents to twentieth-century military psychologists demonstrate how intellectual discourse regarding talent and competence has translated into institutional practice. Carson offers a narrative with undeniable resonance for scholars and educators today, providing immensely useful histories of the cultural institutions through which many of us have gained, or been denied, our own opportunities in life.

In his careful linkages of philosophical and policy developments, Carson shows how educational, military, and industrial sectors in both France and the United States provided the infrastructure by which elites brought ideas of merit to bear on citizens' life experiences. Notably, standardized assessments of intelligence in each of those realms are shown here to have had major and varied civil consequences. We see how the ostensible objectivity of intelligence testing has historically cut both ways, displacing elites and justifying universal education in some settings but helping polities to deny education to marginalized citizens in others. Intelligence, when treated as something that could be measured, has often reified the social privileges of those doing the measuring. Meritocratic ideals, for some time understood by sociologists of education to be a double-edged political sword, are just beginning to attract the attention of historians of scientific or technological knowledge, and Carson provides a crucial resource for such studies.

It is not particularly surprising to learn that intelligence, like any other quantity, is only measured where it is valued, or that psychological instruments enact social agendas; other histories of education, anthropometrics, and eugenics have depicted empiricist human sciences as means of social organization. But Carson's panoramic view helps us see the equivalence of intelligence and other entities that have been subject to Western scientific or systematic analysis over the last two hundred years. The values that made intelligence seem measurable in Jacksonian America, for example, were the same ones that later made hierarchical management practices seem reasonable: the urge to reconcile egalitarian impulses and the productive imperatives of an industrial society. Most topically, in our “post-civil rights, postfeminist” era, when affirmative action and other Great Society social interventions seem to be breathing their last, and differentials in educational or career attainment are increasingly naturalized as matters of innate endowment in the United States, this study suggests some connections between uncritical invocations of merit and weakened democratic discourse.
Judgments about an aspirant’s economic background, character, religiosity, or sexuality may figure less overtly in American education and employment than was the case a hundred years ago, but, as Carson shows, subjective ascriptions of intelligence seem likely to persist as legitimate means of delineating an individual’s potential, doing some of the same sort of gatekeeping.

The arguments that Carson recounts are sometimes dauntingly complex. Proponents of environmentalist and physiological understandings of intelligence both invoked brain physiology, sensation, race or gender, and educational opportunities in their depictions of human intellectual development, just in different combinations. Many experts embraced standardized intelligence testing while also expressing concerns about the method’s limits or undemocratic dangers. While much of the intricate narrative may appeal primarily to intellectual historians who wish to reconstruct patterns of influence among these historical figures, the book will nonetheless serve historians of technology and labor. It is among the most interesting comparisons of technocratic ideologies in France and the United States that I have read, moving beyond a focus on a single profession such as engineering to embed that enthusiasm in class and economic agendas. The French, despite an entrenched occupational hierarchy that famously followed class lines, saw institutions as playing a much larger role in individual attainment than did Americans.

What is more, Carson’s accounts of how elite thinkers deployed such arguments go a long way to helping us understand how skill and individual potential even became meaningful categories. Their basic claim endures—that certain people are simply suited to certain types of work. That notion of human difference is full of political implications, yet it is one that most of us wield uncritically in our own classrooms or professional relations. Carson’s text is not prescriptive in tone, but his precise, and surprisingly dramatic, historicization of merit may help us examine that habit.

AMY SLATON

Dr. Slaton is an associate professor of history at Drexel University in Philadelphia.

**Women at Work in Preindustrial France.**


Daryl Hafter’s book examines women who worked in cloth production in two of France’s key centers of that trade, Rouen and Lyon. In the former city, women could become members and even masters in a number of guilds, eight that were associated with textile production, including linen drapers, spinners, makers of knitted wear, and ribbon-makers, along with the guild