

H-France Review Vol. 7 (September 2007), No. 105

John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 401 pp. \$39.50. ISBN 12-978-0-691-01715-0.

Review by Philip Nord, Princeton University.

How are social distinctions to be justified? In a democracy, all citizens are presumed equal, regardless of birth or wealth. That does not mean that certain individuals, men and women of merit, will not rise higher than others, making exceptional contributions to the commonweal and reaping exceptional rewards, whether monetary or otherwise, in return. Indeed, the wise democracy might want to select out talented citizens-in-the-making at a tender age, the better to cultivate their abilities so that they in turn might better serve the public good. In practice, this is how democratic regimes have in fact proceeded. But not every regime uses the same selection criteria. The French teenager preps for the baccalaureate or takes special courses to cram for the admissions *concours* to a *grande école*. An American high-schooler, by contrast, frets about the SATs. One system emphasizes the essay-based test evaluated by expert readers, the other the so-called intelligence test which lends itself to easy quantification. France and the US are both republics; they both want to pick out the intelligent for educational advancement; and yet they do so by quite different means.

Why should this be so? This is the question John Carson poses in *The Measure of Merit*, an ambitious, comparative history of intelligence-testing in France and the US from the revolutionary era down to the Second World War. And there is an interesting twist to Carson's story, for it was the French who first invented the intelligence test, the Binet-Simon intelligence scale, the forerunner of the SATs. Yet, it was the Americans and not the French who generalized intelligence-testing, putting it to ever more numerous uses, creating in effect a culture of intelligence-testing of a sort that has never existed in France. So, it is not just that France and the US have taken divergent paths, but that it might well have been otherwise. The French had a chance to go the route America eventually took but in the end opted not to, an observation that poses a second round of questions: why did the French come up with intelligence-testing, but not seize on it the way the Americans did?

Carson's handling of this latter line of inquiry is succinct and to the point. There was a spiritualist dimension to much psychological inquiry in mid-nineteenth-century France that treated the self as a metaphysical entity best approached through careful introspection. A younger generation of scientists, Jean-Martin Charcot in the lead, took a more positivist approach. The operations of the psyche, Charcot was persuaded, were detectable through laboratory experiment, and for experimental purposes, Charcot worked with pathological subjects, focusing on the mentally ill (p. 127). Charcot, however, was not just a scientist, but a man of republican and anti-clerical conviction, and such political predilections in fact left a mark on the science he practiced. The Catholic Church might interpret miraculous healings or visionary utterances as manifestations of the divine, but, to Charcot, they were symptoms of mental imbalance and identifiable as such.

Charcot's sometime student, Alfred Binet, worked like his master on abnormal populations, not the insane in Binet's case, but the "feeble-minded." In 1905, in collaboration with Théodore Simon, he completed work on a battery of tests that would allow researchers to separate out the retarded few from the normal majority. The test had an immediate practical application. France had become a Republic in the 1870s and the new regime committed itself to the education of all its citizens, creating a nation-wide

system of public primary schools in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The Binet-Simon test was intended as an aid to educators to help them identify students in need of special schooling, and the test did indeed get used for this purpose, although almost always in conjunction with other forms of assessment: teacher evaluations, doctors' reports, and the like.

But Binet had greater ambitions still. He tinkered with his test in subsequent years, coming up with a scale that would allow him, not just to classify subjects as feeble-minded or normal, but to rank them on a continuum that ran the entire gamut from dim-wittedness to brilliance. This was a signal intellectual breakthrough. Binet's new scheme made the novel claim that students and by implication all citizens differed in matters of intelligence not so much in kind as in degree (p. 144). They were all distributed along the same scale, a few at one end, a few at the other, and the bulk in the middle, forming overall what has now come to be known as a bell-shaped curve. What this implied was that intelligence-testing was a useful tool, not just for picking out the abnormal, but for establishing hierarchies among the normal as well.

This aspect of Binet's project, however, did not take hold in France. Binet himself, Carson makes clear, was never a mainstream figure (p. 149). He did not occupy a high university position, but worked on the margins in asylums and primary schools. He faced opposition, moreover, not least of all from physicians who felt they were in a better position than psychologists to determine who was fit and who was not to attend the public schools, and physicians, were a privileged group in a positivist-minded Republic that counted so many doctors among its founders and legislators. Last of all, what need was there really for Binet's intelligence test? France already had a well-established system of *concours* for separating out the most able. Binet's revised scale served no urgent purpose and so found few takers.

Here is where Carson's story shifts to America. The Binet-Simon scale was brought to the United States on the eve of the First World War by Henry Goddard, a New Jersey clinician who, like Binet, worked with slow-to-develop children. Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman took it from there, adjusting the test in 1916 to make it more suitable for American subjects, and the Stanford-Binet intelligence scale, as it was now known, caught on with amazing speed. America entered the Great War in 1917, and not long thereafter, thanks to the persuasive exertions of Harvard psychologist Robert Yerkes, the US army agreed to adopt the test, using it to evaluate not just raw recruits but also would-be NCOs and commissioned officers. Over the course of the war, the US military would screen 1.75 million soldiers in all in what must have been the first ever mass application of intelligence testing. Operations on such a scale, of course, required a much simplified test. The army eliminated the qualitative components of the exam. It was now just a question of guiding test subjects through the process and then adding up the results, tasks that did not require personnel trained in psychology. The outcome was a numerical test score that enabled the military authorities to rank test-takers on a single scale from officer material at the top to potential wash-outs at the bottom.

Such a useful instrument was bound to attract other takers, and so it did. After the war, variants of the Stanford-Binet test were taken up by high schools for tracking purposes, by universities to evaluate admissions applicants, and by the immigration services to vet immigrants. A veritable culture of testing crystallized in 1920s America, and it was in this context that Princeton professor Carl Brigham first devised the SATs in 1926 (p. 267).

Now, Carson is careful not to draw too sharp a contrast between the French and American experiences. Intelligence testing in France also found applications in the interwar period. It was, as it had been from the beginning, still used for diagnostic purposes to pick out the "feeble-minded." Henri Laugier and Henri Piéron adopted intelligence-testing techniques, in conjunction with other, more qualitative modes of evaluation, for career placement purposes. And in the US, however deep the new testing culture plunged its roots, it always had its critics, men like Walter Lippmann who rejected the notion that intelligence came in just one shape and size, reducible to a single number. Yet the basic point still

remains: in France, intelligence testing was used, when it was used at all, to identify the exception to the norm or to help out an individual client in need, and it was almost always used as just one technique among many; in the US, on the other hand, intelligence testing was deployed to rank and classify large populations, often without the supplement of more qualitative procedures. How then is this difference to be explained?

Carson proposes three types of answer. The first emphasizes the importance of constitutional structure. The nineteenth-century American Republic, federal in design, was slow to generate strong, central agencies with developed skills in the management of large populations. This left an opening for private-sector experts and organizations to insert themselves, stepping in to do what the American state had neglected to do: devise schemes of national ranking and evaluation. The more centralized French state, with its long experience of exam-giving, had done this sort of thing and done it well from the century's very outset (pp. 233, 272-273).

As the US grew in power, moreover, as it became a player on the international scene, authorities in Washington began to appreciate the state-building uses of just such ranking schemes. France had turned to universal conscription in the 1870s, and military authorities in due course learned how to process soldiers on a large scale. When the Great War came, the French army had an established system of screening committees, composed of officers and medical personnel, which evaluated the fitness of recruits. Not so the US which entered the fray unprepared to field the kind of mass army modern warfare now demanded. The late-developing American state had reason to be grateful to the private-sector experts who came to its aid (p. 199). Carson's argument here is a compelling one and may well have wider purchase beyond the realm of psychology. State-building in the US accelerated at the very same historical moment that the social sciences were professionalizing and making a bid for public legitimacy. The consequence may have been a deeper social-science involvement in policy-making in the US as compared to European countries, like France, where the state-building process had gotten a much earlier start.

But constitutional design and state need, important as they were in accounting for the comparative success of mental testing in the US, do not tell the whole story. Culture too played a part. Early twentieth-century France had a diverse population, including a substantial immigrant presence, but public authorities there preferred (and have continued to so until recent decades) not to insist on the nation's diversity. Such pretence was impossible in the American Republic which included an important African-American minority, not to mention millions upon millions of the foreign-born. Anxieties about preserving "American-ness" in the face of purportedly alien elements had helped make Progressive-era elites receptive to eugenics theory. The Great War and the Russian Revolution deepened fears of aliens, and proponents of mental testing played on these fears. They made the claim, for example, that the average mental age of the US army recruit was a mere thirteen years, proof positive that American racial stock was degenerating (pp. 242-244). But mental-testing offered not just a diagnosis of American decline but a way forward as well, for the intelligence test could be employed to identify inferior groups, making it easier for the state to deal with them and their deleterious influences.

This last set of observations poses the question of politics, a subject that Carson does not dwell on at much length. The French players in Carson's story--Charcot, Binet, Laugier--were all men of the Left, the first two republicans, the third a sometime *chef de cabinet* of the Radical politician Yvon Delbos and, during the Second World War, an active *Résistant*. But what of their American counterparts: Goddard, Terman, Yerkes, Brigham, most of them university professors? Did they care about politics; and did their political orientation, given the climate of the day, create openings for them and for the intelligence-testing project that might not otherwise have existed?

Carson has written a superb book which succeeds in highlighting one of the great anomalies of American culture, the national obsession with intelligence testing. Nor has American distinctiveness in

this domain diminished over time. Quite the contrary. French teenagers today, as generations of French teenagers before them, still worry about the *bac*. But what about their American counterparts? They face a testing obstacle course that has grown ever more complicated over time: beginning with the PSATs and SATs for pre-college students, culminating in the GREs, LSATs, and MCATs for post-graduates. There is an American *Sonderweg* when it comes to intelligence testing, and Carson has rendered a signal service in helping us to understand just why this should be so.

Philip Nord Princeton University pgnord@Princeton.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (September 2007), No. 105

ISSN 1553-9172