

The Search for Educational Utopia: Part 1

The Rhetoric and Reality of Educational Reform In Times of Social Change: France 1789-1804 and South Africa 1985-2000

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2026/n36a8>

Peter Kallaway

School of Education
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch, South Africa
peter.kallaway@uct.ac.za

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2738-7482>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2026/n36a8>

Paris: Constitution of 1791

There shall be erected and organised a public instruction common to all citizens, free with respect to the parts of education indispensable for all men.

J H Stewart, *A documentary survey of the French Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1951): p. 232, cited by Robert M. Stamp, "Educational thought and educational practice during the years of the French Revolution," *History of Education Quarterly*, 6(3). Autumn 1966, pp. 38-39.

The Freedom Charter of 1955

Congress of the People, Kliptown, Johannesburg – June 1955

The Doors of Learning and of Culture Shall Be Opened!

Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children

(online: [google hppt://ANC](http://google.hppt://ANC))

Regimes that arise in the wake of dictatorships and repression ... tend to be highly unstable. Their emergence, the culmination of one period of struggle is usually but the initiation of a new round of political conflict. In this new conflict, a significant part of

*the battle is ideological and centres on how to interpret the process by which the new
“democratic” regime came into being. The way the story gets told sets the terms for the new
round of struggle.*

Arthur MacEwan of “Transitions for authoritarian rule” by GO Donnell, PC Schmitter &
L Whitehead (eds.), *Latin American Perspectives*, 15(3), Summer 1988, pp115-130.

*While it is commonplace to recognise that the (French) Revolution gave birth to a new
kind of political world, it is less often understood that that world was the product of two
irreconcilable interests – the creation of a potent state and the creation of a community of
free citizens. The fiction of the Revolution was to imagine that each might be served without
damaging the other and its history amounts to the realization of that impossibility.*

Simon Schama, *Citizens: A chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A.
Knopf, 1989), p. 15.

*Schools continued “to identify, segregate and socialise the elite of the next generation
with few exceptions they have not created the new person, the visionaries and architects
and carpenters and masons of social transformation nor have they become the
foundation of a new order.*

J Samoff, “Socialist education?”, *Comparative Education Review*, 35(1), Feb 1991, pp. 1-22

Foreword

One morning when I was visiting student teachers at a Belgravia High School in Cape Town in the early 1980s, at the height of the student revolt against apartheid education, I witnessed a remarkable scene. The students had taken over! The headmaster and the teachers were all confined to the staffroom, and the student council was conducting an assembly in the school hall, where they were debating how to proceed. What were they to do? How were they to arrange the curriculum? Who was to ‘teach’ and what were they to teach?

Those issues were to dominate the discourse of ‘People’s Education’ in the years that followed. Looking back, I am struck by the complexity of these issues and the history of education that lies behind such moments, which one can only assume are familiar elsewhere in contested political contexts. This exploration is a modest attempt to address that issue through a comparative exercise in the history of education in times of radical change from authoritarian regimes by comparing events in France during the dramatic years between 1789 and 1804 and the South African liberation years at the end of the twentieth century.

Having lived through a period of romantic idealism regarding the capacity of education to change society in the context of the transition from apartheid to 'democracy' in South Africa since the 1980s, I have recently begun to wonder why, in the context of over two hundred years of educational change since the French Revolution, we seem to remain rather naïve about the limits of education as a mechanism of social change. None of the policy deliberations over education in South Africa from the 1980s to 1990 thought to examine these issues relating to other periods of dramatic and revolutionary change since 1789, or to give serious consideration to comparative historical examples of educational transition in modern states.

The process of preparing this paper has made me acutely aware of the complexities of these issues and helped me to confront many of my own questions about why so little was achieved in relation to the promise of "People's Education" in this particular context where we imagined we had a clean sheet for a radical educational transformation, one that would ensure that everyone would be provided with an education to empower citizens in a democratic order characterised by *liberty, equality, and fraternity*. The difficulty of reconciling individual freedom of thought and actions with nationalist requirements prescribed by the State, or the economic 'needs' of society, is one which remains to confront all would-be reformers. Barnard has noted that "a policy of education based exclusively on the idea of patriotism and utility was bound to destroy the very premise of liberal education – freedom to think without concern for immediate practical results".¹ This caution would seem to apply to both the context being engaged with here.

Recent research has demonstrated that educational transition in France between 1789 and 1804 was characterised by continued *inequalities* of access and provision to quality education despite the dominant rhetoric of equity. "The apparent tension between *progress*, which is understood to require focussing limited resources on an educated elite, and an *egalitarian society* with an ethos of collective social responsibility, remain unresolved."² In South Africa, despite an end to the racial divisions in education, there is little dispute today that the benefits of the change need to be understood in terms of class rather than race. South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies on earth, thirty years after 'the transition to democracy'. The majority of the school-going population is poor, rural and black, and their schooling is, by any measure, of inferior quality to that of their fellow students drawn from the middle class or urban (black or white) contexts.³ Margaret Archer argues that in such contexts it is important to understand "why educational goals change,

¹ H C Barnard, *Education and the French Revolution* (1969), pp. 214-217.

² J Samoff, "Socialist education?" *Comparative Education Review*, 35(1), 1991, pp. 1-22.

³ S van der Berg, "Apartheid's enduring legacy: Inequality in Education", *Journal of African Economics*, 16(5), 2007, pp. 849-880.

who does the changing, and how they impose (*or fail to impose* pk) the changes they profess.”⁴ Was it a utopian dream to imagine that it could be otherwise? Was Tony Morphet correct to assert that “the freedom of blacks in South Africa from white rule was conflated with a classless Utopia”⁵ The desire for utopia has often indicated a dream of an ideal world of harmony and peace, but in the case of Robespierre, Hitler, and Stalin, it heralded the Terror, the Death Camps, and the Gulag, respectively.

I offer this paper in the hope that others will be able to promote further debate on these fundamental issues.

Introduction

The search for the dynamics of revolutions as an aspect of social change has been a key feature of modern historiography. Historians and social scientists of all stripes have been challenged to interpret the meaning of the terms used and the implications of such events for political economy. As far back as 1920, Bury explored *The Idea of Progress* in Western political thought.⁶ Crane Brinton’s *The Anatomy of Revolution*⁷ and Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848*⁸ were milestones in that search. O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead’s work on *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*⁹ in Latin America also highlights the importance of understanding political change and the process of democratisation within the context of national and international political and economic forces during the late twentieth century. I attempt to address this issue, with specific regard to the provision of education, in the context of the French Revolution (1789-1804) and the South African ‘transition to democracy’ (circa 1985 -2000).

Within that literature, the role of education in the broader sweep of social policy has been an issue of fundamental concern to many historians, as the provision of education has been widely regarded as a key marker of political and social well-being and has been a universal feature of the discourse about progress and development in the modern world. Education, in whatever form or however vaguely defined, has almost universally been seen as the key to a democratic order and to social and economic well-being. The sources of that faith, in all their ambiguity, can be traced back to the eighteenth-century enlightenment and

⁴ MS Archer. *The social origins of educational systems* (London: SAGE, 1984), pp. 1-4.

⁵ T Morphet, “Brushing history against the grain”, *Theoria*, 76, 1990, p. 9.

⁶ JB Bury, *The idea of progress: An inquiry into its origins and growth* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1920).

⁷ Crane Brinton’s *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1938/1952).

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

⁹ G O’Donnell, PC Schmitter & L Whitehead (eds.), *Transitions from authoritarian rule* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986). Review by A MacEwan, *Latin American Perspectives*, 58(3), 1988, pp. 115-130.

to the political and economic forces unleashed by the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the forces of nationalism and socialism, the secular-scientific Revolution, and the social-democratic ethos of the politics of the Third World in the post- World War II era. As Hobsbawm notes, throughout the nineteenth century, for those who wanted to transform society, the French Revolution provided “an inspiration, a rhetoric and a standard of comparison”,¹⁰ and the field of education was usually assumed to be a key aspect of those changes.

The social transformation that marked the French Revolution was based on “the idea of progress”.¹¹ It emphasised notions of the perfectibility of human nature without regard for the political and social implications of such changes.¹² “Enlightenment rationalism supposed that conflicts between values were a heritage of miseducation or injustice, and could be swept away by rational reforms, by indoctrinating individuals into believing that their individual interests could be fully realised by working exclusively for the common good.”¹³ The arrival of the millennium depended only on the adoption of the correct set of principles. These included the notion that the new social machinery could alter human nature and create a heaven upon earth. And the role of education was central to that image of progress. The Jacobins in and out of the Convention genuinely cared about education, both in schools and in their clubs. It is, of course, a sad irony to us with hindsight that ‘The Republic of Virtue’ turned out to be ‘the Reign of Terror’ in the fateful years of 1793-1794, with few immediate advances in the field of educational provision.

During the years of the Revolution, there was a lot of talk about education, but relatively little institutional action. Many reports were compiled and some changes were made, however, internal turmoil and external conflict made domestic reform difficult. There were various attempts to formulate and codify educational goals in the policy documents that emerged over the decade. In mapping that process, I draw particularly on the extensive work of Emile Durkheim, HC Barnard, and RR Palmer. In this process, I draw on an extraordinary archive of French educational history and research.

Despite the intense debate among historians over two centuries relating to the merits of the Revolution itself, it is difficult to deny that the early years of the Revolution saw the old

¹⁰ Hobsbawm (1996): 36.

¹¹ RR Palmer, *The improvement of humanity: Education and the French Revolution* (Princeton NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

¹² J Sworowski, “Condorcet’s education: Haunted by the ghost of Rousseau”, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 14(4), 1995, pp. 320-330.

¹³ M Ignatieff, *A life: Isaiah Berlin* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 201-202.

system of education virtually dismantled, but the implementation of a new system had to await the period of comparative peace and security following the overthrow of Robespierre and the advent of Thermidor in 1795.¹⁴ The monumental contribution of Condorcet to the theory and practice of education in France during these times and for the future of educational policy is indicated below. Few of these policy reforms were to survive into the Napoleonic era in France, even if the overall influence of the ideas generated was to remain with us to the present day.

Since the Revolution, the educational debate associated with these events has embraced issues relating to aims, access, form, finances, content (curriculum), pedagogy, and bureaucracy. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance to take cognisance of Archer's cautionary remarks relating to idealised visions of educational change:

*To confront these problems is to recognise that their solution depends upon analysing complex forms of social interaction, for education is rarely if ever, the practical realization of an ideal form of instruction envisaged by a particular group. Instead most of the forms that education takes are the political products of power struggles. ...The overall aim of policy research should therefore be to provide an explanation of how social interaction produces specific kinds of state educational systems in different countries.*¹⁵

A key element in understanding the dynamics of such situations is the ability of the observer/historian to balance structural explanations with the role of individuals in shaping the nature of an educational system within the constraints of current economic, political, and social forces. Despite all the rhetoric about equality and redress that was characteristic of the period, Simon Schama's judgement is that the rural poor gained very little from the Revolution. "It was those sections of the population who had been gaining economically under the old regime that profited most from the sale of noble and church lands", and the increasing industrialisation of France in the context of a war economy meant that "the fat cats got fatter".¹⁶ Such issues need to inform our understanding of the educational history of the period.

Despite numerous studies relating to the disjunction between the rhetoric and the reality of modern educational discourse and systems, there is amongst policy-makers and politicians, a tenacious belief in the merits of education as a panacea for social transformation

¹⁴ M Stamp, "Educational thought and educational practice during the years of the French Revolution", *History of Education Quarterly*, 6(3), 1966, pp. 37-38.

¹⁵ MS Archer, *The social origins ...*, pp. 1-4.

¹⁶ S Schama, *Citizens: A chronicle ...*, pp. 854-855.

even when there is abundant evidence that many of the prescriptions for educational policy as a mechanism of implementing social equity are flawed, in 2026, as they were in the 1790s. There is no place here for a comprehensive exploration of this weighty issue, however, it should be noted that even in the USA, the much-celebrated home of Progressive Education as the mirror of a democratic order, educational reform over two centuries—as Tyack and Cuban term it, *Tinkering towards Utopia*—has been demonstrated to be a weak instrument for bringing about societal change and the advancement of equality.¹⁷

Although the processes of educational transformation under review reflect epochal shifts in the political/ideological landscape, there appears to be a striking similarity between the issues that confronted educators and educational policy-makers over the span of the two centuries between the French Revolution and the South African transition to democracy from 1985 to 2000. In both cases, while the struggle was in progress, a degree of consensus existed amongst those opposed to the old regime regarding the faults of the existing educational system and in the idealistic (utopian) statements regarding the goals of education for the future society. In both cases, the old order was itself engaged in attempts to reform education. However, once the old order was removed and the ground cleared for new policies to be adopted, the consensus evaporated, and conflict ensued about the nature of the new educational order to be established and the relationship of those reforms to what had gone before. As Archer indicates above, there develops an almost inevitable standoff relating to the aims, means, content, finances, etc. of the new educational order.

Hindsight indicates that such standoffs tend to proceed on predictable lines—although these insights were not always obvious to the French revolutionaries or to the South African reformers of a later time. These amounted to conflict between:

- a. those who regarded education or schooling in terms of the responsibility of the state to secure the rights of all individuals to obtain the kind of education best suited to their needs and abilities, without restrictions on what they were to learn or how it was to be taught, drawing on the traditions of reason promoted by the Enlightenment and the secular/scientific traditions, and what later came to be termed Progressive Education. This approach focuses on the importance of individual autonomy in the provision, formulation, and conduct of education. In the early days of the struggle, this conception of education often lacked a vision of education beyond the call for a universal elementary phase in keeping with the ideals of *liberty, equality, and fraternity* (Fr Rev) or ‘People’s Education’ (SA). Here, the goals were self-fulfilment and the development

¹⁷ D Tyack & L Cuban, *Tinkering towards Utopia: A century of public school reforms* (Harvard University Press, 1995);
D Labaree, “What schools can’t do”, *ZPH Journal*, 15, 2009.

of the capacity for independent rational thinking. The major contributor to educational thinking during the revolutionary years, Condorcet, was in favour of a policy which placed education in the hands of a professional body that was independent of state control, the aim being to protect it from control by factions. In South Africa, Rick Turner's radical educational ideas challenged both state education and the workerist ideology.¹⁸

- b. those who defended the right of the people in a democracy to an 'equal education'—the same level and quality of education for everyone—as an intrinsic 'right' and the need to cultivate 'good citizens' who were loyal to the new order/ 'the Nation' with an emphasis on patriotism, nationalism, civic education or vocational education, and saw that education in utilitarian terms of *usefulness* to the State, the cultivation of patriotism, citizenship, nationalism and in terms of economic utility. Young citizens were to be *moulded/ indoctrinated* into the values of the new order and shaped as 'useful' citizens and workers.

How are we to balance the calls for the education of 'critical democratic citizens' for the forging of patriotic citizens or skilled workers? What—if anything—have the examples of the French Revolution and the South African transition demonstrated about the significance of education for the process of social change and the building of democracy over the two centuries since 1789?

A 'comparison' of this kind is, of course, a very risky undertaking for a historian, as the nature of the events and the context in which they took place are hardly directly comparable. Yet there is a striking similarity between the *issues* confronted by educational thinkers and policymakers in both contexts. Ultimately, the question posed relates to the nature and status of claims relating to desirable educational policy when considered as an oppositional discourse (a critique of the former educational order) and a policy discourse that takes account of the necessary trade-offs in the political, social, and economic circumstances in which the new policies are to be introduced. These issues are the main focus of this paper.

The narrowing of the policy agenda

By the time of the establishment of the Napoleonic Empire in 1804, the call for education reform came to be defined by the demands of an emergent modern nationalist state. Instead of confirming the educational ideals of revolution—*liberty, equality, and fraternity*—as expounded by Condorcet and the *Philosophes*, the transformation of educational policy was

¹⁸ Both Condorcet and Turner were victims of the revolutionary strife.

marked by the promotion of nationalism, the return to private education, which secured educational advancement for the new middle class, utilitarian demands of the economy, as well as vocational and military training. An uneasy balance between the democratic rhetoric of revolutionary education and the messy realities of politics in the new Empire led to the decline of the Central Schools, which had represented the major initiative for educational reform since Thermidor. There was, as a result, a narrowing of the agenda for educational reform from the sometimes utopian ideas for universal education expounded by Condorcet in 1792,¹⁹ to a more limited vision of a controlled system which emphasised the creation of a new elite in the context of a modern nation state. This elite would equip the army, the bureaucracy, and the economy for a new era of social and economic growth in the context of the Napoleonic Empire.

In the South African case, Aslam Fataar and Linda Chisholm²⁰ also identify what they call the “narrowing of the agenda of education policy” during the period of transition. The wide-ranging call for the democratisation of education associated with the opposition to apartheid education, and People’s Education, came to be blunted once the new government came to power and redefined its policy agenda in terms of globally defined neo-liberal policies and agendas. Debates on education policy came to be defined not by post-War social democratic traditions, public democratic debate or professional participation, or by educational traditions which had characterised the struggle against apartheid education, but by top-down policies determined by globally-defined goals for economic growth such as qualifications frameworks, skills targets and market goals framed in consultation with international advisers who were influenced by World Bank and International Monetary Fund macro-economic policies.

Ultimately, I seek to pose the question about the relevance of such an enquiry. Is it possible to learn ‘lessons’ about educational thinking and policy formulation through a comparative examination of the rhetoric and reality of educational policy in highly contested zones of political conflict? In essence, I seek to unpack the rhetoric of education as espoused by those who challenged the old order at the end of the eighteenth century or in the 1990s, and how it is translated (or fails to be translated) into practice in real, lived historical/social/political contexts of change? Or, to put it another way, what is it that

¹⁹ The term Utopia has usually been associated with the work of Thomas More (1516). Also see Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: RKP, 1966).

²⁰ A Fataar, Education policy development in South Africa’s democratic transition, 1994-1997 (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2010); L Chisholm, & B Fuller, “Remember people’s education? Shifting alliances, state-building and South Africa’s narrowing policy agenda”, *Journal of Education Policy*, 11(6), 1996, pp. 693-716.

happens to the educational principles of the new movement once it comes to power? Why does a failure to implement the educational principle espoused in the revolutionary phase seem to be inevitable? How should educationalists balance utopian imaginings with the realpolitik?

Popular education and the French Revolution

From the convening of the Constituent Assembly in Paris in June 1789 until the establishment of the Consulate at the end of 1799, there was a lively debate about education in France, though it was often submerged under the welter of other pressing political, social, military, and economic issues to hand.

In Durkheim's words: "the Revolution proclaimed theoretical principles far more than it created realities".²¹ Five years after the start of the French Revolution in 1789, the first Central Schools were established, and a secular state education sector came into being in keeping with the political context of the Thermidor settlement.

In 1792, the Convention committed itself to creating "a system of public instruction, common for all citizens, and for those subjects of knowledge that are indispensable for all men (sic)".²² The principal goal of this initiative was to replace the church-controlled philanthropic educational system, which had been a feature of the *ancien régime* since the Middle Ages, with a secular, state-controlled system which promoted the goals of the new 'democratic' political order.

The key issues for educational thinkers were how to deal with the feudal and ecclesiastical legacy of the past and how to transform the influences of the Enlightenment radical philosophical proposals of La Chalotais (1763), Rolland (1768), Diderot (1769), Turgot (1775), Voltaire, Rousseau, and the *Encyclopaedists*, into public policy. In one way or another they all addressed the complex, interrelated issues to do with the framing of practical policy proposals, including how to plan and organise the new state system, what kinds of access to provide to whom and at what level, how to transform the classic curriculum to one defined by the National Assembly in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (August 1789), and how promote the role of science in education, how to fund the ambitious changes proposed, how to allow for popular participation in plans for change, where to find the teachers to implement all these ambitious innovations and so on!

²¹ E Durkheim, *The evolution of educational thought* (London: RKP, 1969), p. 305.

²² RR Palmer, *The improvement of humanity...*, p. 81.

It is difficult today to recapture the ‘policy world’ that the revolutionaries attempted to negotiate. It is, however, significant to note that even Rousseau and Voltaire were not in favour of mass education, as they saw little use for it. In general, the grand philosophical debates of the eighteenth century regarding the nature of education had little direct impact on the schools. Many of the changes merely “confirmed the poor in their pre-ordained status”.²³

During the early days of the Republican Revolution, Mirabeau and Talleyrand contributed to the debate over how to proceed with education. They were followed by a variety of other contributors to these debates during the tumultuous years of the Revolution, including those by Condorcet, Romme, Sieyès, Daunou, Lakanal, Lepelletier, Robespierre, Lanthenas, Bouquier, Roger, Marti, and Fourcroy. These are all summarised by Barnard and Palmer and a host of other historians.²⁴

The old system of education prior to 1789 comprised an extensive system of institutions with three ‘degrees of instruction’ which included the *petites écoles* (primary), *collèges* (secondary) and the *Université* (higher). It was the quality and the subject matter of education, rather than the degree of provision, that came under criticism. As Stamp and Palmer demonstrate, there were far more children at school in 1789 than there were in 1799, however, during those years “an entirely new direction had been given to the school system”.²⁵ Durkheim notes that, “from the beginning (the reformers) proclaimed the necessity of wiping the slate clean, of abolishing (the old system) completely, and starting out from basics to build an entirely new system which would accord with the needs of the time”.²⁶

Talleyrand presented an extensive *Report on Public Instruction* to the Constituent Assembly.²⁷ This provided the platform for the establishment of a Committee of Public Instruction and was followed by Condorcet’s impressive report on a national plan for education in 1792.

Bernard Condorcet (1743-94) was the leading rationalist and educational thinker of the

²³ F de la Fontainerie, *French liberalism and education in the Eighteenth Century: The writings of La Chalotais, Turgot, Diderot and Condorcet on national education* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1932), pp. 16, 38-9; H Chisick, *The limits of reform in the enlightenment: Attitudes towards the education of the lower classes in Eighteenth Century France* (Princeton: 1981); HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 56.

²⁴ HC Barnard, *Education...*; RRPalmer, *The improvement of humanity...*

²⁵ M Stamp, “Education thought and educational practice...”, *History of Education Quarterly*, 1966, p. 47.

²⁶ E Durkheim, 1969, p. 294.

²⁷ HC Barnard, *Education...*, pp. 68-79; RRPalmer, *The improvement of humanity...*, pp. 94-101.

French Revolutionary period.²⁸ He attempted to shape new proposals for education which were to have a remarkable influence on educational thinking throughout the nineteenth century. Condorcet was converted, by the taking of the Bastille, from the belief in limited suffrage to one of democracy, though with strong safeguards for individuals and minorities, including rights for Protestants, Jews and women.²⁹ As a key member of the Committee of Public Instruction in the National Assembly, he drafted proposals for educational reform, but was caught in the crossfire between the Girondins and the Mountains during the stormy years of 1792-1793.

Although Condorcet was to be a victim of the Terror, he is considered by many to have been the most significant educationalist of the Revolutionary period. He has often been regarded as a “major Revolutionary formulator of the idea of progress or the indefinite perfectibility of humankind”.³⁰ David Williams, Condorcet’s most recent biographer, sees him as the last of the *philosophes* and “belonging to a new breed of social planners and political scientists, of policy – makers conscious of the potential power of political arithmetic as an instrument of efficient and enlightened governmental administration and rational forward planning, and for whom the sole purpose of the pact of association was the advancement of public happiness”. To this end, Williams argued that “nations which are truly free are governed by reason alone” and addresses these issues in his report where he argued that a national system of public education would provide the lifeblood for the new nation and the basis for his view of “human perfectibility”.³¹

Condorcet was an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution and was elected to represent the City of Paris in the National Assembly. He was also a member of the Committee of Public Instruction. His famous *Report on the General Organisation of Public Education* was placed before the National Assembly on 20-21 April 1792.³² In this report, many of Condorcet’s main proposals come together, reflecting the ambitions of eighteenth-century romanticism. These included the utopian notion that “universal education, science,

²⁸ S Schama, *Citizens: A chronicle...*, 291; D Williams, *Condorcet and Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁹ It is also important to note that he was unique among the Encyclopaedists in condemning slavery, thus demonstrating his commitment to the universal definition of human rights, and not confining his concerns to French or European citizens.

³⁰ On Condorcet also see: B Jolibert, “Condorcet 1743-94”, *Prospects*, 23, 1993, pp. 197-209; F De la Fontainerie, *French liberalism and education...*; D Williams, *Condorcet and modernity*.

³¹ D Williams, *Condorcet and modernity*, p. 277-280.

³² N de Condorcet, *Rapport et projet de décret sur l’organisation générale de l’instruction publique en France pendant la Révolution* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1792[1989]); see F de la Fontainerie, *French liberalism and education...*, pp. 323-378; H.C. Barnard, *Education*, pp. 80-96.

enlightenment, moral renewal, freedom, equality and happiness, interlock”. Once universal education of ‘the whole mass of the people’ had been achieved, enabling men to govern themselves “by their own enlightenment, natural inequalities between individuals would be compensated by a revolution in social arrangements in which knowledge would no longer be a divisive prerogative of the few, facilitating the oppression of the many”.³³

As Bury has demonstrated, Condorcet’s views, which reflected the *Encyclopaedist* tradition, were based on the idea of human progress, which assumed the movement of human science towards truth and happiness and that a new social machinery could alter human nature—an ideal that was swiftly and terribly refuted during the last decade of the eighteenth century in France. According to Bury, the revolutionaries imagined that they could break with the past and that the new methods of government constructed along mathematical lines, in the form of the new constitution, would herald the arrival of the millennium. Such a utopian approach ignored the historical legacy, social tradition and economic interests which Archer points to above.

During the Revolution, new educational ideas, which were ahead in time of the ideas of the eighteenth-century *philosophes* were considered, and sometimes adopted, and although few of these policies were to survive the *Consulate*, they left an important legacy which would influence education in later periods. In retrospect, the Jacobean dictatorship has been judged to be “at once necessary, flawed, creative, successful and disastrous”.³⁴ As Durkheim noted, “never has there been such a striking discordance between the concerns of public opinion, its hopes and tendencies, and the state of education”.³⁵ However, Brinton pointed out that, though “universal education”, as visualised by Condorcet, had not lived up to its paper promises by 1799, by this stage, the youth of France inhabited a very different educational environment to that of 1789, and the work of Condorcet was a major contribution to that transformation.

Condorcet’s report to the National Assembly had a remarkably modern tone, one that could almost reflect classic UNESCO policy.

To afford all members of the human race the means of providing for their needs, of securing their welfare, of recognising and exercising their rights, of understanding and fulfilling their duties; to assure for everyone opportunities for perfecting their skill and rendering themselves capable of the social duties to which they have a right to be called; to develop to the utmost

³³ D Williams, *Condorcet and modernity*, pp. 284, citing Condorcet.

³⁴ see Google post on RR Palmer by Isser Woloch.

³⁵ E Durkheim (1969), p. 293.

*the talents with which nature has endowed them and, in doing so, to establish among all citizens a true equality and thus make real the political equality realized by the law – this should be the primary aim of a national system of education, and from this point of view its establishment is for the public authority an obligation of justice.*³⁶

The idea contained in the report, that education was free of charge, compulsory, non-religious, and universal, was not to become a reality in France until a century later.

Condorcet argued that public authority cannot establish a body of doctrine which is to be exclusively taught in schools. In his view, no public power ought to have authority to prevent the quest for new truths or the teaching of theories contrary to a particular policy or to its temporary interests. This system of education was equal for all citizens, irrespective of creed or origin, and for both sexes. Women should have an education identical to that of men. Such an education should be free of any dogma or religious or political persuasion and must be secular. Condorcet emphasised scientific and mathematical subjects and especially the applied sciences. “His most important innovation was the independence of education from Government and he thought that the whole system should be controlled and administered by educationalists and scientists organised in a *Société Nationale* based on free elections.” He also proclaimed religious toleration and allowed for independent schools; he opposed the use of schools as a means of spreading nationalist propaganda. For Condorcet the Rights of Man were “to be explained and to be based on reason and not taught as dogma”.³⁷

According to Barnard, only Condorcet, among the revolutionary educators of note, asserted that education should be a means of training and not merely imparting information, encouraging nationalism or preparing students for vocational roles. In effect, “patriotic incantations and the comforting companionship of the crowd” replaced education in Robespierre’s *Cult of the Supreme Being* during the Terror.³⁸ As Condorcet had warned, this meant that schools no longer served to educate but to indoctrinate, betraying their primary function, which was to impart basic knowledge (*and encourage critical thinking: PK*), enabling all to pursue their own education”.³⁹

³⁶ N de Condorcet, *Rapport et projet de decret...*, pp. 105-52, F de la Fontainerie, *French liberalism and education...*, p. 323. It might be important to trace the development of these themes in relation to initiatives like EDUCATION FOR ALL. See SP Heynemann, “The failure of Education for All as political strategy”, *Prospects*, 39, 2009, pp. 5-10.

³⁷ N Hans, *Comparative education* (London: RKP, 1958), 188-189.

³⁸ S. Sharma, *Citizens: a chronicle of the French Revolution* (Madison: State Historical Society, 1965), pp. 822-847.

³⁹ HC Barnard, *Education...*, pp. 213-214.

Condorcet argued that his plan provided the prerequisites for the intellectual, and especially the moral progress of humankind as a whole. In that context, no public body should have authority to prevent the teaching of theories contrary to its own political views.⁴⁰ As Robert Ulich has pointed out: “A policy of education based exclusively on the idea of patriotism and utility was bound to destroy the very premise of liberal education – freedom to think without concern for immediate practical results.”⁴¹ It is to the credit of Condorcet that he understood this issue, even if he failed to understand that the advance of human science towards truth and happiness cannot ignore the role of institutions and history in social development. The assumption that the new social machinery could alter human nature and create a utopia was swiftly and terribly refuted by events of the Revolution. Condorcet himself was a victim on that chaotic state of affairs.

His recommendations proved to be a dead letter as the Convention replaced the Assembly soon after his plans were presented in April 1792, however, they were to be revived, and at least partially implemented, after Thermidor during the time of the Directory (Oct 1794 – Nov 1799), which saw the beginning of a more stable regime characterised by “the recapture of political control by middle class notables”⁴² who were intent on avoiding the excesses of the previous few years.

During the time of the Jacobin dictatorship, a statist view came to dominate the educational policy debate. This emphasised a programme of radical education where children would be conditioned according to the prescribed pattern of revolutionary politics. This development was seen in its most acute form in Lepelletier and Saint Just's scheme of 1793, aimed at conditioning children in compulsory state boarding schools where they would be removed from the influence of parents, families, and communities, and live in Spartan conditions from five to twelve years of age. They would all be treated the same and no concessions made for ability, physique or dispositions. Although these recommendations were read to the Convention by Robespierre at the height of the Terror in July 1793, they were essentially a dead letter.⁴³

These issues marked a test of the radical turn in educational politics. The contradictions embraced by these trends have provided a recurring theme in transition education discourse ever since. The policies framed by Condorcet were partially trialled in the Central Schools during the time of the Directory (1795-1799), but were never taken up systematically in

⁴⁰ HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 212.

⁴¹ R Ulich, *The education of nations* (New York: CUP, 1961), p. 151.

⁴² A. Goodwin, *The French Revolution* (London: Arrow, 1959, p. 181.

⁴³ HC Barnard, *Education...*, pp. 118-223.

post-Revolutionary France. They were, however, to remain central to educational policy debates in France and elsewhere throughout the nineteenth century.

Without any blueprint for a 'modern' system of education that matched the calls for liberty, equality, and fraternity, there were heated debates about how to proceed and what role to allocate to the Central Schools, which emerged as one key aspect of the Thermidorian convalescence in 1795.

At the end of 1794, new plans by Lakanal, Daunou, and Sieyes were put forward by the Committee of Public Instruction, which incorporated some of Condorcet's earlier recommendations. In the *Law of the Third Brumaire* (1795), France possessed (on paper at least) a complete system of public instruction. Founded on the authority of the state rather than that of the Church, guided by reason and analysis rather than by religious considerations, it was a radical departure from the education of 1789.⁴⁴ A key element of these revised plans was the establishment of new schools to replace the clerical control of *middle schools* with *écoles centrales*. They represented the shift of politics towards the more moderate middle-class control of the Thermidor regime.

The Central Schools / *écoles centrales*

The *écoles centrales* represented one of the main educational innovations of the Revolution between 1795 and 1802. They were based on Condorcet's earlier proposals. Looking back, scholars have often remarked that Central Schools heralded a new ethos for education in France.⁴⁵

After the promulgation of the Law of 3 Brumaire An. IV (5 October 1795), the Central Schools were opened. They were controversial in their own time and have been subject to a great deal of subsequent debate. The Central Schools were first mooted as part of the Lakanal Law in December 1794⁴⁶ and passed by the National Convention on the last day of its existence on 25 October 1795 in the form of Daunou's Law, "the only piece of legislation enacted during the French Revolution that applied to all levels of education".⁴⁷ As noted above, this legislation reflected the strong influence of Condorcet's thinking⁴⁸

⁴⁴ M Stamp, "Education thought and educational practice ...", *History of Education Quarterly*, 1966, p. 44.

⁴⁵ C. Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution: 1789-1799* (Westport, Conn. 1934[1983]), 278.

⁴⁶ Lakanal was the acting president of the Committee of Public Instruction

⁴⁷ RR Palmer, *The improvement of humanity ...*, p. 230.

⁴⁸ HC Barnard, *Education ...*, p. 174.

The title of *Central Schools* was to be given to Lakanak's schools because each would be the centre of a group of contributory primary schools and thus, theoretically accessible to those qualified to attend them.⁴⁹ The old *Colleges* came under state control and were replaced by Central Schools. They were to be established in each *department*, with an *Ecole normal* in Paris. The plan provided for local government to take up the role of educational provision.

Although the plan was aimed at universal education, it paid little attention to primary schools despite the chaotic state of affairs in that sector since 1789. There was no specific provision for secondary schools to bridge the gap between primary education and the Central Schools. One Central School was to be provided for every 300,000 inhabitants, catering for students aged between 12 and 16 years, though the students appear to have been much older, many of them 'auditors' rather than full-time students, in accordance with Condorcet's emphasis on the importance of adult education.

The new scheme assumed that most pupils would go to primary schools and this would prepare them for work in agriculture or industry, however, the Central Schools were designed for a select group who, in Condorcet's words, "have been excepted by nature from the ordinary class and should find a sphere in which their talents can be given scope".⁵⁰

The candidates from primary schools were selected by local committees, but there does not seem to have been any systematic attention to grading and selection.⁵¹ Primary school students who are 'most distinguished' would be granted by popular vote and at the *fete de jeunesse* (youth festival) an annual bursary which would enable them to take a place at the Central School. The overall outcome was that the schools served the middle class rather than the upper class or the poor, which was in keeping with the general political tone of the era of the Directorate. By 1799, there were approximately 20,000 course enrolments, with probably 12,000 students (compared with 50,000 students of the pre-revolutionary colleges, and 30,000 in the Napoleonic *lycées* of 1810).⁵² There is repeated reference in the literature to poor attendance.

A key aspect of the reform was that *classes*, organised by age and relating to previous study, were replaced by *courses* which focussed on subject matter to be taught, in keeping with Condorcet recommendations. There was no restriction on admission to *courses* either

⁴⁹ HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 170.

⁵⁰ HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 170.

⁵¹ HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 172.

⁵² RR Palmer, *The improvement of humanity...*, pp. 223-247.

in terms of student background and previous study, or in terms of age. There was no system for course selection or requirements for attendance. Each course was isolated and lacking in linkages to others. There was no systematic process of progression. Palmer has provided a statistical survey of these schools.⁵³

An *école centrale* would enrol students from age twelve upwards and would provide a combination of high school and college training with the emphasis on arts and science. Their curriculum was to give full attention to the physical and social sciences as well as the older philosophic and rhetorical subjects. There was an emphasis on the “moral education in order to promote the young republican conscience in the practice of good public and private virtues”.⁵⁴ Other key subjects were mathematics; experimental physics and chemistry; natural history; scientific method and psychology; political economy and legislation; the philosophic history of peoples; hygiene; arts and crafts; general grammar; *belles lettres* (fine letters); ancient languages; modern languages most appropriate to the locality of the school; legislation.⁵⁵ *General grammar* seems to have been the equivalent of what we would today term civic education. It was, according to Palmer, the subject much favoured by the *idéologues* (ideologists), and was intended to replace the *philosophy* of the old curriculum. Science and Mathematics were seen as central to the new curriculum, however, the evidence indicates that the classes were not well subscribed. The most popular subject was *Drawing*, which offered a training in design and elementary engineering as well and the arts. It seems to have been perceived as the subject with most practical value in relation to future employment.⁵⁶ Yet there was little uniformity in what was taught and it seemed the *professors* were in large part, left to their own devices. Each school was to establish a public library, a botanical garden, a laboratory of experimental physics and a technical museum. It was intended that each *école centrale* play an important part in the life of the community”.⁵⁷

The supply of teachers is identified by Barnard as a critical area. He noted reports that “people of ability have almost all perished and we have fallen into a state of dreadful barbarism.”⁵⁸ There does not seem to have been any significant infusion of new personnel. Each of the Central Schools had one *professor* for each subject /field. Salaries were to be

⁵³ RR Palmer, *The improvement of humanity ...*, pp. 223-247.

⁵⁴ M Stamp, “Education thought and educational practice ...”, *History of Education Quarterly*, 1966, p. 44.

⁵⁵ HC Barnard, *Education ...*, p. 171

⁵⁶ HC Barnard, *Education ...*, p. 171.

⁵⁷ M Stamp, “Education thought and educational practice ...”, *History of Education Quarterly*, 1966, pp 43-44.

⁵⁸ HC Barnard, *Education ...*, p. 171.

uniform throughout the country—1200 livres for masters and 1000 livres for mistresses. The teachers were appointed and supervised by a ‘*jury central d’instruction*’ nominated by the Committee of Public Instruction, which was responsible for seeing that the instructions were carried out. “The school itself will be run by a committee of teachers, meeting every *decade*, and its finances will be the concern of the departmental administration.”⁵⁹

New textbooks were to be “composed and published by order of the Convention”, but little is said of this in the literature I have been able to access. Given the chaotic state of thinking about education, it is difficult to believe that adequate provision could have been made for the extremely ambitious goals articulated in curriculum statements, such as they were. What evidence there is seems to indicate that individual teachers just made it up as they went along and that there were, therefore, wide discrepancies between different schools depending on the availability of talented and motivated teachers.⁶⁰ School inspections were formally required, however, there does not seem to have been much capacity to implement this.

The Roger-Martin’s proposals of 1797 pointed to the weakness of Central Schools and proposed reforms in relation to bridging the gap between primary schools and Central Schools.⁶¹ By this time, there were only 42 such schools. “It can be safely said that, with the exception of the three Parisian schools and those of a few provincial towns, the *écoles centrales* were only a limited success.”⁶² As Durkheim notes, “unfortunately, all the fruitful ideas which were contained in revolutionary educational theory were tainted by the way they were put into practice by grave organisational flaws. The higher education which the Central Schools gave the children from the moment they entered presupposed that they had already received a preliminary training of considerable breadth.”⁶³ This precondition had not been met.

Napoleon’s *coup d’état* in November 1799, and the subsequent establishment of the Empire in 1804, meant that the experiment came to an end with the establishment of a centralised bureaucracy and centralised education system tailored to entrenching a national ethos and promoting national loyalty and good citizenship. The new Fourcroy’s Law (30 April 1802) was passed by the *Corps Legislatif* by 251 to 27 votes. It meant the ‘suppression’ of the Central Schools. This may be regarded as the last act in the educational history of the Revolution.

⁵⁹ HC Barnard, *Education ...*, pp. 171-173.

⁶⁰ HC Barnard, *Education ...*, p. 167.

⁶¹ HC Barnard, *Education ...*, p. 195.

⁶² HC Barnard, *Education ...*, p. 188.

⁶³ E Durkheim (1969), p. 305.

The new policy was a compromise between the fundamental reforms for a complete democratic state system, which earlier revolutionary educationalists had put forward, and the reaction to a despotic system, which did eventually, in the Napoleonic 'University', present an organised and highly centralised system of public instruction.⁶⁴ From this time, the rhetoric relating to the need for state primary education remained—but in reality, that was largely left to private initiative while elaborate arrangements were made for technical and professional education in keeping with the 'economic needs' of the emergent modern state and the war economy. *Lycées* were established for secondary education, and private benefactors were encouraged in the light of previous chaos. Independent schools were allowed, and many students or parents who could afford the fees opted for these.⁶⁵ As a result of Napoleon's Concordat with the Papacy, there was a revival of Roman Catholic Church schools.

After Napoleon's *coup d'état* and the establishment of the Consulate in November 1799, a stable system was re-established, but at the cost of sacrificing many of the educational innovations of the Revolution. These reforms were increasingly tilted toward a centralisation model which stressed conformity and efficiency, a pattern that may be seen, not only in education, but also in other matters affecting the Revolution, such as law, taxation, civil administration, and the army. Centralisation of control, though often warned against, always prevailed because it followed from the demand for 'unity and uniformity' to be achieved not at the lowest common denominator of education for all but as a means of high-level standardisation and ostensibly for equity between the regions of France. The essential educational reforms of the Revolutionary period did not survive the advent of the Napoleon era. From this time, central government control was reasserted through a Director of Public Instruction under the Ministry of the Interior.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 209.

⁶⁵ HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 181.

⁶⁶ RR Palmer, *The improvement of humanity...*, pp. 331; JD Markham, *The revolution, Napoleon, and education* (Napoleon Series Archive [online] (1959), p. 100.

Summary

In a world prior to a formal understanding of the nature and dynamics of mass state educational policy and practice, now difficult to imagine, how did the French politicians and ‘educationalists’ engage with the challenges of reconstructing French education in the context of the social chaos of the last decade of the eighteenth century?

The most immediate achievement of the French Revolution was the destruction of the feudal basis of the *ancien regime* (old regime), and a paving of the way for the development of new social and economic relations. This allowed space for a debate about the practical formulation of policies based on the educational initiatives indicated by the Enlightenment philosophers. My immediate concern, following Andy Green, is to “consider not only the Revolution’s immediate outcome and the arrangements it ushered in with (regard to education) from 1789 to the period of Napoleonic rule, but also the revolutionary process itself and what the various assemblies hoped but ultimately failed to accomplish”.⁶⁷

Durkheim notes that the “effects of the revolutionary effervescence was immensely productive of brand new ideas (for education)”, however, “the Revolution did not know how to create organs which could give these ideas life, institutions in which they could be embodied”.⁶⁸ “The Revolution’s real tasks ... were to erect a state apparatus and legal system (and a system of education pk) appropriate to a rising bourgeois social and economic order”,⁶⁹ but in reality the path to a new order was seldom clear to those involved in the day-to-day management of the chaotic events of the period from 1789-1804. As Barnard notes, at the centre of their task lay “the difficulty of reconciling individual freedom of thought and actions with nationalist requirements prescribed by the State”, an issue which remains to challenge modern states.⁷⁰

While the Revolution entailed the destruction of the system of education of the *ancien regime*, it did not succeed in setting up a new system of education on the ruins of the old. In broad terms, there was a strong belief that education was fundamental to the transformation of society, in keeping with the views of Rousseau and Enlightenment philosophers that man was naturally good and had been corrupted by society. What was needed was to ‘implement deliberately’ the elements of the good society in the next generation. Education was

⁶⁷ A Green, *Education and state formation: Europe, East Asia and the USA* (London: McMillan, 1990), p. 140.

⁶⁸ E Durkheim (1969): 294.

⁶⁹ WH Sewell, “The rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution”, G Kates (ed.) *The French Revolution: Recent debates and new controversies* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 153.

⁷⁰ HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 214.

expected to produce that general transformation of society.⁷¹ There were, therefore, many plans for educational reform between 1789 and 1804.

Adamson summed up the results:

In the field of concrete achievement, the innovators failed badly, but in that of abstract principle their discussion gave currency to certain doctrines which from that date onwards formed integral parts of French liberalism – laicisation, free public instruction, compulsory schooling without respect to gender and a curriculum informed by scientific principles.⁷² These issues continue to be the concern of educational theory and practice to the present day.

Condorcet proclaimed a utopian ideal for education. He supported independent schools; opposed the use of schools as a means of spreading religious or nationalist propaganda; and argued that the 'Rights of Man' were to be explained and promoted, and to be based on reason and not taught as dogma. However, the view that the schools should be instruments of propaganda for the nationalist state came to dominate as the Revolution developed and was seen in the most acute form in Lepelletier's scheme for conditioning children in state boarding schools.

As Barnard explained:

When the old order of things was swept away and the supremacy of the Church and royalty alike were overthrown, the school became an important instrument for inculcating and explaining not the old religion but new political doctrines. So among the things that the Revolution did was to bring to the fore the idea that the main purpose of the school was to serve the state and educate the youth in the virtues of nationalism, and that is the idea which has tended to develop and expand in Europe and elsewhere ever since.⁷³

Yet "a policy of education based exclusively on the idea of patriotism and utility was bound to destroy the very premiss of liberal education that had lain at the heart of Condorcet's project – freedom to think without concern for immediate practical results." It had significant implications for the organisation and financing of schools, for teachers, teaching, pedagogy and curriculum, both then and now.⁷⁴

During the time of the Constituent Assembly (1791-1792) and the National Convention (1792-1793), when a committee of Public Instruction was established,

⁷¹ RR Palmer, *The improvement of humanity...*, pp. 4-7; Silver (1965): 149.

⁷² A Adamson, *A short history of education* (Cambridge: CUP, 1919), p. 239, cited by HC Barnard, *Education...*, pp. 211-212.

⁷³ HC Barnard, *Education...*, pp. 214-216.

⁷⁴ HC Barnard, *Education...*, p. 216.

there were lively debates around education. Thereafter, during the stormy period of the Terror (1793-1794), there was little sustained attention to these issues. Under the Directory (1795-1799), and in the context of Napoleon's rise to power, the first elements of a new policy emerged that were to significantly influence the future of educational thinking and of policy in the years to come and place severe restrictions on notions of democratic education. As Sharma has pointed out, insufficient attention has been given to the irreconcilable interests at play in this context—the creation of a potent state and the creation of a community of free citizens. One key element of the Revolution was the drive towards democracy in the sense of equality, which was blocked and superseded by other concerns of the Enlightenment, notably the belief in progress and a desire for efficiency, for the training of qualified experts, and for the process of modernisation. All these trends were present throughout and remained so in later times; they simply varied in strength at any given moment.⁷⁵

The balance between the utopian goals for education and the context in which the reforms take place remains a challenge to the present day, both in France and globally. In the modern global context, Joel Samoff notes that there has been a failure to institutionalise democratic practice in schools. Put crudely, in transition societies, the reproductive charter of the schools has overwhelmed its role in establishing and nurturing democratic practice. The schools, the society, and the transition have all suffered.⁷⁶ To what extent is it possible to trace the roots of these issues to the events considered above? What are the implications of this reading of the events of the French Revolutionary period for an understanding of the trajectory of global educational policy in the two centuries that followed, and more specifically in relation to the South African transition to democracy at the end of the twentieth century?

⁷⁵ RR Palmer, *The improvement of humanity...*, p. 331.

⁷⁶ J Samoff, "Socialist education?" *Comparative Education Review*, 1991, p. 1.