

# Introduction

## Politics: a revolutionary idea and a practical problem

*Quel serait le meilleur plan d'éducation pour le peuple?*

Académie des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres de Châlons-sur-Marne, 1777<sup>1</sup>

When the Académie des Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres in Châlons-sur-Marne announced the topic for its 1779 essay contest – the seemingly straightforward “What is the best plan of education for the people?” – it raised issues that extended well beyond matters of curriculum, institutional organization, and pedagogy. After all, which people? And by whom should they be educated? What sorts of knowledge and skills was it important – or desirable – for these people to have? For what purpose were they to be educated, and for what sort of future were they being prepared by this education? To invite plans for the education of the people was to raise all of these questions and more and, in so doing, to invite debate and dispute over the nature and foundations of French society, culture, and politics.

Writing fourteen years after the contest in Châlons-sur-Marne was announced, the author of a 1791 pamphlet entitled *Appel à l'opinion publique sur l'éducation nationale* offers us insight into what had become of such questions in the French Revolution, declaring that “for every individual living under a representative government ... the art [of reading and writing] should be considered the fundamental source of his moral existence, and so truly indispensable.”<sup>2</sup> Enshrined in the constitution of 1791 as a right of the citizen and an obligation of the state, education had been recognized as indispensable to the legitimacy and sustainability of

representative government. But it remained the subject of intense debate and disagreement. If anything, the debates had become more contentious as the limits and strains of participatory politics were revealed and as the pursuit of pedagogical and political futures complicated one another. Attempts to redesign the institutions of political administration, to imagine new forms of civic life, and to “regenerate” French society had practically forced the academicians’ inquiry onto the revolutionaries’ agenda.

The early years of the Revolution witnessed a series of amazingly ambitious efforts to reform and reinvent the nation’s political institutions, cultural politics, and social order. These efforts took shape in summer 1789 as the Estates-General gave way to the National Assembly and as the deputies clarified the project before them: to draft and ratify a constitution for France, one that would establish a system of representative government legitimized by the consent and participation of the nation. This was as much a social and cultural undertaking as it was an exercise in constitutional or institutional design, and so the deputies found themselves trying to simultaneously establish a new political order, invent a new model of national citizenship, and engender new modes of political association.<sup>3</sup> For their efforts to succeed, it seemed that French citizens had to possess particular skills and habits, embrace new forms of civic sociability, and develop new ways of thinking about themselves and their place in the national community. The revolutionary project relied, at least in part, on a system of “public instruction.”

Deputies, political commentators, and private citizens alike recognized that reinventing French politics and transforming French society would require rethinking the principles and practices of education. The Assembly embraced this idea in July 1789, when its constitutional committee listed the organization of “national and public instruction” among its priorities, and again when it included the promise of “public instruction” in the constitution of 1791. This promise reflected what had become a near-consensus view: that education represented a uniquely powerful instrument of social and political change and that meaningful social and political changes were unlikely to take root if they were not accompanied by changes in how people were educated. But recognizing the need for educational reform was a far cry from knowing how to reform education, and the emergence of revolutionary politics reignited a decades-old debate over the role of schools in shaping French society and France’s future.

The revolutionary debates over education were remarkable, as deputies and citizens across France came to see the schools as microcosms of

the new social and political regime. Schools became a canvas onto which people could project hopes for, and anxieties about, the Revolution, and the reform of education served as a conceptual bridge across the now-and-then of revolution, an institutional representation of how the tumultuous revolutionary present might give way to a stable post-revolutionary future. Because of this, the debates over education attracted participants from a wide range of political, social, and ideological camps, including future regicides and radicals, royalists and émigrés, the devout and the anti-clerical, the young and the old, the learned and the almost illiterate. To each of these groups, the schools – existing or anticipated – offered an opportunity to indict or defend the Ancien Régime, to express views of the Revolution unfolding around them, and to imagine futures that resembled neither past nor present. This can make the revolutionary debates over education seem like exercises in political fantasy rather than attempts to solve institutional and social problems, and in some cases this is probably right. It has also allowed historians to find the “origins” of a great many political and pedagogical traditions in the Revolution, to see 1789 (or 1792) as a launching pad for the competing ambitions associated with political “modernity.” Most plausibly, the debates of these years have been described as having established an initially unfulfilled promise of “modern” education as national, secular, democratic, and (at least in principle) universal.<sup>4</sup>

To those who participated in the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary debates, however, each of these apparently paradigmatic attributes was a source of uncertainty – and often ambivalence – and it was not at all clear that any of them represented a plausible or desirable future for French education or French society. As Vincenzo Ferrone reminds us, this period – what he calls the “late Enlightenment” – did not share in the “historical construct we now identify as *modernity*, using the term to confer a sense of something completed and definitive. It was, rather, the *laboratory of modernity*.”<sup>5</sup> Those working in the part of that laboratory devoted to education agreed that certain problems should be priorities, and there were particular points on which they thought concrete progress might be made, but these did not necessarily cohere, nor did they point towards a general program or suggest a particular educational model. This was true across the range of issues that had been central to the “education question” since the 1760s: how to best recruit, train, and certify instructors, how to balance, prioritize, or reconcile the interests of the Church and the State, how to fund and oversee new institutions, whether and how to increase popular access to education, and how to anticipate the

consequences that changes in education might have for society at large. None of these questions had clear answers when the deputies convened in Versailles, and if these appear to be the origins of modern approaches to education, this tells us as much about Third Republic historiography and more recent attempts to historicize political and pedagogical liberalism as it does about the Enlightenment or revolutionary debates over education.<sup>6</sup>

That the outcome of these debates was uncertain does not diminish their centrality to the intellectual and cultural politics of eighteenth-century France or dilute their role in shaping the nature and ambitions of the Enlightenment; if anything, this uncertainty highlights how much they mattered and why. Inspired by the works of François Fénelon and John Locke, the writers, thinkers, and political authorities of the eighteenth century emphasized education's role in shaping the lives and character of individuals, societies, and states. The "education question," as it has come to be known, both contributed to and reflected concerns over nationalism and the nation, the sources of political legitimacy and role of the public in political affairs, the stability or fluidity of the social order, the relationship between the sexes and the gendered assignation of roles in public, private, and political arenas, and the power of human agents to collectively influence human affairs. Education emerged in the eighteenth century as perhaps the single greatest instrument with which one might seek to "plan the social future."<sup>7</sup>

The debates over education were thus central both to the Enlightenment and to the idea that new ways of thinking might be translated into new ways of living. To be something more than a new Scholasticism or an addendum to the Republic of Letters, Enlightenment thinkers had to reckon with their place in the early modern world and imagine what their ideas might mean beyond the walls of academies and salons.<sup>8</sup> Debates over education offered them a chance to imagine the transmission and translation of proposals into practice, providing the *philosophes* and their interlocutors with a set of institutional and social parameters within which to conceptualize the spread and influence of ideas, a body of inherited practices and expectations against which to compare innovations, a purposeful language with which to promote, attack, or defend proposed reforms, and a promise that the Enlightenment might represent a turning point in human history.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, the debates over education were shaped not only by disputes about what sort of education was best, but also for whom such an education was appropriate and what it ought to offer them. Many

members of even “enlightened” circles worried that expanding access to education was likely to have “pernicious” effects; as Harvey Chisick noted, “the *philosophes* and other educated men of the time were aware of the social utility of ignorance and illusion, and they were less concerned with enlightening the lower classes than with occupational training, economic utility and social control.”<sup>10</sup> Some – like Voltaire – argued against offering education to “the people,” while others proposed expanding access to the schools only insofar as doing so might benefit the economy or help to maintain social and political order; but there were others still who came to see popular education as a means by which to transform those orders and to reimagine France and its future. Similar tensions shaped debates regarding female education, where claims about the “natural” attributes and necessary responsibilities of each sex were increasingly challenged by arguments about the powers of “nurture” to shape each person’s character and capacities and, with that, the possibility that new approaches to education might transform the social, sexual, and familial hierarchies of French life. In cases such as these, to disagree about education was to disagree about much more besides, and the Enlightenment debates over education emerged as a sort of ante-politics, a political debate about the prospect and purpose of politics.

The intensity of these debates stemmed in large part from the influence attributed to education in sensationist philosophy – a theory of mind, knowledge, and psychology most often associated with Locke, disseminated in France during the first third of the eighteenth century, and celebrated in Voltaire’s *Lettres philosophiques*. Rejecting original sin, the existence of innate ideas and, in some of its more radical iterations (like those of Condillac and Helvétius), innate characteristics and capacities as well, sensationism imagined the infant child as a tabula rasa to be marked by experience. This seemed to obliterate the necessity or immutability of a person’s character and to entail the possibility that people and, with them, societies could be purposefully reimaged and redesigned.<sup>11</sup> The consequences for how people thought about education were tremendous.

Sensationist philosophies of mind and of the self quickly became intertwined with debates about the character and composition of the French nation and about the foundation and legitimacy of the social order. Jan Goldstein notes that sensationist views of imagination “had a ... pronounced tendency to become involved in social, political, and economic discourse.”<sup>12</sup> This tendency was all the more pronounced, and the resulting discourse all the more important, because ideas about society and the nation were themselves undergoing significant changes in the

eighteenth century. Unmoored from notions of divine will or providence, the social order and the social good emerged as barometers by which to judge the suitability of institutions and behaviors and, at the same time, as the result of human choices and actions.<sup>13</sup> Society and the nation came to be seen as “products of human will,” as entities that were “actively constructed through political action.”<sup>14</sup> Schools promised to be at the center of any such action, and they were increasingly imagined as capable of “shap[ing] the character, tastes, and mores of a people.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, writers from the mid-eighteenth century on stressed the need for political and pedagogical regimes to complement one another.

The entanglement of political, social, material, and institutional concerns that characterized the debates over education forced ideas about the French nation, the French state, and French society into dialogue with one another. Designing a system of national instruction (or resisting such a design) entailed not only discussion of what attributes or knowledge the French people needed, but also thinking about the French state, its finances, its agents, its administrative powers, its relationship to civil society, and its power to compel (parents, children or students, instructors, and institutions alike). Ideas about education and its possible reform relied, explicitly or otherwise, on ideas about what the state was, what it could or should do, through whom it should act, and to what end it should do so.

In addition to this explicit politicization of education, these debates were also an example and an examination of the eighteenth-century “public sphere” that has attracted so much attention from historians.<sup>16</sup> They brought a range of political, cultural, and intellectual authorities and institutions into dialogue with one another, as government administrators raised and sought to answer questions being addressed in philosophical works banned by government censors, as academies prompted discussions to which individuals without official or academic credentials could contribute, and as the worlds of official and clandestine publishing interacted with a culture of correspondence that blurred the division between personal reflection and public participation in political affairs. The “public” was also the indirect subject of many of these debates, as the reform of educational institutions and practices promised to have consequences for who could engage in public debates and on what terms they could do so. To ask who ought to be educated and what sort of education they ought to receive was to ask also what that education ought to prepare or permit them to do, both professionally and as members of the political community. That is, it was to make the public sphere and

the requirements for membership in the “public” points of debate and, potentially, dispute.

Despite all of the attention from Enlightenment thinkers, it was not until the last third of the century that the schools became a pressing and practical problem. The almost simultaneous appearance of Rousseau’s *Émile* and expulsion of the Jesuits from Paris in 1762 led political administrators and public commentators to consider how new ways of thinking about education might translate into institutional and social reforms. Whether or not they had embraced the prospect of reforming education to promote social, political, or economic change, it seemed suddenly that changes were coming to the schools and, by extension, to French society. This was, as Marguerite Figeac-Monthus put it, an “effervescent moment” in French thought about education, and the expulsion transformed a debate that had been taking place “on the level of theoretical speculation” into one demanding concrete proposals for the solution of practical problems.<sup>17</sup>

This transformation revealed important fissures in the Enlightenment debate over education. These, in turn, reveal a crisis in Ancien Régime politics, a paralysis in the political imagination of those who considered reforming the formerly Jesuit institutions as the first step towards a new and national system of education. When eighteenth-century thinkers turned to the practical work of reforming the schools and reimagining French education – when they sought to bring the Enlightenment to bear on the society in which they worked and lived – they found that while a century of thought had identified several issues as clearly important to the work of reform, there was no clear path forward. They were left with dilemmas but not direction.

A similar dynamic emerged with the absolute monarchy’s collapse and the coming of the French Revolution. Again, it was widely believed that the transformation of the schools and of the social order went hand in hand, though this time the order was reversed. After 1789, it was the reinvention of French politics and society that seemed to require changes in the schools, and the reform of education came to be seen as both an instrument and a necessary consequence of the changes sweeping France. As the Revolution gave rise to what Robert Darnton called a sense of “possibilism against the givenness of things,” schools seemed like a necessary and natural bridge from the possible to the real.<sup>18</sup>

Confident that educational and political regimes needed to complement one another, aware of education’s role in helping to establish and preserve any new social and political order that might come into being,

but unable to foretell what that new order would be, participants in the revolutionary debates over education sought to navigate the path from an unstable present to an uncertain future. Their desire to establish a uniform system of education competed with the need to find short-term solutions to pressing and critical problems, to provide for students already in school, and to secure increasingly scarce resources (financial, material, and human alike). The result was a series of trial-and-error attempts to balance revolutionary ambition with practical necessity, to chart a course forward despite deep uncertainty and persistent instability. This was true, albeit in very different ways, for *philosophes*-statesmen like Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord and Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicholas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, and for provincial schoolmasters and local political administrators. The latter wrote missives to Paris requesting guidance, resources, or support, the former presented plans to fellow deputies distracted by constitutional concerns and the coming of war; in each case a revolution infatuated with the future found itself distracted and disoriented by a tumultuous present.

The French Revolution's most significant innovation regarding education was the idea of "public instruction," an ambition that transcended the pre-revolutionary distinction between moral education and technical instruction. "Public instruction" sought to situate the development of technical skills (such as reading, writing, and basic computation) within the cultural context of civic sociability and to establish a model of political engagement that relied upon the politically virtuous application of those skills. The citizens upon whom so many revolutionary ambitions depended would need to possess not only the requisite skills for participation in the public sphere and in political society, but also the sort of political sensibility and civic disposition that would make their participation conducive to the well-being of the society and of the body politic.<sup>19</sup> This is what Honoré de Mirabeau had in mind when he called for a system of national education that would "found the people's well-being on their virtues, and their virtues on their enlightenment."<sup>20</sup>

But public instruction was a pedagogical ambition, not a program, and its ideological contours were never entirely clear. This allowed the phrase to survive the ruptures and factionalization of revolutionary politics, and it has led historians to look past the concept's novelty, moving too quickly to the political or ideological conflicts by which it was apparently consumed. But the radical ambition of public instruction stemmed precisely from its pedagogical priorities (rather than ideological imperatives) and from its underlying (rather than overbearing) principles. Its importance



relied upon expectations regarding how the new politics would work; how citizens would engage with one another, with the institutions of political discussion, and with the new political administration: politics would be contestatory, public, and responsive to the views and interests of the populace; political debate would take place across myriad venues and through a range of media, allowing a literate public to remain informed about and engaged in the process of collective self-governance; the legitimacy and sustainability of the new political institutions would depend in large part on the existence and engagement of an educated citizenry whose members were bound to one another by civic sentiments and public virtues. The oft-repeated claim that the legitimacy and success of the new political order would depend on education – on the cultivation and dissemination of particular skills, habits, and virtues among the citizenry – represented a revolutionary and radical proposition in 1789; it remains one still.

Establishing a system of public instruction in revolutionary France would prove a Sisyphean task, each bit of progress unsettled or overturned by social strife, economic instability, or political conflict. Nonetheless, it was a task to which deputies repeatedly turned and to which citizens across France sought to contribute. To understand how and why they did so, this book examines the first years of the Revolution, the period during which public instruction was first articulated and embraced. It focuses primarily on the years of the constitutional monarchy (1789–92), tracing and retracing the debates over education across a number of concerns and from a range of perspectives. Concentrating on such a brief period has its pitfalls, but it also allows us to recognize the contingencies that shaped revolutionary politics and the sometimes lurching path by which those politics proceeded. It offers us an opportunity to put the discursive and ideological currents of the Enlightenment and the Revolution in dialogue with the situational logic and circumstantial developments that shaped how individuals, groups, and institutions responded to political and social upheaval. It pushes revolutionary proposals and plans back into the material and political circumstances of their creation. And it prompts us to recognize citizens' efforts to understand and contribute to the pursuit of participatory, representative, and revolutionary politics, in situ and without a script.

The range of sources upon which this study draws – including philosophical treatises, legislative debates, and formal proposals for reform; government reports and administrative surveys; institutional records; political pamphlets; and hundreds of pieces of correspondence from

institutions, political clubs, and individual citizens – reflects the vitality and the breadth of eighteenth-century debates over education. The “education question” preoccupied the most celebrated *philosophes* and the most obscure schoolmasters (though not necessarily in the same manner), the prospect that schools might contribute to social or political transformation enticed (or frightened) cultural critics and political authorities, and the challenge of reconciling new philosophical or political imperatives with material realities frustrated political and pedagogical authorities at the national, regional, local, and institutional levels. Likewise, navigating the shifting currents of revolutionary politics was a problem not just for legislators in the National Assembly (and then National Convention), but also for instructors, professors, students, parents, and citizens across France. The work of reimagining education so that it might promote and preserve a system of representative and participatory politics was undertaken at once in the academies, *collèges*, and universities, in the halls of the Assembly and the pages of the periodical and pamphlet press, in local reforms and regulations, and in the epistolary contributions of engaged citizens.

This book aims to recapture the dynamism of this polyvalent debate and to flesh out the ambitions and dilemmas that gave it meaning during this most turbulent of historical moments. After a brief prologue surveying the institutional landscape of education in mid-eighteenth century France, Chapter 1 traces an ambivalent strain in Enlightenment thought on education, a deep tension at the point of contact between seemingly limitless philosophical possibilities and the apparent limitations imposed by political and social realities. This tension is highlighted in the works of Rousseau and Helvétius, and in debates over female education and the gendered order of eighteenth-century life. In each case, writers struggled to make sense of divergent imperatives associated with nature and society, with “nature” serving – as it so often did in Enlightenment debates – as a critical mirror to society’s shortcomings. More remarkable than this rhetorical juxtaposition and well-established trope, however, is the explicit function of the “social” and the “political” as a practical and persistent check on the possibilities apparently suggested by “nature.” The result was an Enlightenment debate over education wherein a deep chasm separated the disappointing present from a nobler future, and the prospect of improvement was increasingly viewed in terms of crisis, cataclysm, and revolution, or with a sense of frustrated resignation.

A similar dynamic plays out in the more explicitly political and administrative sources reviewed in Chapter 2. After the expulsion of the Jesuits

in 1762, *parlementaires*, members of the royal administration, administrators at the *collèges*, and commentators across France participated in a wide-ranging debate about the existing institutions and curricula, the prospects and ambitions that might drive educational reform, the desirability and practicality of a national system of education, and the relationship between the pedagogical and political orders. It was during these years that the desire for a system of “national education” was first articulated, the *agrégation* was established to prepare and certify instructors for the nation’s schools, and the prospect of overhauling French education to reform or rejuvenate the French polity was seriously considered. And yet, for all that the 1760s and 1770s transformed the French debate over education, both by making it national and by wedding it to the practical concerns of specific institutions, the steps actually proposed and pursued indicate a relative paralysis in Ancien Régime politics, one that echoes the resignation noted in the Enlightenment texts from Chapter 1. Bringing together royal edicts and decrees, reports from parliamentary commissions, and proposals from prominent political and pedagogical commentators, Chapter 2 finds that what historians have generally described as a programmatic consensus for reform that was then undermined by later political crises was, in fact, a deeply divided discursive and political field, one in which no path to national reform seemed plausible. This sense of crisis is reinforced in the text and fate of this period’s most ambitious proposal to overhaul the educational and political infrastructure of France, the stillborn *Mémoire sur les municipalités* presented to Louis XVI by Pierre-Samuel Dupont de Nemours and Anne-Robert Jacques Turgot in 1775 (also discussed in Chapter 2).

Chapters 3 and 4 move us into the Revolution, situating the debate over education amid broader concerns about the nature and efficacy of representative government and analyzing the nascent idea of “public instruction” from its emergence as a revolutionary ambition through efforts to fulfill the constitutional promise of national education. They draw upon debates in the National Assembly and records from the myriad legislative committees involved in planning a national system of education (both before and after the centralization of these efforts with the creation of the Committee of Public Instruction in October 1791), and they present a reinterpretation of the proposals for reform presented by Talleyrand and Condorcet. These chapters argue for a new understanding of “public instruction” as a pedagogical and political ideal and, with that, a revised sense of education’s role in regenerating France and in working towards a representative and participatory system of government.

Chapters 5 and 6 follow the debates over education beyond the halls of the Assembly, analyzing the proposals, exhortations, suggestions, and critiques submitted to the deputies by correspondents across France, as well as more local efforts to fulfill the promise of public instruction. Chapter 5 discusses the imagined role of letter-writing in representative government and analyzes the correspondence related to public instruction as both an example of and a reflection upon participatory politics. Chapter 6 focuses more specifically on letters and proposals submitted by people affiliated or associated with the schools and related institutions (representatives of the universities or *collèges*, individual instructors, professors, academicians, administrators, and students). Together, these chapters highlight how local populations contributed to the debates over education, experimented with possible solutions to political and practical problems, and worked towards a system of public instruction that they saw as central to the revolutionary project (even as that project changed over time).

Finally, Chapter 7 surveys what changed – and what did not – as the “education question” took on an explicitly republican form after September 1792. It draws again on the debates, reports, and decrees of national political authorities (this time the National Convention), as well as popular correspondence, institutional surveys, proposals from political clubs, reports of local experiments, and updates from local political administrators. While the festivals, dramatic productions, and public spectacles of these years are more familiar to historians, attempts to preserve, reform, or reinvent the schools continued to motivate legislators and citizens across France. These sources reveal a sustained and consistent attempt to establish a system of public instruction, one that people hoped would prepare the French for active and contributory citizenship, and they make clear that local attempts to reform education and establish a new political pedagogy persisted alongside the political centralization associated with the early Republic.

This book traces the debates over education from *philosophes* to deputies, and from deputies to citizens, teachers, administrators, and students across France, but it is not simply a history of diffusion. The problem of public instruction in the French Revolution was at once philosophical, political, and practical, and each of these elements facilitated and legitimized its own forms of discursive authority. Correspondents who wrote to the Assembly did so as full, if not equal, participants in the process of discussing, debating, and pursuing a new form of politics and a new sort of polity. They challenged the philosophical or political premises of

revolutionary proposals, proposed measures to expedite or improve the deputies' work, lay claim to an authority grounded in practical experience (even as the political implications of that experience became problematic), and experimented with ways to reconcile legislative and material imperatives. Embracing their role in the reform of education, these correspondents embraced also the practical corollary to the sense of "possibilism" highlighted by Darnton: a "conviction ... that ordinary people can make history instead of suffering it."<sup>21</sup> A system of public instruction promised to clarify the principles and practices of revolutionary citizenship, a prospect that mobilized deputies, local officials, professors, instructors, students, and citizens, and in so doing offered each an opportunity to contribute self-consciously to the work of collective self-governance and the refashioning of French politics.

In the pages that follow, I aim to establish three points. First, that the debates following the expulsion of the Jesuits revealed a crisis in the political imagination of Ancien Régime France and, at the same time, established a set of practical concerns as central to the problem of educational reform. Second, that how revolutionaries thought about education was crucially important to how and why they thought representative government might work, and the resulting ambition – what they called "public instruction" – was a political pedagogy that transcended Ancien Régime categories and reflected a new way of thinking about political society and contributory citizenship. Finally, that the pursuit of "public instruction" was driven not only by ideological or political imperatives but also by trial-and-error attempts to solve practical problems, that it was molded by local efforts and experiments as well as national political currents and Parisian authorities. Recognizing this allows us to move beyond misleadingly linear narratives of political or institutional succession and to appreciate sustained efforts to design a system of public instruction even when deputies were distracted and the national governments' attempts were consumed by war and the Terror.

Taken together, these points suggest broader themes in the history of the Enlightenment, the Revolution, and the relationship between the two. Debates over education marked a clear point of contact between Enlightenment philosophy and eighteenth-century life, between the ideas and institutions that would shape French society and the French nation. Recognizing the ambivalence and uncertainty that underlay these debates reminds us that the Enlightenment's radicalism stemmed not (only) from the brilliance or clarity of *philosophes'* answers to abstract questions, but from the spectacular range of questions brought to bear on the social,

political, cultural, intellectual, and institutional foundations of modern life, from the supposition that how such questions were answered would shape human society and the social future.

Engaging the Enlightenment as a fertile source of questions and collective concerns gives us a clearer sense of what was at stake in the “stormy” debates of the eighteenth century and why these debates mattered beyond the salon walls. It helps us to appreciate the dynamic processes by which Enlightenment debates arose and from which protagonists’ arguments and positions emerged, and to note that these processes were shaped by practical, material, institutional, and circumstantial factors as well as political, philosophical, or ideological commitments.<sup>22</sup> Such an approach also allows us to better understand the relationship between Enlightenment debates and the ambitions, uncertainties, and conflicts of revolutionary politics. The revolutionaries inherited from the Enlightenment a sense that it might be possible to reform or even transform society, to regenerate it through concerted political action.<sup>23</sup> But the *philosophes* had not established a blueprint for such action or a prefigured set of ideological and political imperatives. Their legacy was, instead, a range of competing ideas about how society works, suggestions about how it might be refashioned, and arguments about where one might invest energy and attention in remedying the shortcomings of the present.<sup>24</sup> The revolutionaries would have to make what they could of this legacy, and they would have to do so amid the economic, political, and social upheaval that brought the Revolution into being; in this respect, the history of “public instruction” illustrates well the complex intersection of Enlightenment and Revolution.

The revolutionaries did not solve the problems left to them by their Enlightenment and Ancien Régime predecessors. In this sense, what follows is the history of a failure. More than thirty years of debate did not result in a model of public instruction that could promote and preserve a system of representative and participatory politics. By the end of the period discussed, most of the schools were in disarray, without funds and, in many cases, lacking teachers or students or both. While the Directory would reanimate many of the institutional ambitions of the late Ancien Régime and the early years of the Revolution, it did so without the earlier efforts’ confidence that new schools would usher in a period of democratic sociability and political civility.

But this is also a history of how people in eighteenth-century France thought about, engaged with, and attempted to act upon the society in which they lived. Attention to their efforts helps us to think about what revolutionary legislators aimed to accomplish, what a broader populace

hoped or expected the Revolution might achieve, and how they thought such changes might come about. It is a history of how new ways of thinking about education underwrote one of humanity's most ambitious attempts to reimagine political society and to reinvent political citizenship. It is a history of how modern politics was first pursued.

## Notes

- 1 *Mercure de France, par une société de gens de lettres, novembre 1777*, no. 15 (Amsterdam, 1777), 164–165. This contest and the winning essay, written by Goyon d'Arzac, are discussed in Harvey Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment: Attitudes towards the Education of the Lower Classes in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 10–15, *passim*.
- 2 Archives Nationales de France, Paris [hereafter AN], F/17//1309, dossier 1, no. 9, “Appel à l'opinion publique sur l'éducation nationale,” 1 November 1791, submitted by M. de Wouves, 2–3.
- 3 Michael Fitzsimmons, *The Remaking of France: The National Assembly and the Constitution of 1791* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994); William Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 35–49; Elisabeth G. Sledziewski, *Révolutions du sujet* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1989).
- 4 R. R. Palmer, *The Improvement of Humanity: Education and the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985); Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 266–267.
- 5 Vincenzo Ferrone, *The Enlightenment: History of an Idea*, trans. E. Tarantino (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), xi. Emphases in the original.
- 6 Roger Chartier highlights a similar retrospective coherence and “origins story” at work in the revolutionaries' own relationship to the “Enlightenment.” Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. L. Cochrane (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 5.
- 7 The phrase is taken from Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 50–51.
- 8 Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 83–84; Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 239.
- 9 Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), 501–502.

- 10 Chisick, *The Limits of Reform in the Enlightenment*, 77, 91.
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