

## Author manuscript

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**Social equality in education: France and England 1789–1939**, by Ann Margaret Doyle, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, xiii + 245 pp., €77.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-3-319-94721-1.

In *Social Equality in Education: France and England 1789-1939*, Ann Margaret Doyle examines the evolution of the French and English education systems from the French Revolution to the beginning of World War II. She argues that the two countries took different approaches to implementing a nation-wide education system, with France attempting to develop education as a means to reduce social inequality to a greater extent than England. The book explores how three major factors contributed to these diverging historical developments - notably idiosyncratic ideologies, differences in social class alliances, and unequal forms of state organisation. Using these three factors as the basis of her analysis, Doyle argues that the emphasis on equality in France originated in the French Revolution (1789-1799), and was corroborated by progressive social class alliances and a centralised state, which sought to implement universal education and standardised assessments. By contrast, liberalism - emphasizing a laissez-faire doctrine as well as voluntarism and self-help - prevented a discourse of egalitarianism and had an enduring influence on the evolution of educational policies and institutions in England.

Doyle aptly begins her analysis with the French Revolution, an event which not only brought about major political, social, economic and cultural changes in society but also led to a revolutionary republican ideology that persisted over the historical period covered in the book. The revolution marked the beginning of the idea that the French state had a responsibility for education. *The Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen* defined the founding principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, which have since been inseparably linked to the French state. As Doyle discusses, these principles also led to a powerful ideology guaranteeing that egalitarianism would be prominent in educational discourse and policies, and that the universality and free cost of education would be introduced at the elementary and, later, secondary level. While England did not have a social revolution like the French Revolution, industrialisation, combined with the ideology of liberalism, began changing the face of the country in the eighteenth century. Following the philosophy of Adam Smith, economic and human progress was achieved through the pursuit of individuals' own interests in free competition in an open market unrestricted by state interference. Accordingly, education should not have a single overarching system but rather a plurality of institutions commensurate with

the social divisions in society and in keeping with a social hierarchy. In line with a minimal state orthodoxy, voluntarist and religious benevolent organisations primarily provided education in England. Free and compulsory education was introduced more gradually and unsystematically than in France, and it was not seen as an affair of government until 1870, when the first serious attempt to initiate public education was initiated, and a dual system of voluntary and state schools evolved.

In France, wide progressive alliances of social classes were conducive to the development of a secular universal primary education. During and after the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie became prominent through allying with the popular urban masses (the *sans-culottes*) and the peasantry. During the Third Republic, a union of progressive social classes, including rural and urban middle classes, petite-bourgeoisie, workers and farmers united under the banner of anti-clericalism and against the aristocracy and the Church. These alliances pushed for free and secular education and they were propitious for the development of universal compulsory primary education. By contrast, in England, social class alliances were conservative. Unlike in France, where the Revolution caused a reversal of power relations, no attempts were made to change educational institutions based on an egalitarian doctrine. On the contrary, a conservative backlash against educational innovation was observed, with aristocratic parties continuing their alliance with the Anglican Church. Overall, the conservative social class alliances in England were detrimental to a discourse of equality and the reduction of inequalities in education.

The French nation state emerged during the nineteenth century and inherited from the absolutist state of the *Ancien Régime* a centralised apparatus which was well placed to create a nationalised system of education. Napoleon used the central legal machinery to implement a unified public education system that merged all educational institutions under state control. Uniformity was implemented in the form of an identical curriculum in all schools, and all examinations (e.g. the *baccalauréat*) were certified by the state. A form of credentialism and equalisation of standards was thus promoted throughout the country by the early nineteenth century. This was at odds with the situation in England where education lacked systematisation and uniformity. The minimal state in England, which arguably persisted throughout the period between 1789 and 1939, opposed intervention in education. Educational expansion occurred with little support from the state, making it slow and unsystematic. Because of the lack of a centrally regulated state system, control over school enrolment and attendance was weak, and there was considerable variation in the standards of schools.

Inequality in education is arguably one of the most fundamental roots of all long-lasting inequalities in society, and the book thus addresses a topic that is highly relevant and topical. In any modern society, individuals are thought to possess equal fundamental worth and dignity as well as equal rights. At the same time, any society is characterised by inequality, with the total stock of valued goods and resources being distributed unevenly, and privileged individuals enjoying a disproportionate share of economic, political, and cultural power. The historical comparison of France and England is of particular interest given that the two countries share important similarities in terms of their polity (liberal democracies), their capitalist economy, and their welfare systems but nonetheless diverge in the historical development of their

education systems. The book provides a thorough comparison of the two cases, contrasting developments in distinct historical periods and capturing their specificities relative to each other, rather than simply re-narrating the modern history of education in succession for the two countries. Although the study relies heavily on secondary sources, it clearly adds value to the existing literature by virtue of its chronological tracing of the trajectories of educational policy in the two countries.

There is also a point of criticism. The overarching objective of the study is to analyse to what extent educational policies in France and England succeeded in promoting social equality in educational attainment during the period of observation from 1789 to 1939. The study defines social equality in education as the absence of a link between social class and educational attainment. Given that universal access to education was not implemented until the end of the nineteenth century, the analytic objective seems somewhat inadequate. In our view, it would have been more informative to differentiate clearly between inequality in access to education (e.g. the proportion of children who had access to education) and inequality in educational outcomes (e.g. social-class gradients in educational attainment). Before the implementation of universal education, any educational expansion inevitably reduced inequality in access, but not necessarily inequality in outcomes. Despite this shortcoming, this is a well-researched book presenting interesting material and important insights for both scholars and policymakers.

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