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Designs on the Popular: Framings of General, Universal and Common Culture in French

Educational Policy

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Abstract

This article examines the culture-shaping strategies pursued through French educational policies. It traces the process through which the republican education system claimed legitimacy to bring all citizens into its universalising embrace, and to institute a form of national popular culture. At the same time, the article shows how specifications of esoterically 'universal' and 'general' curricular content were used to maintain barriers between elite and popular classes. The article then explores endeavours since the 1940s to delineate more democratically framed notions of 'general' or 'common' culture, and the difficulties that have accompanied the integration of such perspectives into mass secondary schooling since the 1960s. In particular, one sees in France persistent disjunctions between the 'universal' cultures carried by academic curricula and contemporary popular cultures and experience (though the balance of power between these poles has shifted in some respects).

Keywords: French educational policy, French cultural policy, implicit cultural policy, common culture, popular culture and education

Among very early references to the terms 'ministry of culture' and 'minister of culture' in French are some that do not refer to State departments or political figures, and antedate the deployment of the terms for those entities by several decades. Writing in 1910, Charles Péguy evokes polemically the exhausting 'ministry of culture' exerted as a vocation by primary and secondary school teachers whom he describes as so many 'ministers of culture' (Péguy 1961, pp. 529-31).¹ Clearly, Péguy is building on the long established ecclesiastical understanding of the terms (whereby parish priests exert their religious 'ministry' among local populations), even if many of the teachers in question would have been following an emphatically secular agenda. For, Péguy, moreover, this 'ministry' was one that was being borne by committed individuals preserving a flame

against the deadening and instrumentalizing prescriptions of central government and educational authorities. Clearly, there was more than an element of nostalgia, even at the time, in Péguy's lyricised portrait. If one wanted a version of such a 'minister' transposed into an active myth for our own times, one might turn to the harrassed but multiply attentive middle-school teacher in Laurent Cantet's 2008 simulated documentary *Entre les murs*. Nevertheless, it is striking that this early usage of the term locates 'cultural ministry' as an activity at the interface specifically between State educational institutions and the populations they were designed to shape.

This leaves open the question of the actual cultural resources deployed for shaping these populations, and the overall aims of such projects. Educational policies work on popular cultures (even, and sometimes especially, when they profess to ignore popular cultures altogether). They also, in a sense, institute forms or aspects of popular culture when they bring into their embrace all of a nation's people and become a routine part of popular experience (initially, in France, at primary level, but in recent decades up to at least secondary level). The ways in which this takes place can be brought into particular focus if we relate our understanding of what is 'popular' about cultures to other epithets used to inform and legitimise cultural-educational programmes. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the 'universal', the 'general', and the 'common'.

(I should perhaps note that the term 'popular culture' is not used here only, or indeed primarily, in its now dominant anglophone sense of contemporary consumer culture. It refers more broadly to cultures emerging from, imposed upon or appropriated by 'popular' classes as variously distinguished from counter-posed elites. The categories in question are not socio-historically stable, and need to be relationally defined and internally differentiated as the historical focus of analysis shifts).

Universal Authority and Provision

In order to set extensive educational policies, governments must generally mobilize some kind of overarching national cultural authority. Significant legitimacy is required for the deployment of substantial public resources to intervene so powerfully in the cultures of so many social groups, popular and elite (producing what the monarchist education minister François Guizot called in 1833 the 'government of minds' (Mayeur 2004, p. 335; Rosanvallon 1990, pp. 113-16)). One of the striking features of French educational history is the extent to which governments have had to lay claim to a higher and more expressly 'universal' authority when framing educational policies. This is due in large part to the background against which the republican tradition in French educational policy emerged. General schooling in pre-revolutionary France was the province of the Catholic Church, and the Church would remain a strategic force in the educational field thereafter. As its name implies (*katholikos* – general or universal), this schooling was delivered, theoretically at least, in the name of a universal truth ordained for the universality of humankind. The republican challenge to the educational dominion of this transnational body within the nation had to trump this claim to universal authority. The 'lay' tradition as it emerged in France, first discursively and then institutionally, thus incorporated powerful claims as to its validity for all French citizens. Its revolutionary pioneer Condorcet argued in 1792 that 'the moral principles taught in [...] schools [...] will be those which, being based on our natural sentiments and reason, belong equally to all men' (Condorcet 2000, p.197). A century later, the republican philosopher Charles Renouvier articulated the general implications that this transfer of authority appeared to bring with it: the State, once in a position of supremacy, would have to assume 'responsibility for souls just like any church or community, but in a more universal manner' (Renouvier 1876, p. 100, quoted in Gauchet 2005, pp. 64-5). In other words, he ascribed to educational policy a general responsibility for the culture of the people.

Establishing a principle of authority, whether philosophical or political, over national education is one thing. Ensuring effective universal provision is another. The universalizing educational principles first articulated during the Revolution were important, but its concrete

achievements in this respect, as might be expected given the context, were extremely meagre (Mayeur 2004, pp. 82-4). Indeed, in a rather different respect, there was something of a mismatch between the claims of the early Third Republic's educational reformers to have created a primary school system for all the French people and the precise nature of their more limited, though still considerable, achievement.

There was only one institution, in the wake of the Revolution, in a position to bring anything like a universal reach to the task of national primary instruction. Napoleon may have brought secondary education under State control, but he had to rely on the Catholic Church to run and maintain a network of primary schools. The Church played a major part in the spread of primary schooling and the decrease in illiteracy rates over the next seventy-five years, as did legislation passed by succeeding non-republican governments. Thus by the time the Third Republic had consolidated itself and was in a position in the 1880s to pass its regime-defining 'fundamental laws' in education, a quasi-comprehensive network of primary schools was already in place. There had been some 14,000 communes out of 38,000 without a primary school in 1829; by 1863 this had dropped to 818 (see Prost 1979, pp. 89-211).

If one considered simply the numbers of schools created and the rise in pupil attendance, one might conclude that the republican reformers of the late 1870s and 1880s simply 'filled in the gaps' in existing 'voluntary' provision, as the British government of the time expressly set itself the task of doing.² Certainly, they did bring the numbers of school-age children and the numbers of children at school ever closer together, particularly at the upper end of the 7-13 age range. But their real achievement lay in a more fundamental reframing of primary education provision overall as a universal public service to which all citizens, as such, had a right. This construction was built upon three basic foundations: national education was to be made free of charge (but not charitably); it was an obligation; it was non-clerical (*laïque*). Popular education (the education of the 'people') was thereby made into a quasi-constitutional principle of State.

A General (Primary) Culture for the People?

The considerations above still revolve, in a sense, around a rather formal notion of the universal. Certainly, they are concerned with the conditions of effective provision. But they address issues of pedagogical content – *what* is actually delivered in a universal manner - only insofar as they touch upon its general acceptability (which, in the context of the time, entailed inevitably a neuralgic fixation on elements of clericalism and anti-clericalism). But the notion of universality poses also a different kind of question for popular schooling. Is its purpose to provide pupils simply with what is necessary – with the ‘rudiments’ they require to get by in life? Or is it to provide them with content of more general interest, to transmit a culture of potentially more universal value? And what kind of choices might that imply within a framework of limited resources?

The ‘rudimentary’ approach to primary education had certainly had its advocates throughout the nineteenth century, from Napoleon to Thiers’ famous pronouncement in 1848 (in reaction to the radical project of the Second Republic’s Minister for Public Instruction Hippolyte Carnot) that ‘reading, writing and counting is what they have to learn; all the rest is superfluous’. But there was another strand in the development of a curriculum for public primary schools. Jules Ferry set out to build on previous efforts by such as Guizot in the 1830s and the Second Empire inspector Octave Gréard in the 1860s to bring primary schooling beyond the delivery of mere rudiments and towards something more universalizing in its scope. We can interpret in this perspective his insistence in 1881 that what had hitherto counted as ‘accessories’ should henceforth be viewed as essential in the delivery of primary education:

It is around the problem of the constitution of a truly educative programme that the Ministry of Public Instruction has expended all its efforts [...]. It is this overriding preoccupation that explains, brings together and harmonizes a very great number of measures which [otherwise] might offer grounds for reproaches concerning the excesses in

the new curricula, exaggerations in accessory details, programmes of study that are overly varied and that do not, on first inspection, appear sufficiently coherent: all those accessories to which we attach such value, and that we group together around the fundamental and traditional teaching of 'reading, writing, and counting' - lessons based on physical objects, drawing, natural history, school museums, gymnastics, school walks, manual crafts in the workshop next to the school, singing, choral music. Why all these accessories? Because in our view they are what is most important, because these accessories make primary schools into schools of liberal education. That is the great distinction, the great line of separation between the former regime, the traditional regime, and the new regime.³

Claude Lelièvre, following Pierre Kahn, cautions against superimposing the 'poetry' that lyricizes in this way the projects of republican reformers upon the 'prose' of more routinized pedagogical practice at the time (in a different theoretical tradition, Péguy's 'ministers of culture' as evoked above could also be conceived as 'street-level bureaucrats'⁴). Moreover, not only was there, as we shall see, a powerfully latent class-based dimension to Ferry's overall primary policy that was masked by quotations such as this. The vehicle of a universalized primary education infrastructure was also set to work in a particular legitimization process designed to embed a still fragile republic as part of a bourgeois lay nation-building agenda (Hobsbawm 1992, pp. 263-73). Nonetheless statements such as Ferry's gave force to a different kind of question. This concerned not simply who should hold dominion over national education and in the name of what. It asked rather what the contours might be of a culture that could be at once 'general' and commonly available – or, to put it another way, universalizing in scope as well as universalized in delivery.

Segregated Universes

If we consider as a whole the policy framework for primary schooling constructed by Ferry and his associates in the 1880s, we might say that they both raised and sidelined this question. Even putting aside the matter of the confessional ‘free’ schools that the legislation allowed, the public primary schools were not schools for the whole nation. They were schools for the popular classes – the *peuple* – but only for those classes. They instituted a ‘popular culture’ of a kind – but they underline for us the restrictive implications of the term. Social elites eschewed the schools altogether, sending their children to the *petites classes* of the *lycées* designed specifically to prepare pupils for secondary education proper. Indeed, Ferry himself expressly strengthened the position of these *petites classes*: they were exempted from the no-fee regime imposed by the law of 16 June 1881 (they were thereby enabled to protect themselves from unwelcome social admixture); the qualification barriers for teaching in them were raised through the creation in 1881 of a specific certificate; and Ferry noted in a circular of 1882 that he was pleased to see new classes of this type opening to satisfy the kinds of families that standard primary schools could not. These *petites classes* would multiply throughout the Third Republic, catering to 16,000 pupils in 1881, 31,000 in 1913, and over 55,000 in 1930 (Lelièvre 2004, pp. 25-6). Indeed, it is better to see them as a form of pre-secondary schooling, just as the public primary schools could feed some of their pupils into certain ‘post-primary’ streams (notably the *écoles primaires supérieures*) that were kept resolutely separate from secondary institutions. Cross-over between the worlds of primary and secondary education was very difficult: secondary education began at 11, before primary education as such had ended, and to curtail one’s primary education to venture on a long and costly secondary education for which one had not been prepared was a gamble not many were prepared to make. Scholarships were available, but they were few and far between, and often awarded to State employees’ children as a kind of encouragement in lieu of promotion. Even when secondary education itself was made fully free from 1933, the barriers between these two social universes remained deep. For Prost, French educational provision prior to the reforms of the 1960s could not really be described as a ‘system’ precisely because of this split into two discrete blocs operating according to different

principles and directives (Prost 1992, p. 88). Despite a certain republican universalist ethos running through French educational discourse, the reality of its educational institutions served to consolidate social stratification and to dichotomize cultural provision.

The paradox in all this, from the point of view of our focus in this article, is that the self-consciously defined specificity of secondary education in France was that it was supposed to provide its pupils with a genuinely 'general' or 'universal' culture. The peculiarity of this claim to universality is brought into relief if we consider the functions of Latin, or 'classical humanities' more generally, both within the curriculum and in broader discourses about the purposes of education.

The classical humanities (the study of Latin and Greek) had long been the defining element of French secondary education, notwithstanding an important parallel strand making the case for a more scientifically and socially operational form of curriculum.⁵ The explicit case for their preeminence was based on the putatively universal value attributed to the high texts of antiquity (suitably excerpted, anthologized, and synthesized for edificatory purposes with a Christian tradition). The essence of humanity was deemed to be fundamentally unchanging, and had best been expressed in these texts and in the elevated sentiments they articulated (Durkheim 1990, pp. 368-70). The purpose of this 'high literary education' was to bring children out of the 'vain and banal' notions they might express in French, and, via the incomparable 'vigour' of thought induced through classical languages, give their speech, 'through true art and true culture [...] a kind of new, more noble and elevated form'.⁶ The major reforms in secondary pedagogical method that took place from the 1870s changed the rationale for studying the classics but not, substantially, their preeminence in the curriculum (Mayeur 2004, pp. 553-6; Prost 1979, pp. 246-9). They emerged from the critique of the rote-based and formulaic approach to producing especially Latin prose and verse, and indeed the increasingly manifest absurdity of devoting so much time to writing in a language that few students afterwards would actively use. Emphasis was to be placed henceforth on understanding the texts, translating them into French, and writing essays in French. The content of the Latin texts was less significant now than what was presented as their incomparably logical syntax

and the abstract gymnastics it provided for the mind. It was precisely their emptiness that provided the condition for their supposedly universal value: because they were not limited by being really 'about' anything in particular, they prepared the mind for any number of subsequent applications.⁷

Clearly the case in itself was often sincerely made (in more nuanced form than the summary above), and anticipates in some respects certain contemporary arguments for the value of a humanities education. But the very particular sociological circumstances in which these claims for universal value were advanced as principles marks them out as heavily overdetermined. The fixation on Latin, in particular, revealed an implicit segregatory agenda beneath the variety of explicit rationales for its prioritization. These issues were pinpointed quite clearly by Edmond Goblot in a classic work on the French bourgeoisie:

Those who are considered to be the enemies of Latin studies are, on the contrary, those who would like to see them being pursued more seriously and to a more advanced level. But for that to take place, they must not be imposed on all. They would have to be tackled by very gifted minds who, finding the work easier [...], would be able to pursue them in conjunction with other studies, notably the sciences. They would form an elite. Others, given the insufficiency of their intelligence or perseverance, would have to resign themselves to a more reduced culture. But that is just what the current self-styled defenders of Latin do not want; what they want is for Latin studies to continue to be imposed by a common rule upon the whole bourgeois class. Their only reason for this, though they may be unwilling to admit it, is to maintain between the social classes this distinction that is so clear and easily graspable: on the one hand, those who know no Latin, and on the other – I hesitate to say those who know it – those who once learnt it.

For what would happen if one could undertake secondary studies without Latin? An intelligent and hard-working pupil, completing his elementary primary studies with further schooling in the primary sector, or even in a good technical school, might become more

educated and even more cultivated than an average secondary school pupil. There would no longer be that inequality of culture that distinguishes the social classes: everything would be mixed together. The bourgeois need an education that remains inaccessible to the people, which is closed to the people, which is a *barrier*. And it is not enough that a bourgeois pupil has received this education, because people might not notice it. A State diploma, a piece of parchment signed by the minister, certifying officially that he has learnt Latin, gives him the right not to know it.⁸

It had not been straightforward, as it happened, to impose Latin studies as the key element in an elite common culture in the decades preceding Goblot's study. Not only had it been difficult to contrive a framework wherein a key fraction of the elite would no longer forsake Latin in order to pursue a scientific curriculum. The secondary education corporation also had to deal with a newcomer, as Victor Duruy's 'special' vocationally orientated studies, established in 1865, morphed by stages into a 'modern' section of the baccalauréat, insistently held at a distance from other sections due precisely to the inadequacy of its Latin provision (Mayeur 2004, pp. 566-78; Prost 1979, pp. 252-7).

Of course, the precise 'barrier' diagnosed by Goblot would not hold in the long term, and can seem rather artificial to modern eyes. But similar barriers, superimposing explicit universal cultural rationales upon implicit segregative functions, would replace it. One of the effects of the pedagogical reforms in the last decades of the nineteenth century, with greater emphasis on writing in French, was to bring forth the specification for education of a 'home-grown' classical French literary canon. The early work of Bourdieu and Passeron showed how this was playing by the 1960s the same kind of role that Latin studies once had (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979 and 1977). The apologies for classical humanities at the turn of the century are likely to seem strained or uninvolved to us. But this very fact serves to bring into clearer relief a recurrent function that they exemplify: the policy specification of a curriculum or system of reference designed to be common to

an elite, to have universally acknowledged value as regards its contents, but which is also expressly constituted so as to be non-universal in its effective availability.

A Democratic General Culture

Ferdinand Buisson, one of the prime architects of the ‘fundamental’ education laws passed in the 1880s, was conscious earlier than most both of their practical limitations and of the way in which the ‘religious question’ in education served to obscure a more general ‘social question’. He saw in the France of May 1914

two kinds of youth: the elite and the masses. The elite consists of some three hundred thousand children to whom society gives the most complete intellectual education. The masses comprise five or six million children whose instruction – assuming that it is really given to them – will extend simply to reading, writing and counting.

Who marks out the boundaries between these two groups? What accounts for this difference in intellectual treatment? Who benefits from education in its noble form? Who are those condemned to a pitifully truncated education? There is only one criterion, one mode of differentiation: money. (Buisson 2003, p. 321)

Others came to share Buisson’s concerns. Their forced experience of social mixing during the First World War convinced a group of academics (the ‘Compagnons de l’Université nouvelle’) that the nation required a more democratic form of schooling – a shared ‘single school’ (*école unique*) that would ensure universal provision and a measure of popularly accessible universal content. This campaign for a ‘single school’ was taken up by others between the wars, notably by Jean Zay, the

education minister at the time of the Popular Front (Prost 1992, pp. 47-97). I shall focus here firstly on one prominent moment in the slow move towards a 'single school' in France and the reflection upon a non-elite 'common culture' that intermittently accompanied it.

The Langevin-Wallon report (1947) has often been ascribed a somewhat mythical status in the development of French educational policy. Its two authors, the leading communist intellectuals Paul Langevin (a physicist) and Henri Wallon (a psychologist) were recruited by the left-wing Gaullist education minister René Capitant in November 1944 to head a commission framing major educational reform in France. Many proposals regarding this were circulating at the time, most aiming to break with the educational arrangements of the discredited Third Republic. Langevin and Wallon embarked on the project with a view to initiating a wide-ranging democratization of provision. However, by the time the definitive report was passed to the incumbent minister in June 1947, the political window that had given rise to the commission had definitively passed. The euphoria and sense of common purpose that had characterized late 1944 had evaporated, giving way to sweeping budget restrictions, a Cold War, and the ejection the previous month of all communist ministers from government. The authors were fulsomely thanked and their report put into a ministerial bottom drawer, whence it would not emerge for many years. Its mapping of a new educational system had become a dead letter without political support; its reconceptualization of 'culture' at school and beyond was widely attacked as undermining the conditions for France's traditional cultural distinction (see Sorel 1997).

Since then, however, and with the benefit of hindsight, the report's significance has come to be evaluated in altogether different terms. It has been seen as laying down the blueprint for the 'systematization' of French education that took place from the beginning of the Fifth Republic in 1959 to the Haby laws of 1975. This led notably to the raising of the school-leaving age to 16, the establishment of a single type of school in which all pupils would be educated up to that age (the *collège unique*) and the definition of a common programme to be followed (the *tronc commun*). This undoubtedly corresponded to the broad recommendations of the Langevin-Wallon report, and can

be seen as a comprehensively universalizing process. François Dubet, however, questions the extent to which this outcome can be attributed to the direct influence of Langevin and Wallon, whose role in this regard he sees as indirectly 'prophetic' (Dubet 2004, p. 115). They foresaw the kinds of social and economic changes to which de Gaulle looked to respond in the 1960s, requiring greater levels of qualification to augment the country's human capital and satisfy parental demand in a time of rising prosperity. It was this that led de Gaulle (working against the passive resistance in this respect of both his education minister and his prime minister Pompidou) to institute in 1963 the *collège d'enseignement secondaire*, designed to take further able children previously confined to post-primary forms of education. This *collège* would notionally bring all pupils under one roof between the ages of 11 and 15, but (Pompidou insisted on this) it retained within it different and largely hermetic streams that perpetuated the previous modes of social and cultural segregation. It was the abolishing of these discrete streams that led under Giscard d'Estaing's education minister René Haby to the establishment of the 'collège unique' in 1975 (Lelièvre 2004, pp. 75-91).

Comparison suggests that something similar would have developed in France with or without the Langevin-Wallon report. This was France's version of a 'comprehensivization' of secondary education that also took place in a number of other countries, responding to similar economic and social pressures, albeit following different rhythms and degrees of systematization.⁹ For Dubet, however, the Langevin-Wallon report's enduring interest derives not from its influence over the formal structures of French education. Rather, it remains significant because it attends to dimensions of the universalization of public education that have since been persistently neglected. The transition to the *collège unique* corresponded, in Dubet's account, to a universalization focused on institutional structures at the expense of pedagogical content (see also Dubet 1998, 2004a, and 2008). All pupils now passed through (notionally) the same kind of school, but not enough thought had been given to how the curriculum should be changed to take account of the now very different clientèle in attendance. An educational fare designed to prepare a previous elite for further academic study was now served out to the population as a whole, who had very different objectives,

horizons, and centres of interest. For Dubet, this mismatch lay behind many of the problems into which teachers at *collèges* would run over the next decades. In terms of our problematic, a culture that had long been assumed to be of potentially universal value and relevance was not so. It was necessary to rethink the contours of a 'general culture' fit to become a 'common' culture for obligatory mass schooling. The Langevin-Wallon report contains suggestive indications in this regard if we venture briefly on the kind of reading of it that Dubet invites.

The report emphasized from early on that, in addition to its economic significance, the state educational policy that they had in mind corresponded also, in effect, to a universalizing and comprehensive cultural policy (though the term as such is not used):

Education must [...] offer equal possibilities for development to all, and open access to culture for everyone; it must become democratized less through a process of selection that takes away from the people those who are most gifted than through an ongoing elevation of the whole nation's cultural level. (Langevin and Wallon 2004, p. 18)

This statement introduces a first break with regard to conceptions of academic democratization that had previously prevailed. The point was not simply, as part of a meritocratic agenda, to open doors to high educational and cultural provision to classes of people for whom those doors had previously been shut. The focus was rather on raising the cultural 'level' of the people taken as a whole. And this entailed a second important break with accepted thinking. The abstract defence of 'general culture' might be an expected component of such a report, but the authors constructed the notion in a rather different way. They recast it so that it constitutively linked up with those spheres of 'popular' activity from which it had theretofore constitutively distinguished itself:

We conceive general culture [...] as an initiation to the diverse forms of human activity, not simply to determine individuals' aptitudes, enabling them to make informed choices before entering a profession, but also to allow them to remain in contact with other people, to understand the interest and appreciate the results of activities other than their own, and to situate their own activities cogently in relation to society as a whole. (Langevin and Wallon 2004, p. 20)

'General culture' was thus something not to be reserved only for the higher echelons of a socially stratified school system, but was intended, understood in these terms, precisely for the general mass of the necessarily specialized labour force:

General culture represents what brings people together and unifies them, whereas professions represent too often what separates them. A solid general culture must thus serve as a basis for professional specialization and continue during the period of professional apprenticeship in such a way that people's education as a whole is not limited or hobbled by their training as technicians. In a democratic state, where every worker is also a citizen, it is essential that specialization should not be an obstacle to the understanding of wider problems and that a broad and solid culture should liberate people from the narrow limitations of the technician (pp. 20-21)

In intellectual terms, their vision was certainly broader than the kind of classical-humanities vision of general culture discussed above. As might be expected from a physicist such as Langevin, the discipline of scientific thought was ascribed a key role in the process they called the 'culture of the critical mind' (ibid., p. 72).¹⁰ But in social terms also, their vision added a decidedly unbookish if doubtless somewhat utopian dimension to the kind of universal service that schooling might provide. Indeed, the implication of their argument was that what had theretofore counted as

'general culture' (and that we might better label 'high culture') did not properly merit the name. It led to disdain or ignorance about entire domains of general social activity (such as the demands of manual or service professions). The report signalled in effect that this scholastically transmitted culture – a particular 'classification of real values' - required substantial remodelling:

The broadening of pupils' horizons and their preparation for life in the community will take place through progressive initiation (as often as possible through direct contact) with social reality. Adolescents will be led less through books and lessons than through visits, investigations and personal research towards the critical analysis of the social, administrative and political structure. An important place should be reserved for learning about the different professions, their role, their evolution, their conditions of work. An exact appreciation of the fundamental role of workers, of the solidarity between diverse human activities, will direct adolescents towards an understanding of the duties and rights of citizens (p. 73).

All this struck many contemporary readers as irresponsible social fantasy revealing the crypto-communist agenda of the report's authors (see Sorel 1997, pp. 196-200). The report certainly took from communist thinking a more probing approach to the possible relations between work and culture, and a more demanding sense of educational and cultural 'justice', than previous programmes had done. It fused these with the dominant themes of the 'new education' movement (learning by doing, active learning methods, etc.). That is not to say that it thereby generated the last word in educational policy development. However, it did produce considerably more than the institutional skeleton of a reformed school system, by reflecting on the implications for universally extended schooling of producing a curriculum that might be of more universal value.

School culture and popular cultures

The question of a democratically framed general culture – or what to do with the now ‘common trunk’ of obligatory secondary schooling – re-emerged once the *collège unique* introduced during the mid-1970s had bedded down and some of the pedagogical problems it brought with it had come more clearly into focus. An early response to these problems was somewhat shocking to conventional ‘republican universal’ thinking in France, insofar as it broke with the long aspiration to give exactly equal provision to all citizens. Indeed, it was perhaps the first (initially unspoken) example of ‘positive discrimination’ within French public policy. The socialist government in 1981 officially recognised that, notwithstanding centralized and standardized provision, not all *collèges* were in fact equal, due to their very different local social, economic and cultural contexts. In response, they proposed, through a ‘Zones for Educational Priority’ policy, to give more resources to those schools in the most disadvantaged areas, with the aim of bringing them closer to levels of academic achievement in more favoured institutions.¹¹ Yet this response in terms of differentiated economic allocation alone was not seen as sufficient. Attention had to be given to the curriculum itself, such that it could be more effectively negotiated by the generality of pupils, while providing a ‘good’ of more obviously universal relevance and significance.

One apparently obvious response at this level might have been to introduce elements of existing ‘popular cultures’ (notably working-class cultures) into the curriculum. There has been a pedagogical counter-tradition in England, with connections to the early formation of ‘cultural studies’, that has sought to do just this, seeking in various ways to ‘recast’ education as ‘a process of cultural dialogue’ (Jones 2003, p. 60).¹² Even here, however, such streams existed for a long time within a more routinized ‘conservatism’ characterising the country’s ‘cultures of teaching’ (ibid., p. 88). Moreover, since the prime minister James Callaghan’s attack in 1976 on pedagogical autonomy, or the ‘secret garden of the curriculum’ (Ball 2008, pp. 73-4), increasing levels of centralization under conservative and New Labour governments have turned schools into very different institutions where such forms of cultural experimentation have become more difficult. Schools are

under multiple and measurable pressures to 'perform' (and thus conform). David Buckingham has followed numerous contemporary forms of such experimentation, and is a good guide to the difficulties and pitfalls associated with them (Buckingham 1998). In his judgement, the gap in England is actually 'widening [...] between the culture of the school and the culture of children's lives outside the school' (Buckingham 2005, p. 26). Indeed, referring to more recent developments in juvenile culture (as the French would say), Buckingham diagnoses an 'extraordinary contrast between the high levels of activity and enthusiasm that characterise children's consumer cultures and the passivity that increasingly suffuses their schooling' (ibid., p. 14).

In France, experiments with the curriculum at local level, and particularly the admixture of elements of 'popular' cultures within consecrated 'school' cultures, have been altogether more difficult, due in part to the strong centralization that has long permeated nearly all aspects of the education system. Certainly, there have been influential systematic critiques of that system, such as those of Passeron and Bourdieu in the 1960s and 1970s, who saw that 'for the sons of peasants, manual workers, clerks or small shopkeepers, the acquisition of school culture represents a process of acculturation' (Bourdieu 1979, p. 22, trans. mod.). Yet Bourdieu and Passeron were highly critical of the 'abdication' promoted by any 'populist illusion that might lead to claims for the admission within the culture taught in school of those parallel cultures carried by the most disadvantaged classes' (p. 72, trans. mod.). In this French educational tradition, 'emancipation' for popular classes is achieved by enabling them to escape from the limited (or even 'mutilated') cultures into which they are born. Forty years later, the sociologist Dominique Pasquier noted that traditional 'humanist' culture remained central to the French school curriculum (Pasquier, 2005, p. 21). In her assessment, the 'current crisis in schools does not revolve simply around the difficulty of managing more disparate academic levels than in the past; it is rooted equally in the strangeness that characterises for many pupils the world of humanist culture' (ibid., pp. 161-2). However, the environment within which this 'strangeness' is perceived and managed has changed significantly. As Pasquier puts it, the 'dominant' culture within the experience of contemporary schoolchildren is no

longer the ‘culture of the dominant class’, but an assertive and commercially mediated ‘popular culture’ (ibid., p. 162). The issue is not simply now the marginalisation of popular cultures within school, but also the assertive marginalisation of academic cultures within mass adolescent experience.¹³

Prescribing a Common Culture

There has thus been comparatively little scope in France for bringing closer the worlds of classroom experience and the increasingly autonomous universes of ‘juvenile’ culture (the issue is not black and white, needless to say – the preservation of a certain distance between the two is surely a valuable function of schooling as an institution). Insofar as the specifically cultural challenges of mass secondary schooling have been addressed at all, they have tended to give rise to a different kind of question. This has generally been formulated at the level of the central prescription of curriculum contents rather than that of ‘negotiation’ between different cultures at classroom level. In this perspective, a democratic form of mass secondary schooling should not limit its work to a mode of more or less meritocratic ‘fractional distillation’, sorting its populations into greater and lesser degrees of capability (and effectively weeding out from its higher reaches swathes of pupils from the ‘popular’ classes) (Dubet 2008). The function of such schooling should also be to equip its pupils with a shared set of aptitudes and general references for navigating the contemporary world – a ‘common culture’.

Attempts were made from the mid-1980s within a number of policy contexts to address this issue, though in Claude Lelièvre’s view it was a question that was repeatedly raised only to be recurrently buried (Lelièvre, 2004, pp. 93, 101 and Lelièvre 2008). This was partly no doubt due to its intrinsic political, cultural and technical difficulties – who has the authority and competence finally to arbitrate on the contents of a veritably common culture? It was also certainly due to disciplinary and corporative resistance within the educational field (from those fearful of a dumbing down or a

vulgarization of culture). François Mitterrand (prompted via Jacques Attali by Pierre Bourdieu) sought in 1984 a first way around these problems by giving his presidential authority to the highest cultural authority – the professors of the elite *Collège de France* – to define a new set of orientations for secondary school curricula. The report was driven and authored in large measure by Bourdieu himself, and its reflection would be taken further in the the report he wrote with Frédéric Gros for the Socialist Minister of Education Lionel Jospin in 1989. One of the the principal recommendations developed across these two reports was that the state should institute and guarantee a ‘common cultural minimum’ which all pupils would have a right to receive before the end of their obligatory schooling. This was to be defined in an open and universalizing rather than a closed and ‘minimalist’ manner, being based on certain fundamental and transposable ‘modes of thought’ that might be taught using approaches that privileged practical experimentation and exploration.¹⁴ Bourdieu was critical in the extreme of the educational ‘back to basics’ campaign launched around the same time by Mitterrand’s Minister of Education between 1984 and 1986, Jean-Pierre Chevènement. For Bourdieu, this amounted to populist demagoguery insofar as it locked popular classes into educational contents that parents recognised and endorsed precisely because it was all they had been given by the schooling of their time.¹⁵ This conflict between, as it were, a ‘maximalizing’ and a ‘rudimentary’ approach to a common cultural minimum reactivates, in a sense, some of the debates around primary education in the nineteenth century. It may not be, in practical terms, straightforward to resolve in definitive terms.

The issue was put on – and taken off - the agenda again at regular intervals over the next two decades. After the two reports propelled by Bourdieu, it was raised again in the mid-1990s by the National Curricular Council (*Conseil National des Programmes*), a steering body created as a result of the Bourdieu-Gros report (Raulin 2006); and by François Dubet and Marie Duru-Bellat in the report they wrote for the Socialist minister for school education, Ségolène Royal, in 1999 (Bergounioux et al. 1999). But even when the issue finally appeared to make its way from proposition to prominent governmental programme in 2005, it was argued by some that this was

simply another way of putting it aside (Lelièvre 2008, p. 95). In response partly to the Thélot report of 2004, the major education bill of April 2005 included as its article 9 the provision that:

Obligatory schooling must at least guarantee for each pupil the necessary means for acquiring a common plinth (*un socle commun*) comprising a range of knowledge and skills that it is indispensable to master in order to complete one's schooling successfully, pursue one's training, construct one's personal and professional future and succeed in one's life in society.

That 'plinth' has since been defined (in admittedly rather catch-all terms). But the debate has not been settled. Many suspect it of being a contemporary version of Thiers' rudiments or Chevènementian basics. If everybody gets the plinth, asked the educationalist Philippe Meirieu in 2006, then who gets the statue?¹⁶ In Dubet's view, despite the heavy centralization that characterises the French system, the real purposes of mass secondary schooling (particularly between the ages of 11 and 15) are still not clearly ordered at a central level. It is up to teachers on the ground to steer a path between the demands of consecrated academic culture and the priorities of a 'common culture' (Dubet 2008, pp. 142-5). They are exercising an uncomfortable contemporary form of that 'ministry' (or street-level bureaucracy) evoked by Péguy at the beginning of this article. Questions of the universal, the general, the common and the popular are still at work in French educational policy debate.

Concluding remarks

Mass secondary schooling is now a standard component of adolescent experience across all classes in France, as in many other countries. The *collège* now integrates virtually 100% of every generation between the ages of 11 and 15. The percentage of pupils actually achieving the

baccalauréat at *lycée* level has gone from 11% in 1961 to 34% in 1981 and 65% in 2006 – with a further 5% taking it unsuccessfully that year (though sociologists of education have shown how this ‘absolute’ expansion of opportunity coexists with multiple forms of covert segregation and splitting that makes the ‘democratization’ in question ‘relative’ at best). We have seen how this development has been accompanied by processes of mutual marginalisation between the manifest worlds of school culture and popular cultures. Coming to terms with this divergence is a significant contemporary challenge for many pupils, who must synthesize those two worlds as best they can in their own experience. Stéphane Beaud evokes suggestively the nature of this challenge, as he traces the expectations raised among working-class pupils by governmental announcements in the 1980s that 80% of a generation would by 2000 have access to *baccalauréat*-level education, the disappointments and difficulties involved in negotiating an insufficiently adjusted curriculum, and the considerable subjective distress in framing a sufficiently ‘respectable’ identity for oneself after this experience (Beaud 2003). French educational strategy continues undoubtedly to work upon the popular – to bring it to a suitably ‘universal’ cultural level – but shows also, it seems, a persistent failure to attend to it in its own terms.

Jean Baubérot has noted how the universal within France, and particularly within French education, has often been constructed as an operational concept through a process of subtraction: pupils must, as it were, leave all marks of their particularity outside the classroom in order to engage with a realm of generality (Baubérot 2004, p. 46). The possibility of a more bottom-up approach, augmenting universality of perspective through the cumulative integration of singularity, has tended to be neglected. This has often produced, to borrow a term from Pierre Bourdieu, forms of symbolic violence. Regional cultures and languages were notoriously excised both from curricula and school playgrounds. Working-class and other popular cultures have been held apart from school cultures, augmenting the alienation of these pupils within a domain of academic generality that, objectively, was closer to the cultures of bourgeois milieux. Even now that the typical ‘balance of power’ between academic and popular cultures has shifted within the lived reality of most schools,

academic culture has tended to remain quite isolated with regard to developments outside it (Pasquier 2005).

The disjunction between formal school curricula and popular experience has been brought out in different ways in recent international comparison. The OECD's PISA surveys have had a bad press in France.¹⁷ Aspiring to measure the capacities in literacy, numeracy and science of member and associate nations' fifteen-year-olds, they have repeatedly placed France in a rather mediocre position in relation to comparable countries. Their methodology has been disputed, but the educational sociologists Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet suggest this methodological argument has largely been a pretext to avoid engaging with the surveys' finding. They argue that the surveys are carefully constructed, and maintain that the education systems investigated are 'evaluated in reference to their fundamental values, social justice and efficacy, which are universal values, independently of the very different forms of organization that characterize each country' (Baudelot and Establet 2009, pp. 23-4). Certainly, the work of such international organizations is scarcely agenda-free (see Ball 2008, pp. 25-48). But what is important and new, for Baudelot and Establet, is the way in which these international comparisons render visible certain unhappy 'singularities' of the French system (Baudelot and Establet 2009, pp. 47, 63). France holds, for example, the world 'record' (41% in 2003) in the proportion of fifteen-year-olds who have had to repeat at least one year of schooling – an indication of a continuing mismatch between the demands of the curriculum and the cultures of less advantaged pupils. French pupils perform satisfactorily when it is a question of retrieving information previously presented to them, but rather less well when they need to mobilize acquired knowledge in unfamiliar situations (*ibid.*, pp. 47-8, 25-7). Most concerning, 'the country where the strongest claims are made for republican meritocracy is also one of those where academic destinies are most strongly linked to social origins and the cultural capital of families' (p. 61). Indeed, when that cultural capital is broken down into its different elements, it appears that disposing at home of the paraphernalia associated with the most classical of cultures provides more than twice the comparative advantage for pupils in France than the

average for other nations (p. 69). The correlation of academic achievement and domestic cultural capital is, of course, a quasi-universal sociological law in itself. France's singularizing feature appears to be, however, that its school system does considerably less than that of other countries to mitigate this law. The classical and 'universal' culture that has historically been a central component of its educational mission, and that has recurrently been framed so as to keep elements of the 'popular' at bay, distinguishes the country also in less welcome ways.

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NOTES

¹ On the sub-departments for 'fine arts' and the two very ephemeral ministries for 'art' that had been assigned responsibility at central level for artistic matters since 1870, see Dubois 1999, pp. 23-108 and Poirrier 2000, pp. 15-29.

² See Green 1992, pp. 302-3 (in reference to the 1870 Education Act). On English educational 'voluntaryism' more generally, see *ibid.*, 264-8.

³ Ferry's speech to the *Congrès des instituteurs et institutrices de France*, 19 April 1881, quoted in Lelièvre, 2004, pp. 21-2.

⁴ On the dilemmas of 'street-level bureaucrats', see Lipsky 1980.

⁵ For a long historical overview, see Durkheim 1990. The scientific strand came to the fore during the Revolution, but also existed in more routinized form during the nineteenth century, when candidates for the 'government schools' of science and engineering (commonly called *grandes écoles* today) had to take an alternative route to the standard baccalauréat.

⁶ Mgr. Dupanloup in an 1873 letter, quoted in Prost 1979, p. 66.

⁷ See e.g. (but integrating a critical perspective) Durkheim 1990, pp. 363-72, 393-8 (these lectures date from 1904-5).

⁸ Goblot 1930, pp. 123-4. On an analogous dynamic at work in nineteenth-century English deliberations regarding the place of classical humanities in curricula for the upper classes (at the time of the Clarendon Commission in 1861), see Simon 1974, pp. 305-9.

⁹ For the UK, see Jones 2003. For a comparative account, see Maurin 2007.

¹⁰ Earlier statements of such a view can be found in thinkers such as Condorcet and Durkheim.

¹¹ On the ZEP policy, see e.g. Peignard and van Zanten 1998. These zones were rebaptised in 2006 as *Réseaux ambition réussite* and *Réseaux réussite scolaire*. Opinion is divided on the efficacy of the policies: they have promoted forms of equity over more rigid notions of educational equality, but at the same time they have led to stigmatization of the schools in question and consequent middle-class flight.

¹² [On the links between this counter-tradition and the work of thinkers like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall on popular and common culture](#), see e.g. Jones 2003, pp. 63, 82.

¹³ It should also be noted that, within French school culture itself, recent decades have seen a rise to emphatic dominance of a 'scientific' culture at the expense of a devalued 'literary' culture (to the extent that central government have had to find deliberate ways of revalorising the image of the baccalauréat's literary stream).

¹⁴ See Collège de France 1985, pp. 27, 19; and Bourdieu and Gros, 2000, pp. 175, 178 (where Bourdieu's 'modes de pensée' are translated as 'ways of thinking').

¹⁵ See Bourdieu 1991, pp. 35-6. For a more extended analysis of Bourdieu's policy work on these occasions, see Ahearne 2010, pp. 138-50.

¹⁶ Quoted at Lelièvre 2008, p. 95.

¹⁷ PISA stands for the Programme for International Student Assessment. The first survey took place in 2000, and subsequent surveys have been conducted at three-yearly intervals.