

Education during the Enlightenment: Public Education and Social Reform

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Abstract. The Enlightenment shaped and transformed European society in many ways. This paper illustrates how thinkers like Martin Luther and Jean Jacques Rousseau proposed their thoughts on education, which then played an important role in the educational reform of Prussia and France respectively. It further analyzes how geographical and cultural differences led to distinctively different education systems and goals.

Keywords: Enlightenment Movement; Education; History; France; Prussia; Rousseau.

1. Introduction

The Enlightenment ideas that originated in France spread to most of the European countries with the support from the printing press. Frederick the Great of Prussia welcomed most of the Enlightenment ideas but made arrangements according to the conditions of his own country. Both France and Prussia implicated the Enlightened educational ideas to their own ruling strategies, which eventually achieved social reforms in education. The education in 18th century Europe was greatly constrained by the requirements of social order at the time. As the knowledge of necessary manners and social rules was important, children were educated and cultivated according to their social status to prepare them for their adult lives.

For instance, young girls whose families could not afford dowries were sent to monasteries since the age of seven. At twelve, they would usually start to help with housework, and if they were not needed in the household, girls would be provided with a limited religious education. This was designed solely to cultivate religious piety and the knowledge needed to fulfill the role of future mothers. In the case of aristocratic education, girls were instructed to become "ladies" to lead an upper-class social life as they were dressed up and taught etiquette according to the standards of noble women. [1] The education of men also abided by the norms of their according social status. As Bernard Mandeville noted in *The Fable of the Bees*, "Miss is scarcely three years old, but she is spoken to every day to hide her leg, and rebuked in good earnest if she shows it; while Little Master at the same age is bid to take up his coats, and piss like a man." [2] Children were not educated as children, but rather to follow adult standards.

Such was the kind of education in old regime Europe, which was soon to be changed during the age of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers considered education an important means to empower the public with knowledge and to emancipate the mind; changes in the forms and purposes of education in effect fueled social reforms across Europe, and the educational reform in France and Prussia are two typical examples. This paper explores the implications of education in specific political contexts through examining the education reforms in France and Prussia. It will summarize the changes in the education system in the two states and the ideas behind them, and then analyze the impact of these reforms on the respective societies.

2. Education in France and Prussia

2.1 Public Education in France

2.1.1 French Education before the French Revolution

Before the French Revolution in 1789, education in France is not systematic, as public education received scarce attention. There were not enough trained teachers, nor could families in backward areas afford tuition without support from the village or the government, and there was not much enthusiasm to send children who could be useful for the labor forces for the household to schools in the first place. In Old Regime France, schools followed an individualized method, in which each child brings their own books and only interacts with the teacher; in a standard class of thirty, each can hardly receive ten minutes of attention throughout the school day [3]. As institutions tied to the Church and villages, schools are places where prevailing religious values were instilled into children and little care was given to the development of children themselves.

During the Enlightenment era, however, the ideas of modern education started to take shape. National education was popularized in the middle and late 18th century under the influence of the Enlightenment. National education stressed the relationship between education and the state and the nation, the importance of the educational level of all people, the importance of people as the center of society, and the significance of national consciousness and the development of people's basic skills. Furthermore, it is a kind of popular education, that is, to improve the social welfare of the public by providing primary education to them through universal education and to emphasize the equality of education. The first major feature of national education is freedom and equality. According to Voltaire, freedom is the natural right of man, and freedom presupposes that all people around are equal. This idea of "cultivating rational free men" laid the foundation for the theory of national education. [4] Likewise, Jean Jacques Rousseau also emphasized the importance of "freedom", saying that "without freedom there is no patriotic thought, and without morality there is no freedom." [5] The pursuit of freedom and equality in their Enlightenment thought became a foundation of French national education and provided the ideological basis for the development of the French educational system.

2.1.2 Rousseau's Educational Thoughts

Rousseau's "Back to Nature Theory" theory was a twist on classical educational thought, since it has shifted from the importance of national education emphasized by traditional educational thought to the importance of human development on liberal educational thought. The predominant theory of education before Rousseau was the Classical Civic Education, which asserted that the purpose of education is to benefit the whole nation by creating virtuous, self-sacrificing citizens. [7] All people were required to receive the same kind of education for there was only one universal objective. As Aristotle pointed out, "since the whole city-state has a unique purpose, it is obvious that all citizens should be educated in the same way." [8] Thus, children were educated in the standard of an adult, a citizen. Children were imbued with the same moral concepts and codes of conduct as adults, while their own personalities are effaced. Rousseau's liberal education theory, however, emphasized human nature. He believed that education that aims at cultivating children into a virtuous citizen with one restrictive and identical method distorts the trend of children's natural growth. "Free growing plants, while maintaining the direction that people force them to lean, do not change their sap so that they will not change their original direction, and if they continue to grow, they will grow upright." [6] This means human nature will not change through imposing social constraints, while social education will only restrict children's development. He turned the focus of education to children themselves, emphasizing that children should follow the law of their own development.

Furthermore, Rousseau argued that children are either too constrained or too spoiled by their parents, which is the primary reason for their vices. First, he states, "if a person lets himself go after he is born, I'm afraid he'll be out of shape. Prejudice, authority, the needs of life, precedents, and all the social conditions in which we find ourselves, will kill his nature, but will not add anything suitable

to him." [6] Then he also claims that constraints imposed by parents and society to children are also detrimental, as he writes, "as soon as the child left his mother's womb, he was bound again before he began to stretch his limbs." [6] Therefore, Rousseau thought that the internal motivation which is promised to promote social development faced obstacles in the process of children's necessary activities. [6] Rousseau believed that children's education should conform to their nature. Therefore, teachers should have a certain understanding of children, not impose adult thinking onto them. Rousseau demanded that education should be based on the characteristics of children of different ages, and different kinds of education should be given according to the individual differences of children. He urges educators to "respect the children, no matter good or bad, don't jump to judgment. Let the special appearance self-display, self prove, and be confirmed, and then use special methods for children's education." [6] Rousseau also attached great importance to children's health, and proposed that children need loose clothes, simple diet and adequate sleep and exercise. Rousseau's ideas on education emphasize the differences between children and adults, and advocate for respect for children's freedom and nature. This is very different from the old society which restricted children's nature and gave them heavy tasks. Rousseau criticized these educational methods that would limit children's potential and instead put forward a kind of education that respects individual personality and freedom.

Moreover, Rousseau's "Back to Nature Theory" believes that man's rationality comes from his perception of nature, as well as religion. Man's belief in religion should also come from his perception, understanding and belief, rather than just believing in doctrines. [7] Therefore, Rousseau's thought opposed the autocratic education controlled by the church, and played a role in breaking the shackles of the Church. Rousseau's Nature Education thought, which pursues the equal natural rights of everyone, strongly opposes the privileges of nobles and monks. It has become one of the democratic thoughts of opposing autocracy and pursuing freedom and equality in the 18th century, and it provides an important theoretical basis for social transformation.

Rousseau's thoughts on education did not have much feasibility during the French Revolution, nor did it become a reality. However, his natural education thought still provided a theoretical basis for the construction of subsequent schools. For example, public schools, which prohibit religious control, began to spread the idea of freedom and equality. The *fachhochschulen*, colleges that focus on practice and career education, during the French Revolution were in line with Rousseau's idea of attaching importance to labor, skills, and students' individual characteristics. Rousseau believed that "the natural needs are the same for all", so he points out that "labor is an unavoidable or exempt responsibility of a society." [6] Besides, during the French Revolution, the education plans and thought were influenced by Rousseau, such as Condorcet plan, which was regarded as the practical application of Rousseau's thought by Francisque Vial. [9] Although the Legislative Assembly did not implement Condorcet's plan, the plan still marked an important turning point in the French education system in which equality and compulsive education ideas started to prevail. These reforms under the influence of Rousseau's thoughts not only promoted the emphasis on human value, but also liberated human potential and thought.

2.1.3 The Views of Other Enlightenment Thinkers on Education

The idea of free education started to spread through Europe. People also began to consider education as a public matter, associated greatly with politics and related to governments. This political perspective was greatly pushed forward by certain Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu, who viewed education in a political context; by stating that "it is in a republican society that the whole power of education is required," he argued that virtue is the objective of education in a republic, and that virtue can only be obtained through education, for it is a painful process of "self-renunciation." According to Montesquieu, virtue pertains to "the love of the laws and of our country" in a republic, for it is only in democracies that people are entrusted with their own government, and it is therefore crucial to inculcate this love, this civic virtue, and especially in children. [10]

As the Revolution overturned the Old Regime, education received unprecedented attention as more than a mere means for social and economic development but ideologically important. Schooling was

expected to inculcate beyond skills but virtue and citizenship as well. Education in the age of Enlightenment is the power to emancipate the mind and to encourage people to use their reasons. An eligible citizen should have sophisticated knowledge on politics, literature, and other important knowledge to be enlightened and apply reasons. As Immanuel Kant discussed in his essay *What is Enlightenment?*, this transformation cannot be achieved through a revolution but should rather be a gradual process. [11] Education plays a very important role here. In the minds of the national educational theory thinkers, the purpose of education is to cultivate rational and citizens and promote the transformation of society. For Rousseau, the cultivation of individual and collective virtues is the most important. He has always insisted that children should be given more autonomy in education, rather than any specialized education, and limited to their social orders. Revolutionaries were passionate to create a new national education system with universal public schooling, which would be essential to building a democratic society. [12] Education thus assumed a “civic mission” of civic regeneration, as the French society sought to enlighten itself from the ignorance of the Old Regime during the Revolution.

The creation of public schools also generated discussions on the disparities in education among different social groups, especially differences between male and female. Throughout Europe, public debate arose on the topic of women’s education, and people started to question the conventional view of education and women’s role in society. Despite being a firm supporter of the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft criticized its lack of consideration for women. Wollstonecraft noted in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that the sexual differences between men and women, or the weakness of women, resulted from education--or lack thereof. Unlike their male counterparts who were disciplined as boys, women received only “a disorderly kind of education.” Instead of cultivating an understanding of knowledge, they were taught to look pleasing. With the lack of scientific study in their education, women dwelled on superficial effects and were unaware of basic principles. It was the limitations on education for women that placed them in a situation where they were rendered incapable of contributing to society. [13] In fact, traditionally, women were not allowed to acquire substantial skills, intellectual abilities, or anything worthy to be considered virtue, for these were considered masculine qualities. Women’s mental strength was thus oppressed and kept “in a state of childhood”. They were confined to the private, domestic realm in contrast to the realm of masculine reason. [14] Through broadening the mind, women could be liberated from “blind obedience.” [13] Advocating for equal education of men and women, Wollstonecraft contended that the empowerment of women is overall beneficial to the spreading of virtue and knowledge in the entire society, for they were assigned the role of the first educator of children, and unless they were educated themselves to have developed virtue, women would fail the mission of educating the next generation to be virtuous citizens, stalling the progress of society. [13] It is noteworthy, however, that this claim strongly focused on the kind of motherhood assigned to women by the traditional values of society, and in a way reinforces this stereotypical social expectation of women. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft’s call for equal education for women set a precedent for future feminists, echoing across Europe and contributing to making the “equality” touted by the French Revolution equality for women as well.

Advocated by many Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Voltaire and others, public education changed the role of education from training people for the Church to training citizens and patriots for society and the state. As an example, Rousseau, who abhorred religious morality, advocated for the cultivation of fraternal morality and respect for labor from the goodness of human nature, as well as the education of citizens in civics and patriotism on the basis of democracy. [15] Kant, Voltaire, and Montesquieu, on the other hand, supported the positive effects of public education on citizens primarily from the perspective of the cultivation of reason, democracy, and equality. In this sense, thoughts proposed by Enlightenment thinkers in France effectively strengthened nationhood and the idea of freedom and democracy.

2.2 Compulsory Education in Prussia

2.2.1 Educational Reforms Related to Martin Luther

Prussia was the first country in Europe to impose compulsory education, which then benefited from its educated citizenry. The beginning of this powerful movement that eventually propelled Prussia to become great power can be traced to the well-known theologian and religious reformer Martin Luther. Though he was most famous for his resistance against the enforced ordinances and corrupted administration in the Catholic Church during the Northern Renaissance period during 16th century, he also supported efforts to instruct children (even though he was speaking of religious knowledge only) in his thesis *Sermon on the Duty of Sending Children to School*. Furthermore, Luther cooperated with one of his friends, Melanchthon, to form a Protestant school. [16] He believed that religion should be the major subject, and other skills taught would only be of assistance for the students' future career. This attitude was evident in his sermon, in which he claimed that "...I would not advise anyone to send his son to a place where the Holy Scriptures do not come first. That is why we observe the kind of people who are now and will continue to be in the universities ...I greatly fear that the universities are but wide-open gates leading to hell, as they are not diligent in training and impressing the Holy Scripture on the young students."

Although Luther's ideas were limited to religious instruction, his writings greatly influenced the later expansion of education in German states and Prussia. As a result, Weimar, a German state at that time, introduced the first charter that forced children to learn dogmatic reading and writing. Later in 1717, Frederick William I of Prussia issued an act to make every child go to primary school, providing funding for education. Ironically, Frederick William I had a dislike for culture, banning French literature, Latin, and music in the land of Prussia. Although he did not implement compulsory education with Enlightened ideas in mind, the act was aimed at forming a regulated labor force that would help Prussia develop its industries.

Although Prussia was progressing at the forefront of educational development, the lack of professional teachers and decreasing number of students in college led it into a trough. Many teachers at the time regarded teaching as a second occupation, and instructors came from the ranks of tailors, shoemakers, and priests. Such great challenges were caused by a lack of educational institutions (e.g. schools) and delay in the reformation of the corrupted colleges. External influences were a concern for Prussia, as under the influence of the Enlightenment, Prussia was flooded by new ideas of education that originated in France. King Frederick the Great admired everything from France, the promotion of such idea enabled Prussian intellectuals, scholars, and students to hold strikes against the corruptions in education. Enrollment decreased as a result, and from 1811 to 1815, the total number of college students dropped from 9000 to 4900. Two reforms encouraged by the Enlightenment revitalized German universities. [17] First, the absolute importance of religion in education was demoted, and second, more secular, scientific subjects were added into the curriculum. This trend of change took place in both secondary and primary education institutions.

2.2.2 Educational Reform in Prussia

Prussia's military defeats also led to calls for reform in its education system. After the tragic fiasco during 1806 where the Treaties of Tilsit took territory from West of the Elbe in Prussia and reduced its population from 10 million to 4.93 million, the confidence of this country was defeated. The desire of the ruling class to strengthen the sense of nationalistic pride and revive the national power were the major causes of their later movement on reformation of education system.

The path Prussia chose when facing divergence led education to become a tool for totalitarianism in the states. According to *A Study of Modern German Universities in the 19th Century and their Relations with the Society and State*, Wilhelm von Humboldt suggests that Purity and aimlessness should be the main focus of education, and hence government control in the realm of education should be limited. Regarding as a threat of scientific pursuit of truth by the government, he insisted that education and the state need to keep a moderate distance. [17]

On the other hand, another strand of thinking catered to the need for enhancing national power and pushed the education in German states to empower the government with more complete and unrestricted power. Friedrich Theodor Althoff, secretary of the culture ministry of Prussia, propagated that the Government has the authority over the parties or the education, and the government protects education from being contaminated by religions or states. Just as Xue Zhang mentioned in her dissertation, even though this approach placed education under the control of the government, according to Althoff, it was not a threat to academic freedom, but a means to keep them away from prejudices from different parties, religions, and sect. Althoff's ideas served the need of Prussians to recover from their wounds and to restore their confidence. The urgent need for restoration and development of the Prussian people led them unto this totalitarian path, employing education as a utilitarian tool; this method, while effective, had in actuality deviated from the Enlightenment ideas which it was claimed to be based upon. The French people, on the other hand, approached education reform with a different method.

3. Conclusion

In both France and Prussia, the concept of education was fundamentally transformed during the Enlightenment era. Enlightenment thinkers introduced innovative ideas and theories on education into public debate, influencing the public opinion on education and leading to education reforms. France established the New Regime education system around the ideals of freedom and equality, emancipating the mind of the public and cultivating citizens for a new democracy whereas Prussia reformed its education system with a utilitarian approach and successfully enhanced its state power. In both cases, Enlightenment thoughts led to educational reforms, but due to the different circumstances these two countries faced, they devised their education systems with different objectives in mind, which led to varied implications. However, although the Enlightenment thinkers had pictured an ideal education for all, they did not live to see it completely realized, and inequalities in education remained a significant issue in both France and Prussia. Nevertheless, the different cultural background, ideology, and focus of the ruling class does shape education in their country into different forms, and brought benefit to both countries.

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