



L'école et le territoire: Nouveaux espaces, nouveaux enjeux (School and Territory: New Spaces, New Issues). Bernard Charlot, ed. Paris: Armand Colin, 1994. 223 pp.

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One of the first things one learns about education in France is that it is under the central control of an enormous Parisian bureaucracy that, until recent events made such metaphors anachronistic, rivals the Red Army in size. A cursory review of the history of French education will often confirm this idea, adding nostalgia for elementary teachers as the Republic's soldiers in a cultural war on the church, who unswervingly apply the Parisian curriculum and in the process turn peasants into French citizens. Accounts of rural life feature educational experiences that are remarkably uniform, whether they occur in Brittany or Béarn.

Unfortunately, these explanations and nostalgia seem not to correspond much with recent educational reality. In the last 10 or 20 years, asking a young French person where they were in their studies would often produce a long list of strange acronyms and curricula and complex explanations about how each track could lead to a particular vocation or another stage in education. Just as one would begin to grasp the different acronyms and educational tracks, they would change again. A wide range of political and economic concerns have motivated this growing educational diversity. These are discussed in a variety of ways, including efforts to make education more "democratic," to prepare students for local employment opportunities, to make France more "flexible" and "competitive" within the European Union, and to "de-concentrate" Parisian power. Funded by the French Ministry of Education, the authors whose essays are collected here set out to evaluate the effect these changes have had on education in France. They are especially concerned with measuring the relationship between policy goals set in Paris and actual life in schools and universities.

It is worth noting that the assumption of centralization is much more than a fact of bureaucratic structure. It becomes a deeply embedded framework for thought, so that most of the essays collected here start with an assumption of power and motivation moving from Paris out to the cities and towns of France. This seems slightly curious, since in the book's opening essay, Louis Saisi points out that education in France was, until the end of the 19th century, a much more local affair than it would later become. For many of the collection's other authors, this essay serves to suggest that decentralization might be understood as a restoration of French tradition. It might just as well serve to indicate the inevitability of local influence over education, especially



during a period of history when Paris was effectively farther away than it is today. This idea is confirmed in a very perceptive essay by Bernard Charlot in which some of the limits of Parisian authority and understanding of local educational needs are discussed. The imposition of Parisian priorities and authority appears not to have always been a simple process, even among local people who supported obligatory public education. Curiously, however, Charlot ends by suggesting that disagreements between local and Parisian officials over education are dangerous, not simply a fact of life. Charlot argues that the proliferation of local curricula, standards, rules, and structures may lead to ideological chaos over the very purpose of education in France. Are the schools meant to teach skills or citizenship? What should the role of ethnicity or religion be in education? Who--teachers, local administrators, or Parisian bureaucrats--are the legitimate arbiters of educational goals? These questions are fundamental to the tone of this collection. It is clear that the attempted transformation of French education challenges these authors in their assumptions about what constitutes good education and good government. It also challenges their ideas concerning research methodologies.

The collection itself is divided into four sections. The first sets the background, providing a history of Parisian, regional, and local relations over education. The second section of the book is devoted to research methods used to evaluate these changing relations. This section will no doubt be of particular interest to U.S. researchers, providing a useful contrast with the manner in which most U.S. anthropologists are likely to conduct their own work. Here the assumption of Parisian control becomes most evident, as each research methodology is set up to examine forms of resistance to or accommodation with the concerns of the Ministry of Education. Curiously, concepts that are of central concern to the authors of this collection, such as "local" and "territory," end up being defined almost entirely in Parisian terms. Yet in the end, these methodological issues also reflect problems faced by educators, local officials, parents, and students in France. While U.S. anthropologists have in recent years been concerned with linking local research with broader contexts, the French researchers seem almost incapable of thinking in terms of the "local."

It may be more difficult for most U.S. readers to make sense out of the third section, unless they are well versed in very particular French debates about the place of universities or the relationship between education and job opportunities. The essays here focus on specific cases, but require more than a minimal knowledge of the history of French educational policy. Finally, the last section consists of a bibliographic essay on education and policy in France. This will no doubt prove very



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useful for U.S. researchers and students seeking an introduction into these very confusing policy debates.

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