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Olivier Marty · Ray J. Amirault

# Nicolas de Condorcet

## The Revolution of French Higher Education

A history on how educational ideas become  
institutionalized

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# Preface

## On Ideas and History: The Case of Condorcet in Understanding Today's French Higher Education System

The current French higher education system is aligned within international standards, that is, the system today is post-colonial, dominated by virtual worlds, and faces linguistic rather than geographical boundaries. All French higher education specialists are supported by research project incentives coordinated by the *Agence nationale de la recherche* (ANR), which is the French equivalent of the European Research Council (ERC). Teams and networks of individuals are incorporated and blended into the system in order to obtain project-based grants provided by the central agency. This is, of course, of foremost importance to the budding academic, since a career as a higher education professional is based primarily on research-based achievements. University academics are paid for teaching hours (approximately 192 hours per year), but the academic's career evaluation chiefly relies on research-based achievements. Administration is perceived as a secondary activity of lower importance in the French higher education ethos.

Research and teaching are currently undergoing a shift into the digital realm: higher education institutions are providing learning management system platforms such as *Moodle* or *Blackboard*, making possible the inclusion of distance learning to the traditional, face-to-face educational modality that has been the traditional modality all the way back to ancient times. When distance education appeared in France, it was a state-based function housed in a specific institution—that is, Cned, the *Centre national d'enseignement à distance*, that had been created in 1939. Cned is roughly equivalent to other country's "Open" Universities, but today all French universities are each equipped to support distance education and are therefore not strictly reliant on Cned for online learning. A new generation of digital distance learning has also been made possible via the appearance of MOOC technology (Massive Online Open Courses); in France, the centralized MOOC-based organization is the France université numérique (Fun-MOOC), and all higher education institutions are challenged to export their best courses to the Fun-MOOC system for

propagation to the wider audience. Digital support for research is provided by the HAL platform (“Hyper Articles en Ligne”). HAL is the online publication location for results of all French public-funded research and is a primary mechanism for dissemination of scholarly articles and conference proceedings. The digital HAL system will transform the former traditional system, where scientific reviews were artificially segmented by discipline: the HAL system allows review of all disciplines in open format through a single digital portal. Open publication does not limit the types of publications available: working papers, for example, are common. In addition, the diffusion of information is much easier and more efficient via advanced digital means, bypassing the limits that are intrinsic characteristics of traditional libraries.

So then, just what is the current state of higher education French institutions? With Europe undergoing numerous significant changes in both political and technological arenas since the nineteenth century, France has today realized that it must concentrate on its *local* capabilities in order to be more competitive in international educational rankings. To help achieve this goal, France has developed a gathering of all higher education organizations in regional territories into “super-universities” called ComUEs (*Communautés d’universités et établissements*). The result is an educational structure containing 80 universities and some 400 great *Grandes écoles* gathered into 25 regional ComUEs, nine of which are in Paris, the capital of France.

Does this organization of educational institutions represent the end of the great divide between the medieval universities and the republican *Grandes écoles*? Possibly. The original system of universities and the revolutionary invention of the *Grandes écoles* have largely lost their pertinence in today’s educational setting. Today, higher education has moved towards “democratization”, and there is a trend towards viewing higher education simply as “tertiary education”, an educational component that merely follows the primary and secondary levels in sequential order. Higher education, too, is no longer “higher”, since the bulk of the population has access to it (e.g., France’s current national objective is to have 50% of a generation of students earn some degree. In 1927, only 1% of individuals held a baccalaureate, but today, some 80% hold a baccalaureate, with 1% holding the more advanced doctorate degree). Higher education today is both digitized and professionalized, assuring vocational education for a mass of students, not only the elite and wealthy. The elite *Grandes écoles*, residing next to the political, industrial, commercial and intellectual centres of power, preserve this social function, but the European LMD (*Licence, Master, Doctorate*) system regards degrees from the *Grandes écoles* only at the master’s level. Thus, these institutions have to work on “brand” and undertake new challenges within adult and continued education if they are to survive. The concept of “lifelong learning”, for example, is such a new opportunity and educational systems are also simultaneously diversifying their programmes to adapt to different populations. Today’s educational offerings have commodified and democratized education to even greater extents.

If this is the *current* landscape, how did this landscape appear in previous historical settings? This question brings us to the aim of this book: *to build an understanding of the higher education revolution that took place at the end of*

*European Enlightenment (1789–1799)*. This monumental educational event explains both the origins and the waning of the French dual system of *Grandes écoles* and universities. Our explanation is synthesized with the work of a great philosopher and politician: *Nicolas de Condorcet*. Through the intellectual legacy of this key thinker of education, we may understand how the doors of a new educative order were opened. This happened at an important moment during French history: the political revolution of 1789 which not only changed institutions but also fundamental social realities.

It would be difficult to find an equivalent to Condorcet today. Perhaps Gaston Berger (after World War II) would be a good candidate, as that period was also one of reconstruction and major political and cultural shifts (Gaston Berger, as a minister, created a ministry of higher education and democratized engineering schools with the institution of *Insa: Instituts nationaux de sciences appliquées*). It is also difficult to find a true correlation today to that of Condorcet, because during his life, intellectuals were rare; today, there are many intellectuals, but with comparatively less influence due to their wider distribution across the population. This makes the case of Condorcet peculiar to the specific period of revolutionary transition, and therefore a worthy subject of our study.

We also ask a research question in this book: *May we use philosophy to help explain the history of education?* In this volume, we take the case of a single person (Condorcet) who institutionalized his ideas during the revolutionary period. Our book is about historical *ideas*, not just the *history* of those ideas. We examine how ideas were turned into durable realities at this exact period of historical educational transformation. The intellectual works of Condorcet are intertwined with his political career and also his actions within the national assemblies to which he was called to serve. This book does not focus on a biographical presentation of those actions, nor does it target a philosophy of history or the many historical facts of the period. It is also not a retroactive reconstruction of Condorcet's ideas: indeed, Condorcet and his ideas were recognized while he was still alive. What do we seek to accomplish is an examination of the *ideas* of someone who made history, leaving aside the concomitant factors of that history.

We accept that any man involved in a specific situation can transform that situation according to his own plans. Therefore, a situation with great potential transformation, such as a revolutionary period where political power is redefined, can be deeply changed by a single man of ideas (here, Condorcet, inheriting ideas surrounding the French Enlightenment, a man who was simultaneously a mathematician, a philosopher and a politician). We examine the institution of educational ideas: how a thinker transforms political realities and represents the birth of a new system so durable that it remains valid over 200 years later. The bias of philosophy might be to overestimate the importance of Condorcet as a lone thinker: in actuality, his ideas are the ideas of his time (and we do present the needed historical context when necessary and appropriate to our story) and he did indeed act within assemblies and groups of people. However, the goal of this work is to examine a key thinker, and we therefore focus on the philosophical approach of Condorcet, the

philosopher, as well as his work. We conclude our volume by presenting a modern perspective on the historical changes to which he contributed.

We will consult Condorcet's texts to discover his ideas and to trace their consequences all along a period of French history extending over 200 years to the birth of higher education organizations: schools with a specific intention of which he conceived and—directly or indirectly—implemented. We will also take into consideration the broader context of Condorcet's time: the European Enlightenment, the advent of the technical sciences, the rise of the bourgeoisie as a major social event and the role of a capital city such as the city of Paris. We encourage the reader to keep these themes and goals in mind as the text is read.

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# Summary

This book attempts to bridge the gap between the eighteenth century French Enlightenment period, represented by our key figure, Condorcet, and the Revolution of higher education through the advent of the then newly created *Grandes écoles*—including the *École normale supérieure*, the *École polytechnique* and the *Conservatoire national des arts et métiers*—each of which institutionalized a specific educational concept rooted in the philosophical framework of Condorcet. We trace these institutionalized ideas of higher education from their origins within the French Revolution (1789–1799 AD) all the way to the present day. In doing so, we not only examine the forward-thinking and meaningful educational contributions of Condorcet both to France and the world but also elucidate the distinctive nature of the French higher education system. The French higher education system can be difficult for non-French citizens to grasp without knowing its history due to its historical complexity and the many personages involved in its evolutionary growth, and thus we embed this content as we present Condorcet’s story.

## Readership

The text is aimed at social scientists and philosophers, including both professionals and students, who wish to explore both the current French elite education system as well as its 1789 AD republican origins. The book makes extensive use of current higher education research in a manner that both the lay reader and the research scholar may benefit from its presentation. The book is also eminently suited for any reader who wishes to learn the outlines of Condorcet’s educational contributions that effect educational structures to this day.

## Keywords

Condorcet • *Grandes écoles* • French Revolution • *École normale supérieure* • *École polytechnique* • *Conservatoire national des arts et métiers* • French Enlightenment • French higher education • Post-revolutionary France • French primary education • French secondary education

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