

THE SECONDARY SCHOOL, THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND THE FREEDOM CHARTER

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INTRODUCTION

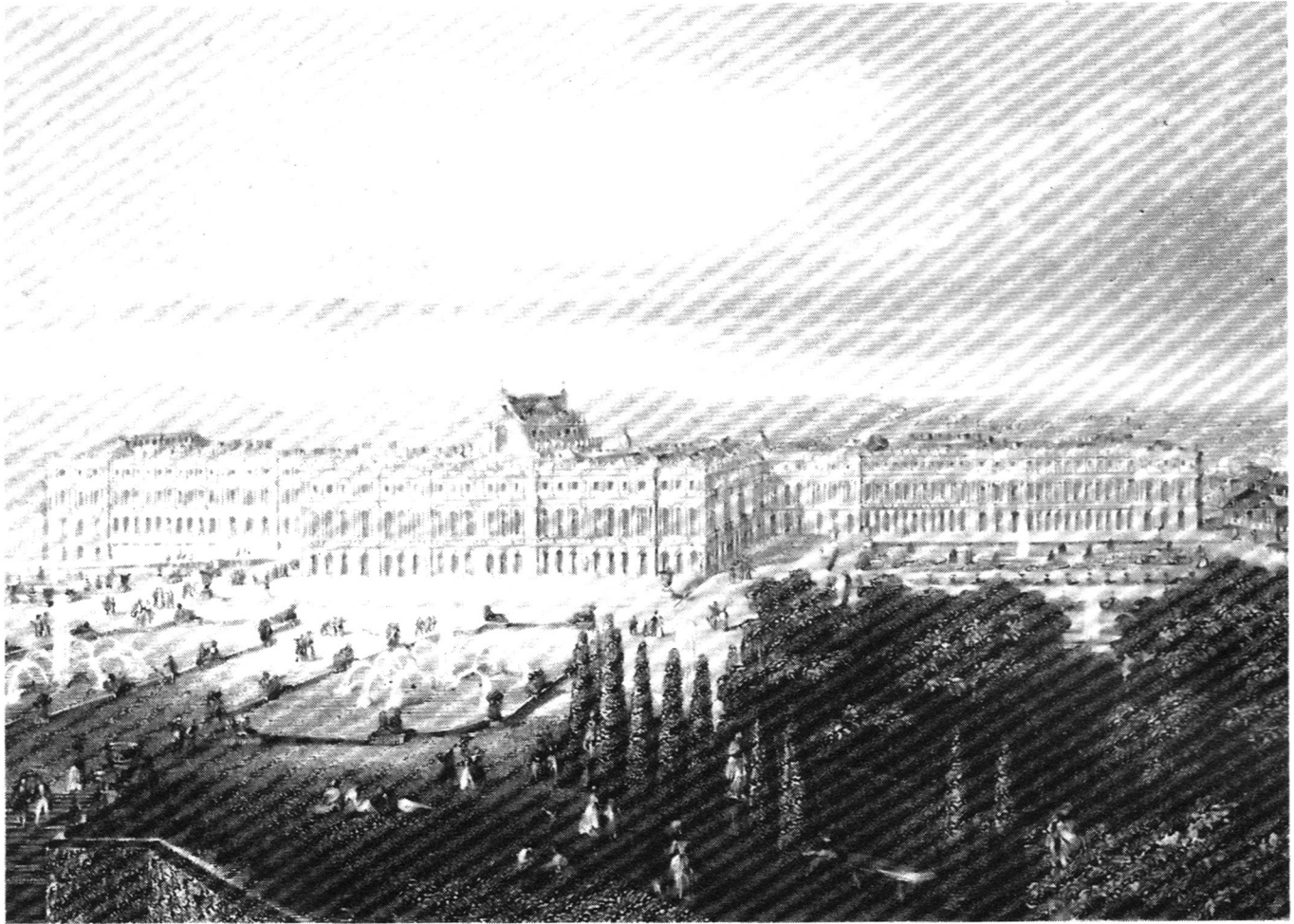
It is of course imperative that in this the bicentennial year of the French Revolution in many a classroom all sorts of comparisons will be drawn and analogies implied. Some of these might be valid, while others may be less plausible. Fact is, that the history teacher ought in any case to endeavour, not only to relate to a unique episode or individual, but to adequately bridge the gap between the unique and the general, the particular and the typical. On the other hand, history is not a natural science and accordingly the human and historical patterns of events in history are different from those "fixed" laws applicable to natural phenomena. In other words, history cannot teach by direct example, but certainly it can illuminate and broaden the frame of reference of mankind by analogy: by debating with the past over universal human values like justice, freedom and fair play – all of these obviously part and parcel of any assessment of the influence of the French Revolution on present-day society.

Obviously the specific meaning or content given to these concepts have changed over the years. The important point to stress, however, is that the ongoing dialogue between values, individuals and events is at the centre of the potential formative value of History as a school subject. The more the history teacher succeeds in conveying history to his pupils as an ongoing debate between human values, the more history will articulate a definite existential message. In other words, if history is presented as a debate between different societies, values and individuals the experience of other human individuals can, in a certain sense, become self-experience.¹

In this specific case the Declaration of the Rights of Man during the French Revolution is often conveyed as the ideal, the classic example for similar declarations in another time and place, like the Freedom Charter in contemporary South Africa.

The danger, of course, exists in a very real sense that such an exercise may be nothing but an exercise in futility if the similarities are highlighted without explicit reference to the possible and inevitable differences between the two historical realities.

Fact is, there are obvious differences between the French Revolution and the present revolutionary climate in South Africa – differences not only of time and place, but differences far more basic to any balanced assessment of present-day South Africa. To mention but a few: There are indeed different race groups involved in the South African scene and these groups constitute, not only racial, but also cultural differences, differences of life view, political experience, social and religious differences and the like. On the other hand, pre-revolutionary France was a far more clear cut case of political social and economic stratification within a reasonably homogeneous society. Accordingly, the inference that in both cases it is basically a class struggle between the haves and the have nots, is a gross oversimplification and biased presentation of reality. It is, of course, a fact that the ruling minority in present-day South Africa is basically the Afrikaner, but they are not a homogeneous economic group. What is more, the Afrikaner acted the way he did to a great extent in order to safeguard his cultural heritage, as he saw it. His prime concern was thus not to deny the black man political, economic and social upliftment, but to preserve the Afrikaner as a separate cultural entity by maintaining political control of his destiny. The basic premise of his action is therefore often not in the first instance economic greed but cultural exclusiveness. One can, of course, argue that by denying other groups fundamental political and human rights, the interests of the Afrikaner have not been served in the long run. What is more, the ugly duckling of apartheid has dramatically bedevilled intergroup relations and is still casting a dark shadow on the future of all South Africans. In fact,



it was a very naive policy in theory and in practice constituted an affront to human dignity. Nevertheless, these arguments do not refute the basic premise that the South African reality resembles a Marxist or even New Marxist class struggle only to a limited extent.²

Secondly, in the case of the French Revolution, the acceptance of the Rights of Man was not part of the build up to the revolution, but a manifestation of the fact that the people were already in power. In the case of South Africa, more than thirty years have lapsed since the acceptance of the Freedom Charter by the African National Congress and still the downfall of the citadels of power is all but imminent – in spite of many predictions in this regard.³

On the other hand, in both cases the relevant document was and is seen as a sort of Bill of Rights – a declaration of intent. In both cases much is made of values universally acclaimed – freedom, justice, equality and fraternity. In both cases there was eventually substantial popular support for the documents. Another parallel is that the importance of the document did not diminish after a lapse of time. In fact, both gained momentum, so to speak, and in the case of the Freedom Charter this fact has become more than evident over the last few years.⁴

In conclusion the history teacher has to generalise if he has something worthwhile to say and if the formative value of his subject is uppermost in his mind. But as is evident from this case, his generalisations are of a limited nature and have to be reconciled with the basic ingredients of the historical reality. What is more, history is an ongoing debate between historians and their facts, values, assumptions and perspectives. Therefore, true history teaching implies more than one perspective. This presentation of different sides of a story is fundamental if education rather than indoctrination is the ideal.⁵

THE TEACHING OF THE FREEDOM CHARTER IN SOUTH AFRICAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

To understand how history is taught and what history is taught in South African schools, one has to briefly refer to the educational system of the country. There are no less than 18 basically autonomous educational departments serving the different ethnical and cultural communities. None of these departments is significantly multicultural or multiracial, although a number of private schools have lately been propagating a multicultural approach to education.

There is, however, a degree of coordination between educational departments, as far as curriculum planning is concerned, in the sense that here is a basic core curriculum which serves as a basis for regional or ethnic educational authorities. In the past the Joint Matriculation Board had, at school leaving level, substantial influence due to the fact that it controlled university entrance qualifications and standards. Recently, the influence of this board on especially curriculum content has been drastically reduced.⁶

Furthermore, it is a fact, that in a subject like history there is at this point in time, a lot of dissatisfaction regarding the curriculum. Basically, the criticism is levelled at the Eurocentric bias of the curriculum. It is argued that African history is grossly neglected, and that an emphatic approach to a multicultural society is needed if history has a contribution to make, in fostering a more tolerant society. The present core syllabus explicitly is, nevertheless, the first curriculum that addresses, amongst other issues, black responses to apartheid during the period 1948 – 1970. Unfortunately, prescribed and recommended reading is still very much the prerogative of the individual departments and, sadly enough, not many of them have explicitly facilitated a multiperspective approach to this controversial period in our history. Generally speaking, the parochial focus of especially the whites is still very much the order of the day. Personally I believe that unless

an emphatic, multiperspective approach to history teaching is propagated, history teaching will continue to foster racial bias, stereotypes and negative master symbols of different groups – all of which are not conducive to a reconciliation of the different peoples of this land.

How do textbooks in fact handle the Freedom Charter? In this regard it may be illuminating to focus primarily on the two most controversial textbooks based on the matriculation core syllabus. One of the publications (Joubert),⁷ is a conventional Afrikaner interpretation of South African history, especially used in the predominantly conservative European province of the Transvaal. Nevertheless, this textbook caused an outcry amongst liberal-minded educationists and historians which high-lighted the controversiality of the publications. Nevertheless, it is still very much the basic textbook in the Transvaal. The other publication (Kallaway) claims to follow a "new history" approach endeavouring to move away from the "parochial view of historical events and processes" and, secondly taking into account the revisionist and African history "that has informed and enriched the understanding of our history in the past two decades",⁸ enabling the new generation to adapt to the challenges of the future.

In the more conservative textbook (Joubert) an effort is made, although rather concealed, to vindicate separate development, arguing, explicitly or implicitly, that apartheid was the best solution for the inter-racial strife in South Africa. Obviously many of the more appalling consequences of apartheid have therefore been glossed over. It is not surprising therefore, that scant attention is given to black reaction to Government policies. The section on South African history since 1948 covers 71 pages and seven of them cover white and black opposition to apartheid.

First of all the red herring of a communist inspired onslaught is reiterated and thus perpetuated. Then a short extract from the Freedom Charter is quoted verbatim without any effort to interpret the text. If one looks at the revision exercises set on this section, no explicit reference is made to the Freedom Charter. All in all the presentation is either factual or biased towards the status quo. No source material is used and it is therefore very difficult to evaluate the real impact of the Freedom Charter on contemporary history.

The other publication covers the period since 1948 roughly in 100 pages. Of these, 13 deal explicitly with black responses to apartheid and economic deprivation and in the rest of the section reference is often made to black resistance. In fact, a rather critical appraisal of the whole political, social and economic system is evident all along. About two pages are dedicated to The Freedom Charter. Apart from a lengthy quote from the Charter, there is a brief assessment of the

document. The reference material used and questions asked on this section do reflect an appreciation of the complex reality and an effort is made to present different interpretations of the situation.

Reference to the Freedom Charter in most other textbooks is scant. What is, however, more alarming, is that the education department for blacks chose to ignore the period after 1948, because it was deemed too controversial. Granted that the interpretations of present day South African history are often biased, one has to accept that the essence of history is controversy. Stripped of its controversiality history becomes but 'one damned thing after another.' (Toynbee) with very little educative value.

Fact is, that nobody can be totally impartial, but everybody has to strive to be honest. The truth – that elusive ideal – is in the end the ultimate goal of every true historian and sincere history teacher. In spite of the emotional impact a document like the Freedom Charter is bound to have in a divided society, the dedicated history teacher will at least try to dismantle the myths and build a reasonable appreciation of the historical realities surrounding the Freedom Charter. The true history of South Africa can only be taught if the Freedom Charter becomes part of the heritage of all South Africans.

SOURCES

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