H-France Review Vol. 25 (October 2025), No. 81

Linda L. Clark, *Women and the Politics of Education in Third Republic France*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. viii + 312 pp. Notes, selected bibliography, and index. $88.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780197632864.

Review by Sarah A. Curtis, San Francisco State University.

In this book, Linda L. Clark has written a comprehensive study of the women who headed lay normal schools in France (and Algeria) during the Third Republic. As is well known, this was a period of intense educational reform, when Republicans sought to dislodge Catholic influence in education by making primary education free and obligatory while removing religion from the curriculum and Catholic teaching orders from public schoolhouses. This initiative especially lagged for girls due to a lack of trained lay teachers and the continuing support for teaching nuns at the local level. The Paul Bert Law of 1879 (which preceded the better known Ferry Laws of 1880-81 and the Goblet Law of 1886) sought to solve this problem by requiring each department to establish a normal school for women (also for men, but these were already widespread). In these establishments, lay women would receive the education and pedagogical training that would allow them to staff the new lay girls' public schools across the country.

The normal schools were therefore key to the regime's mission of expanding and secularizing French primary education in the service of the nation, a mission that their *directrices* took to heart. In the early years, many of these women were holdovers from the few previous normal schools (except, of course, those run by female religious orders) or experienced private lay teachers. But as early as 1880, the Republic had opened an *école normale supérieure de l'enseignement primaire* at Fontenay-aux-Roses to train both professors and *directrices* for the normal schools. In this establishment, students received more advanced training in academic topics as well as in psychology, pedagogy, and administration. Especially important were lessons on civic morality, which replaced religion as a school subject, and which future *directrices* would need to transmit to normal school students.

Based on their personnel files, Clark provides "collective profiles" of almost two hundred of the women who became *directrices* between 1879 and 1914, concluding that "the vast majority…were committed to their work" as "nearly all pursued careers that lasted until retirement or death" (p. 34). Many were the daughters of *instituteurs*, but others came from even more modest origins, suggesting that training to run a normal school was a significant opportunity for social mobility. Many had already taught in public or private schools. These women also experienced unusual geographic mobility as they were routinely assigned to normal

schools outside of their home region. A substantial number were married, often to other educators, and most of those had children, which meant they balanced their role as career women with the more typical trajectory of wife and mother. Although the individual stories are fascinating, this chapter could have benefited from some well-constructed tables rather than relying on prose to convey the statistical information about origins, training, and career paths.

Once assigned to a normal school, *directrices* had wide-ranging responsibilities in educating future teachers in a boarding facility that some compared, not always favorably, to a lay convent. Clark exposes the tension between the supervisory role of the *directrice*, who was expected to monitor her students' behavior and academic progress, and her supposed maternal role in creating a familial atmosphere, on which she was also evaluated. An ongoing challenge was preparing these future teachers to comport themselves in communities where parents might be hostile to a lay girls' school, a not uncommon problem in the 1880s and 1890s. Even within the normal schools, issues sometimes arose regarding students who wished to attend religious services but who were not allowed to leave the school on their own, forcing *directrices* to accompany them.

As is befitting her previous work on women administrators,[1] Clark is particularly interested in normal school *directrices* as professional women whose experience in Republican education gave them growing authority in public and male spaces. They were subject to formal evaluation by inspectors and administrators, almost always male, and informal evaluation by the public, local notables, and the press. The *directrices* themselves served as the only women on the departmental council for primary education. In all of these circumstances, *directrices* walked a narrow line between asserting themselves professionally and showing deference to officials and superiors. They found support in alumnae associations (*amicales*) for both graduates of Fontenay-aux-Roses and those of the normal school themselves. Other *directrices* used their professional knowledge to publish textbooks and articles in pedagogical journals.

In some cases, this assertion of professional expertise led to activity in feminist circles. Paid less than their male counterparts despite the Republic's rhetoric about the importance of educating Republican wives and mothers, this issue galvanized some *directrices* to join the Conseil National des Femmes Françaises (CNFF), founded in 1901, which advocated for women's rights. The support of *directrices* for overtly feminist groups and causes, including the right to vote, varied, though Clark has evidence that about half were involved in the 1920s. What is clear is that *directrices* saw themselves as professionals worthy of recognition and support.

Although most of the book presents evidence from throughout France, Clark dedicates one chapter to two special cases, that of Brittany (and the Vendée) and that of Algeria. The former presented particular challenges because of its conservative and clerical politics that favored church-supported education and because local notables and families were resistant to lay schools. Here, *directrices* had to work harder to establish themselves as educational authorities and to prepare their students for the difficulties they often encountered on the job in local communities. More than many other places in France, they saw themselves as part of a lay "civilizing mission" that would teach Breton girls French and assimilate them to Republican norms.

In Algeria, the government set up normal schools in its three departments. In these schools, all but two of the *directrices* before 1914 were born in France and turnover was high. These normal schools served the heterogenous and growing European population of settlers. Although a *cours normal* was set up in 1893 to train Muslim women to become *monitrices* (not full-fledged teachers) for young indigenous children, it closed in 1897. Only a tiny minority of Muslim girls were educated in French schools by normal school graduates, and none of them had the opportunity to enroll in normal schools themselves.

Clark closes her book with a chapter on the Third Republic between the two World Wars and an epilogue about the Vichy regime and the Fourth Republic. Unsurprisingly, the 1920s saw a loosening of social and behavioral restrictions at the normal schools and an expansion of the curriculum, as well as the integration into the normal school system of Alsace-Lorraine, where public religious education was still legal, posing new challenges. By the end of the 1930s, some *directrices* were more involved in politics, which came to an end when the new Vichy regime closed normal schools in 1941, judging them, rightly, as bastions of Republican support. Some *directrices* transitioned to other positions; some joined the resistance. Half returned to the revived normal schools after the war, and the last *directrice* who had trained during the Third Republic retired in 1968.

Clark has done very thorough research in public archives and professional publications and is thus able to provide detailed information about these women and their place in the French educational landscape. The personnel files in particular (over three hundred in total) allow a textured account of the careers of these *directrices*, which she lays out in multiple vignettes of individual trajectories. One woman, Albertine Eidenschenk, appears in almost every chapter--as a *directrice*, a writer, a feminist, and a pacifist--reflecting the various ways that an ambitious and talented woman could transcend the limits of normal school administration. Most *directrices*, however, we meet for only a few sentences or a paragraph or two, as illustrations of particular situations and settings, making it hard to keep track of the larger picture, a common challenge with collective bibliography. The sheer volume of detail Clark narrates throughout the book often overwhelms the broader contours of the argument she is trying to make about the role these women played in the politics of Republican education.

From the time of the Revolution, the need to educate girls to become Republican wives and mothers had long been the loophole allowing French women to enter into public life, especially in a system that prioritized single-sex education. The Third Republic sought to institutionalize this objective on a broad scale. Girls needed schools, schools needed teachers, teachers needed training, and those training institutions (normal schools) needed women administrators (*directrices*). Clark argues, convincingly, that the work those women did gave them the skills and confidence not only to train generations of teachers but also to nurture their own careers, act as pedagogical authorities, collaborate with male officials, and, in some cases, enter into political debates, outlasting the Third Republic itself.

NOTE

[1] Linda L. Clark, *The Rise of Professional Women in France: Gender and Public Administration since 1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Sarah A. Curtis
San Francisco State University
scurtis@sfsu.edu

Copyright © 2025 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172