SOCIAL EDUCATION FROM A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

François Gillet
Haute Ecole HE2B, Pedagogical Department, Brussels
CÉRISÉS – Centre d’études et de recherches sur les interventions socio-éducatives, Haute Ecole de Bruxelles-Brabant
fgillet@he2b.be
Abstract
Travelling through the history of Education in the 19th and 20th centuries, this article explores how the European education system was built in articulation to - and in coherence with- the industrial society. Concerning social education, focus on global production system was a reality that impeached for a long time, the proposition of socio-educational care with a human dimension. Later and progressively, a model of «education for misfit persons» appeared, first still «industrial» and that later succeeded to become more connected to the specific needs of children, adults and elderly people. This evolution is observed all over Europe. However, the time will be different in each country, in relation with the evolution of specific political awareness on those questions on national levels. A European social educator identity -actor and artist of encounter- is today in the heart of this evolution, because of this history and in the living history.

Keywords
Europe, Social education, Industrial society, Humanisation
Let us remember

Europe has a long story... As other continents in the world, Europe is characterized by its diversity in cultures, languages, religions, values, traditions.... Europe has this specificity of not being the last continent in our long human prehistory and history where representatives of different «empires» went all over the world to colonize countries. In most cases, colonisation processes included the integration of new countries using military strategies, and culture, economy, religion and language as colonisation Tools. Social help, education and medical assistance were not the last dimensions for dissemination and implementation of the colonizer’s domination. France, Great-Britain, Spain, Portugal, Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Belgium and other States were colonizers somewhere in this period going from end of 15th (1492!) to the 20th century. In addition, this adventure is not closed, considering what happens today with post-colonialist policies.

This history was relatively clear between Europe and Latin America, and often not easy to evocate. In any case it seems important to look at those questions, through a precise and scientific analysis capable of seeing the advantages and disadvantages of those colonialist interactions. Concerning education, it appears to be clear that Europe diffused a growing «industrial» look on what a school, a family, a leisure centre or an asylum has to be, in a society where production-process and industrial organisation of tasks is the key-point. This process became very clear in the 19th and early 20th century.

Social education as an alternative

Thus, it is interesting to look at the history of Social Education in Europe, since it refers to the education of people with particular challenges: poverty, illness, social challenges, migration, disabilities... In this perspective, we will begin with the 19th century and its industrial revolution. We know that children in risk or people with disabilities did exist, long before the 19th, and that charity organizations took them in charge, when it was possible. Still, in this article we will discuss how the industrial culture influenced the European concept of education and how social education was a particular response to this industrialized education system. Because it was about poor and fragile people, social education had to find alternative ways to educate children and adults who couldn’t -or who didn’t want to- be in the official, «normal» way of education.

It is also Interesting to notice that this focus on the «alternative» included in the concept of European social education is still very present today in Latin-American concepts of social work that include «an alternative vision» on people and society conducting to work with them and the «community», in finding and building alternatives together. For this aspect, European social education and Latin-American social work are somehow connected.
A short European «contemporary history» of social education: 1800-1900

19th century was a very hard time for the working-class. Let’s look on the work «Les Misérables» of Victor Hugo or on «Pieter Daens» of Louis-Paul Boon, or on the remarkable movies adapted from those books to feel how catastrophic the situation was: poverty, ignorance, isolation and restructuring of social links and families, especially for the crowds of migrant workers coming from the countryside to the cities.

In this context, we see two different ways of working with children, adults or elderly people in difficulty:

a. Charity organisations confessional or not, solidarity organizations, volunteers going in the streets and districts where poor people were living, encountering families and bringing them food, clothes, wood or coal and when there is still time for this, education... to help them a few.

b. Residential homes organized for people who are in too extreme situations. The principle is to host them in some host-institutions, on the mode of the «hospitium» of the «internat». The common point between those people is... «the handicap or the difficulty» that can be social, medical, psychological, but also cultural, economical... Therefore, the result, is that those institutions will be general internats, with non-specific care, mixing people with different needs (as it was sometimes the case in medieval hospices). Youngsters were also hosted with adults and elderly persons (for example, in mental health). From these two examples of intervention we can already see a premise or a kind of prefiguration of what is called today «indoor» and «outdoor» social work.

In this context, there is no place for social education as a job or as a status: those two ways of intervention, include some social and educational dimension made by the people who are there to do this. Usually the work is conducted by a priest or a nun, a nurse, a volunteer, a syndicalist, but with no social helpers or social educators, in this century seriously trained and officially recognized as qualified professionals. This reality will appear later.

In the process of a professionalization of social education there was a progressive specialization inside different institutions, when selecting the people, they will welcome for taking care of them with adapted buildings, methods and tools. This concerns both children and adults. On the early 1800s, for example, we can find in Europe institutions for children with disabilities mixing all kinds of disabilities. This will progressively change, in the second half of the 19th, taking into account some progresses made in medicine, education and the early begin of psychology: schools for children with sensorial disabilities (deaf and blind children), residential homes for children with mental troubles (sometimes still confusing disorders and disabilities), asylums and heating places for vagabonds and workless people, night hospitality for elderly people in need, first «night asylums for women... The «professionals who will work in those institutions are most of the time people with no specific «social» training. Their profile is most of the time the ability to be there, doing the job for few money or as volunteers. The question of their «vocation» for the job is not so easy to analyse. What we know from history, is that there were occasional problems with violence particularly with children and people with disabilities. This was unfortunately common at that time as the consideration of fragile people was sometimes very disturbing for economical management. However, an evolution of the respect of the workers their conditions, especially with the development of socialism and a bit later of social democracy, will also change the situation in the 20th century. In Belgium, the second industrial nation in the world after Great Britain, for example, the first law regulating working conditions for children appeared in 1889.
1900-1950

This law helped to change slowly the minds and the practices since it created limits to the exploitation of youngsters in the factories: prohibition of employing children under 12 and with a maximum of 12 hours per day, aged between 12 and 16 (21 for girls). Night work was not allowed for boys before 16 years old and girls before they were 21 years old. This first law was limited to factories, workshops or mines where the work was considered to be «dangerous». More restrictive laws came in 1911 and 1914. This evolution will happen all over Europe with laws on school obligation - «Ferry» laws in France, for example, between 1890 and 1911- or organizing school obligation until 14 between 1890 and 1940 in most European countries. This is an important start-point showing how human fragility will be progressively taken in consideration in the parameters of industrial European society. These laws led the attention to fragility in the heart core of social education and allowed the development and officialise of a progressive organization of social-educational care work for several fragile populations: children and youngsters at risk, women, people with disabilities, adults with illness, elderly people... In 1901 in France and in 1902 in Belgium, the first laws on children protection emerged... Concerning disabilities, the laws would come later. As «inadapted persons» or «inadapted children» those populations would be considered as in need of medical help more than of educational adapted help. That is why, all over Europe, we will see the first laws organizing institutions working on different disabilities starting from the years 1930 on to the seventies and in some cases, even later.

A last example is the official accompanying of young mothers during the time of birth and early childhood through consultations and family visits. This started in Europe between 1850 and 1930, with the foundation in different countries of «national associations of birth and childhood» that were clearly more oriented to «early childhood» since the reduction of mortality rates amongst children and mothers was an emergent challenge (in the 1850, half of born babies or young children didn’t survive...). Later in the years 1920-40, leisure centres and summer camps for children and youngsters, were also organized or supervised by those associations. This is also connected with laws on «paid holidays» for adult workers that starts in different European countries, around 1936.

Between 1950 and 2000

After this view of a general historical European development of including the «fragility care» in the management of industrial society, we can now look more precisely to the official and professionalized social education construction that arrived clearly after the Second World War.

In France, an important law on «Social help for childhood” was voted in 1945 and most of the European countries reorganised this help, due to the number of orphan children at the end of the conflict. Children homes were thus organized and those homes needed caretakers. Those “caretakers” had no training and no professional specificity. They were recruited because they were ready to do the job, for a low salary. This led, in several cases, to scandals when the newspapers told stories about institutions where children were beat, subjected to violence and other revelations about those «children prisons». There were also articles and books written by former residents of those «prisons» bringing testimonies on the bad treatments they received and the non-respectful way they were «educated» by their caretakers: contempt, abuse, neglecting were for many of them an everyday experience.

Discovering this reality was a chock for public opinions and governments and raised awareness about the necessity of organizing a serious professional training for the candidates to a job in social education, at the time still called education for «inadapted people». Educating was, in this context, often limited to the idea of «adapting people to society».

Higher schools for social education started to exist from private initiatives in the years 1930 and became more developed in 1950’s and 1960’s. At the same time, the «Golden sixties» allowed an important development of measures in favour of people with disabilities and with mental illness. Finally, new laws for child protection helped a better organisation of the protection and welcoming of children and youth in risk.

In the 1960’s – 1970’s, the number of schools or training institutions for social educators will really explode. Each region of Europe will progressively have at least one school for higher education of social educators. In parallel to this, the international recognition of the profession will start in 1951 with the creation of AIEJI 4, that is until today an international reference platform.
Different labels but common values in European social education

Social educator, social care worker or youth community worker, sozial erzieher or sozial pedagog, opvoeder-begleider. These are a few examples of labels present in Europe to name what is called, in French, «éducateur spécialisé» in France, Belgium and Switzerland. In those countries, before the 1960’s they were also called «éducateur social». This diversity of labels is probably created to different timelines of development of the profession in Europe. As we saw above, there was sometimes gaps between 30 and 70 years for some steps of development. Does this mean that the identity of social education would be more sensible to the cultural and historical fluctuations than to the basic values of the profession? Yes and No

Yes, because different geographical and historical contexts, diversity of languages, political initiatives -sometimes contradictory- have built different vision and practices on education, on what is marginalization and on what we call «social» in social professions. As an example, between Europe and Latin America, we see that the words «laborador social» and «educator social» include the notion of «alternative worker or educator». It includes a research of another way for educating in difficult circumstances. Often, on this continent, the word «social» is associated to the idea of «doing differently», of daring an alternative with everyday work with an important socio-political dimension. An educator is not only there to accompany people in their life challenges, he/she is also aware of the challenging of a society that allows, and sometimes strengthens in its organisation, the misery and injustice that constitute the basic problems for those people. In Europe, the vision is inversed. We look more to social education as an everyday tool to repair the accidents of life connected with this misery and injustice. Nevertheless, socio-political awareness is not so
present in training or in professional practices. Perhaps we can connect this difference with the fact evocated in the begin of this article: Latin America is composed essentially with former colonized countries where, at the same time, Europe was a colonizer. This probably contributed to a different vision of what is socially and politically correct to say and to do. So this comparison with Latin America can also be made between different European countries. Integration of socio-political awareness can be very different or expressed very differently in southern or northern European countries. Being connected with geographical and climate conditions and with the fact that the south was traditionally more influenced by Catholic Church, whereas northern countries were more protestant. Also today, we see important differences between west and east European countries, for example, in the way of experimenting hierarchy. The fact that east countries were deeply influenced by communist policies from years 1920 to the beginning of the 1990’s is probably an interesting start point for the exploration of this and the story of its influence on education.

No, because behind different priorities, different names and labels we can observe a common sensitivity, a consciousness of doing the same job, of being in the same profession in different cultural contexts. This is what the members of international associations experiment as in AIEJI but also in the FESET\(^1\), the European association for schools, universities and training centres in Social Education. Those associations organize congresses, every two years, where the discussed topics enter in a deep resonance between the participants from countries of all Europe and outside of it. We see that through the borders, with different words and different cultural experiences, those educators from all countries recognize each other and discover common values that are basic and evident: interpersonal and relational work, educability of each human being, sense of solidarity, of alterity, social justice, work with groups and individuals, creativity and creative methods... Practices are sometimes different in Europe but this common base of values, this deep agreement on ethical questions seems to be in the heart of the professional identity of European social education.

Other international associations, thinking and working on «social professions», give an important place to social education as profession and as a scientific and creative mode of intervention. ENSACT\(^4\) and AIFRIS\(^5\) also discuss the articulation between the different social professions in different European countries and others: social assistant, social educator, medico-social worker, psychologist, socio-cultural animator, street social worker. All those jobs have to collaborate in the everyday work and cross their interventions, if they want to be efficient. It is also a common value for European educators that brings here a double value: educational team working as a synergetic space for facing the difficult educational challenges and inter-professional team working as a federative power of competencies allowing facing the multidimensionality of the encountered situations.

The essential part of individual work is also recognized in all the countries: it is about working in the proximity, in a real human presence, in everyday life, in the encounter of the other, threefold: physically, mentally and affectively, where the educator is paying with his or her personality.

Currently, we observe in every European country a paradox between an «individual work», trapped in a social engineering of «social active state» with the idea that every person can be «activated», and a «group work» in a more communitarian philosophy. This Individual / Common paradox is present in Europe today, and less in Africa or in Latin-America, continents where the question of social links is so crucial and more evident.
Conclusion

We saw that the evolution of social education since the 1800s is clearly one from working with all kind of «inadapted persons» on a charitable way in a context of industrial society based on production, efficiency and profitability. This was a challenge for social education: to find answers to the specific needs of people. The identity of social educators in Europe was progressively based on 5 axes:

1. Evolution in distinguishing the needs: mental health, different disabilities, social needs, specific fragilities with little children or elderly people, children in educational risk, adult in problems, etc...

2. Proposition of more adapted responses to those needs, particularly due to the development of scientific knowledge and the creation of specialized institutions for encountering those needs;

3. A spectacular humanisation of those institutions throughout 20th century, from an «industrial methodology» in big internats with hundreds of people, big dormitories and few specific help in the everyday life, to a more «familial» dimension, with services from 15 to 25 people and more social, medical, psychological and educational workers to take care of them.

4. Professionalization of social educators, with the founding schools of social education with a higher education level, crossing theoretical study with practical training trough internships and precise professional activity analysis.

5. Europeanisation and internationalisation of this social education identity since the 1950’s and throughout the creation of international associations.

The social educator is in the centre of this evolution because he recognizes him or herself as an actor and an artist of encounter between individuals and groups in the heart of social difficulties in everyday life. He knows by his work how many the solidarity of a group can be an opportunity for an individual and how much this person can bring to the group. This is, perhaps, one of the deepest influences that European social education brings to social work, particularly in a context of a changing world, where respect for the fragile part of humanity is, once again, in discussion.

Notes
1 QUERRIEN Anne et STENGERS Isabelle: «L’école mutuelle: une pédagogie trop efficace» Ed: Les empêcheurs de penser en rond 2005
3 BOON Louis Paul «Pieter Daens of hoe in de negentiende eeuw de arbeiders van Aalst vochten tegen armoede en onrecht Amsterdam, De Arbeiderspers 1971
4 LE CHANOIS Jean-Paul «Les misérables» Movie 1958
5 HOSSEIN Robert «les misérables» Movie 1982
6 CONINX Stijn «Daens» Movie 1992
8 AIEJI (association internationale des éducateurs de jeunes inadaptés) www.aiei.net
9 CAPUL Maurice Dir. «L’invention de l’enfance inadaptée» Erès 2010
10 GILLET F. «Dimension internationale du métier d’éducateur spécialisé» in Les Carnets de l’éducateur Ed. Rhizome 2013
11 FESET: Formation Européenne des Educateurs - European Social Education Training - www.feset.org
12 ENSACT: European Net of Social Action - www.ensact.org
13 AIFRIS: Association internationale pour la Recherche, la Formation et l’Intervention Sociale www.aifris.eu
References


