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Discovering pioneering women in the field of adult education

ABSTRACT: The lack of visibility of women in history has long been noted, and notably, the field of adult education remains particularly understudied from a gender perspective. However, in recent years, a number of researchers studying various kinds of adult or popular education have become increasingly interested in women as audiences or initiators of adult classes or the professionalisation of women. In this article we will argue that “discovering” does not necessarily mean revealing unknown personalities. Various meanings of the word “pioneering” will also be discussed. Finally, we will question the term “the field of adult education”. Discovering pioneering women may mean that the field needs to be reshaped and its borders reconsidered or connected with other social fields.

KEYWORDS: Women history, biographical turn, gender studies, adult education.

Most French historiography of adult and popular education has long identified a number of pioneers as adult educators or adult education promoters: for example, Joseph-Marie de Gérando, Charles Dupin, Jean Macé, Auguste Perdonnet, and Georges Dehesme in the 19th century; Marc Sangnier, Robert Garric in the early 20th century; and many more in subsequent periods. Most were the founders of societies or bodies who worked in what would gradually become adult education (adult schools, public lectures, evening classes, popular universities, study circles, and so on). If we add to these names the politicians who encouraged actions in this area to this list, such as François Guizot, Victor Duruy, and Léon Bourgeois, or senior officials such as Edouard Petit, we obtain a picture of the development of French adult ed-

ucation that was led solely by male figures, one that generally addressed the needs of male workers.

Indeed, if one only considers the adult classes that were promoted by the State and implemented in schools, women workers were truly forgotten when adult education began in 1830s France, up to the 1860s. We know, however, that they were involved in other previous initiatives, and yet very few historians have studied this phenomenon or identified women as promoters of adult education or adult educators. This trend is now being reversed thanks to recent historical research. Following the first publications on women's history in the 1970s and the development of gender studies in the 1980s and 1990s, many social domains have been scrutinized and their past reread in order to emphasise the role played by women. Nonetheless, the field of adult education remains understudied from a gender perspective.

Starting from the French case, but then expanding our reflections to a transnational level, this contribution provides an opportunity to discuss what is meant by "discovering pioneering women in the field of adult education", and to examine each word of this phrase.

"Discovering" does not necessarily mean revealing unknown personalities. Various meanings of the word "pioneering" will also be discussed. Finally, we will question the term "the field of adult education". Discovering pioneering women may mean that the field needs to be reshaped and its borders reconsidered or connected with other social fields, such as social work, parental education or emancipatory (gender) education. The resources dedicated to adult education and its modalities should also be reconsidered, notably by attaching greater importance to the reading of journals and booklets and to certain women's meetings.

A research project brought on by a variety of trends

"History is wholly to be remade"

These words were written by a woman who signed her articles "Henriette, artist" in the columns of the journal *La voix des femmes*¹ (The Women's Voice) in revolutionary 1848 Paris: "If history is jeopardized, this is due to false judgments and involuntary or calculated omissions more than to the facts themselves. [...] History is mostly a lie for the woman and [...] the truth will

¹ A journal created by Eugénie Niboyet, which was written by women for women.

only emerge when female observation and intelligence take part, and above all, relate it to female concerns²”

The lack of visibility of women in history has long been noted. What was missing was women historians who were sufficiently well known to be able to denounce the silences of history (Perrot, 1998) and try to search for them through research programmes, which is what some western historians have succeeded in doing since the 1970s and 1980s, led in France by Michelle Perrot.

This first became possible when academic careers for women became feasible *and* considered socially as valid, and then when the idea of gender-situated epistemology was finally acknowledged in the academic field, or in other words when gender became a useful category for historical analysis, as Joan Scott (1986) has put it.

It took some time before these conditions were in place. Previously, denouncements of the invisibility of women in history had been viewed as a marginalised form of activism, and women had been shouting in the desert for many years without being heard. These days, however, projects to discover pioneering women in the field of adult education can benefit from all the advancements of the past 40 years and from the abundant international and national academic literature produced in the field of women's history and gender studies.

A biographical turn

The aim of this project also falls within a recent biographical trend that we might call a biographical turn, one that is itself favoured by gender studies. Biographies are not an innovative approach to history: in the past they were mostly about kings or other important state figures, those “Great Men” to whom the fatherland is grateful, as we read on the pediment of the Panthéon in Paris. What has emerged in recent years is an interest in the everyday lives of unknown people, some of whom are very simple women or men. Scrutinising their everyday lives has become a new way of entering history, and their actions and engagements sometimes turn out to be an important way of discovering social or political phenomena that had hitherto gone unnoticed. In this way, biographies of “ordinary” women often reveal important social roles or unexpected skills that call previous analyses into question. Some of these

² Henriette, artiste (1848), *Les sages-femmes d'Athènes*, *La voix des femmes*, no. 28, 20 April 1848.

women were not so unknown at other times, but the memory of their roles has been erased. They disappeared from the “official history” and were not taught at school. They were women such as Olympe de Gouges, whose name only appeared in French history school textbooks in the 2000s. Historical research that brings some of these forgotten political figures, including Saint-Simonian and Fourierists, back into favour has been published since the 1990s. For example, Michèle Riot-Sarcey’s book (1994) on “three critical figures of power” – Désiret Véret, Eugénie Niboyet and Jeanne Deroin – gives us some elements of their biographies. In the area of the history of trade unionism, the book on Lucie Baud (1870–1913), which was published with the title “*Mélancolie ouvrière*” (Perrot, 2014), describes the life of a woman who was a worker from the time she was 12 years old. It shows how she almost unwittingly became a strike leader and the founder of a women’s trade union. The unusual life of Mme Luce (1804–1882), who moved from France to the colonies, where she founded the first French school for Muslim girls in Algiers in 1845, is also worthy of mention (Rogers, 2013). In order to reconstruct all the events in her life, Rebecca Rogers carried out a real detective-style investigation, using the smallest details and following in the footsteps of Mme Luce at a number of locations in France and Algeria. There are also transnational dimensions in later works, which are at the heart of Françoise Thébaud’s (2017) book on Marguerite Thibert, a civil servant at the International Labour Organisation. Interweaving an individual biography and institutional dimensions, she calls her approach an “impersonal biography”, one that enables her to map the issue of women’s labour as it was debated during the period between the wars.

All these works open up a pathway, and are extremely inspiring. We can also see that recent international collective books have assembled several different biographies in order to map an area, retrace the history of an institution, or uncover transnational networks (Boris, Hoehcker, Zimmermann, 2018), including educational ones (Fitzgerald, Smyth, 2014). This biographical turn is now reaching the field of adult education.

What does “discovering pioneering women in the field of adult education” mean?

The meaning of “pioneering women”

If we look in a dictionary, we see that the word “pioneer” has several different meanings. A pioneer can be someone who is the first to open or prepare a pathway, or who is the first in any field of enquiry, enterprise or

progress. Being the first means there will be followers, which implies having a minimum amount of room for manoeuvre and benefiting from adequate social recognition. As far as women were concerned, however, neither condition was satisfied until recent decades. In the 19th and first half of the 20th century, women's actions unfolded within the context of a lack of civil, social and political rights.

Gender studies use this term in a different way. Pioneering women are those who first broke into strictly male spaces, which “they cluttered with their unusual presence” (Gardey, 2000, p. 29). These women were, sometimes despite themselves, forced to adopt other ways of being female, often by assuming male norms, in order to reach a place that had been refused to them. They thus had to fight for themselves above all, and they did not always work together. This is the meaning of the term “pioneering women” that Sylvie Schweitzer (2010) uses in her transnational history essay. She shows how women progressed professionally in European spheres of power in successive waves, benefiting from international lobbying by associations of “first women” such as the International Federation of University Women or the International Federation of Business and Professional Women.

Nevertheless, the struggle to make room within the male universe is not the main concept we want to convey. Without always being the *first* to do things, women *did* collective work, opening up new – or different – paths in the field of adult education, some successfully founding institutions or sowing seeds that were then harvested by others (both women and men). In order to achieve this, they knew how to use the little room they were offered. Some undoubtedly forced doors open, but more often than not they took advantage of the lack of formal prohibitions in certain areas that were reserved to women, such as social or charitable activities.

If we study their actions, we can also add that they were rarely isolated: they were involved in networks and benefited from various kinds of support. But all these characteristics may well have been the same for pioneering men whose actions may have been highlighted by historiography without enough attention being paid to those around them.

A pioneer is also one of the first people to settle in a region or colonize an area. In the 19th century, the ‘territory’ of adult education was new to everyone, and both the women and men involved in it were the first in the field. This is particularly relevant with reference to the social settlement movement, in which women played a considerable role after the 1880s in England, the USA and France, when social and educational centres began to be opened in the poor neighbourhoods of large cities at the very end of the 19th century.

The problem of sources: the many ways of “discovering”

Objective obstacles make it hard to discover pioneering women. Sources on adult education in general are often lacking, or are widely scattered. Because of its diversity and because it was mostly implemented at a local level by small societies, associations or rural municipalities, it has left few traces in the archives. The situation becomes even more complicated when we look at women's actions due to the fact that they had fewer opportunities to write in journals or any other kinds of publication. Because they were excluded from politics, their speeches – if there were any – were not recorded. Speeches are an important source for learning about adult education, but we know that except in rare cases, public speaking was not a common form of communication for women. Information on their actions must be sought elsewhere, therefore.

We can indulge in a fantasy that we might discover a dusty old manuscript in a garret written by an unknown woman who dedicated her life to the idea or development of adult education and wrote about all her experiences in detail in her memoirs, but there is not much chance that this will happen.

More realistic approaches may be explored, like searching for unexploited (or even unidentified) sources on the actions and life of a woman who is still unknown, but whose name is mentioned in archives or a published document on adult classes or some other form of adult education. The names of some women can be found here or there, in fact. This may be a lengthy process, however. There may also be major obstacles to identifying women, because they were often deprived of their own names, or even their first names³. These investigations are inevitably a question of serendipity, of every little piece of evidence, and they may be fruitless in the end, but the risk needs to be taken.

There is another path that can be explored. This consists in taking a new look at the action or writings of women who are already known, but are famous in a domain other than adult education, such as social work, politics or care, including women who took action to inform, sensitise, moralise, politicise or professionalise young women, working women, mothers or their peers. Their actions can be re-read through the gaze of the adult education historian. How did these women succeed in delivering their message? What form did it take? Can it be compared to an adult education initiative?

³ As Geneviève Poujol showed when studying French Protestant women involved in social activism. As spouses, they did not allow themselves – and were not allowed – to be called by their first names, but by those of their husbands (Pougeol, 2003, p. 34).

“Discovering” may consist in emphasising less known facets of the actions of people who are already known, therefore, in highlighting what gave birth to their ideas and in revealing intimate facts or personal fragments of their lives that give us an understanding of why they were involved in education and social activities.

(Re-)Mapping the field of adult education

If this is to be done, it may mean that the field of adult education needs to be re-mapped. Using the word “adult” in the term “adult education” is a problem when we consider women’s education, because the law denied them their civil and political rights, reducing them to a subsidiary status dependent on their husband’s or father’s guardianship, thereby depriving them of adult status.

If we take for granted the interpretation of the French Minister Guizot, who in 1833 wrote that adult education should benefit the “working generation”, women’s place is called into question once again. Whether they worked or not – and here “work” means “working outside their homes or farms” – women were only given the social role of mothers and spouses. As labour historians and sociologists have shown, women’s work was long ignored and hidden. If they were peasants or traders, they were considered to be the wives of peasants or traders; if they worked in factories, their situation was seen as being fortuitous or temporary, and never a permanent job. Did they really belong to the “working generation”?

In France, women workers were also “forgotten” when adult classes, which were set up for men only, first began. Adult classes for women began more than 30 years later, and the number of women participants started to rise in the 1860s. Co-education was either not envisioned or encountered moral obstacles. Although men could teach women, the opposite was inconceivable. There were rare exceptions, however, like Dick May⁴, who led a conference within the framework of the Popular Universities. But this only occurred at the very end of the 19th century.

If we take all these conditions into consideration, discovering women as adult educators or thinkers on adult education may seem to be doomed to failure. It therefore becomes necessary to pay attention to discourses and arguments developed by women to defend their ideas, notably on women’s education. This may lead to a reshaping of the configuration of the adult edu-

⁴ Alias Jeanne Weil (1859–1925), who contributed to the creation of a school of social studies in Paris.

cation field, to an expansion of its borders that would allow the inclusion of all sorts of activities that are ordinarily consigned to the margins, such as hygiene education, social work, library development, parental accompaniment or activism aimed at giving a voice to those who have previously been silent.

This is the goal of women's and gender history, therefore: not to modify the knowledge on its margins, but to bring about a thorough change in its objectives, methods and epistemology.

Works in progress

This project has only just begun. In recent years, a number of researchers studying various kinds of adult or popular education have become increasingly interested in women as audiences or initiators of adult classes or the professionalisation of women. French publications on this topic are still rare, however, although there are signs that they will become more numerous in the coming years. In 2015, a conference on the history of popular education was held in Lille, and a publication followed (Christen & Besse, 2017) in which a quarter of the contributions were devoted to women. It is not much, but it is far more than had previously been the case.

Adult education in the USA and the role of migrant women

English language literature was not much more abundant until recent years⁵, when a number of studies on the topic of women in adult education were conducted. As far as the USA is concerned, *No Small Lives: Handbook of North American Early Women Adult Educators* (Imel & Bersch, 2014) opened the doors. Its intention was to “restore women to their rightful place in the history of adult education in North America” by presenting 26 women who had been active in the field between 1925 and 1950. Amy Rose talks about a “defeminized past”, and notes that “so far, there has been little effort made to understand the totality of women's contributions to the history of professional adult education” (Rose, 2014, p. 3). Another recently-published book (Tamboukou, 2017) focuses on the role of Fannia Mary Cohn (1885–1962) in workers' education in the USA in the early 20th century. Cohn was a Russian Jewish immigrant in New York, where she worked in the garment sector, later becoming a trade union leader responsible for the education of women

⁵ Except for writings about the Bryn Mawr college experience (Heller, 1986), and the documentary film *The Women of Summer* (1985), directed by Suzan Baumer and produced by Rita Heller.

and men workers in the ILGWU (International Ladies Garment Workers Union). In her book, Tamboukou explores a number of moments in Cohn's life and her ideas, mostly through "autobiographical" letters and photographs. She analyses the importance of migration for the activism of US women in the early 20th century as the result of socio-historical conditions. Like other Central European and Russian migrants who fled to the USA to avoid pogroms and other policies of discrimination, Fannia Cohn had received a relatively good education in her home country. "Apart from their educational capital [they] also carried the political baggage of their involvement in underground revolutionary groups" (Tamboukou, 2017, p. 107), but most of them did not speak a word of English, and they were forced to find low-skilled jobs. They experienced the very hard-working conditions of worker women (mostly migrants) in workshops and the garment industry, which created the conditions that made the emergence of the workers' education movement possible. It is this movement, which Tamboukou calls the "cultural spring", and in which women played a major role – one that remained unknown for many years – that is analysed in depth in her book.

A range of profiles of pioneering women in adult education

In July 2017, Claudie Solar from the University of Montreal and I co-ordinated an international French language seminar in Paris on pioneering women in adult education⁶. Our purpose was to launch a long-term project on the topic and to give researchers an opportunity to meet and discuss the aim of discovering pioneering women. A French book was then published (Laot & Solar, 2018) that presented the lives and ideas of eleven women from various countries: from Belgium, Switzerland and France and one each from the USA and Poland. I worked on the biographies of two of these women, the Frenchwoman Jeanne Deroin, and – with my colleague Ewa Marynowicz-Hetka from the University of Lodz – the Pole Helena Radlińska. Our work illustrates two different ways of 'discovering' pioneering women.

Jeanne Deroin

Jeanne Deroin (1805–1894) is now internationally famous – maybe more in the USA and Great Britain than she is in France! – as the woman who dared to run in the elections in revolutionary France in 1849 at a time when

⁶ *Pionnières de l'éducation des adultes*, Quinzièmes rencontres du réseau international francophone des recherches en éducation et formation (REF), Paris, Cnam, 4–5 July 2017.

women did not have the right to vote, let alone to be elected. Naturally, her candidacy was rejected. She has now become a kind of icon for women's involvement in politics and their struggle for civil rights, even though she was totally marginalised and forgotten during her lifetime. Much has been written about her in the French and English literature⁷, but none of these writings highlight her activities as an adult educator. Her contribution to the education of women was made through the journals she wrote for or founded, as well as in adult classes such as the *Cours de droit social pour les femmes* and history classes. "Discovering" Jeanne Deroin as a pioneering woman in adult education thus consists in selecting and discussing certain facets of her life and actions and issues directly related to what might be understood as "adult education" (Laot, 2018). Some might think that it is pointless to add a new 'label' to her actions, but if we consider that she is mostly known by a few historians in the milieu of gender studies or feminist movements, but is totally unknown in the field of adult education, our argument is that it is useful, and even necessary, to reveal her role in this area. It should also be noted that she was a friend of the well-known male pioneer in adult education Jean Macé, whom she certainly inspired.

Helena Radlińska

Helena Radlińska (1879–1954) was another type of pioneering women, renowned in her own country as the founder of social pedagogy in Polish universities. Because of her involvement in a number international institutions and events (such as the World Conference on Adult Education in Cambridge in 1929), her fame travelled beyond the borders of Poland, notably in the milieu of social work. Her thinking is well known, and is still studied today in university departments in Poland. Although the ties between social pedagogy and adult education were very close, she is less recognised as a pioneering woman in the latter field. Our task of revealing her as a pioneer (Marynowicz-Hetka & Laot, 2018) consisted in exploring certain moments of her life, in particular her youth, when she was involved in a variety of activities, such as popular universities and public libraries, and illustrating her leading role in the publication of a book⁸ that some believe to be the first Polish

⁷ Among the English language literature, see Scott, 1996; Beker, 1997; Pilbeam, 2003, Dixon-Fyle, 2006; and Kunka 2016.

⁸ *Praca oświatowa, jej zadania, metody, organizacja.* (Social Education, Function, Methods and Organisation) Podręcznik opracowany staraniem Uniwersytetu Ludowego im. Adama Mickiewicza, Collectif, Kraków 1913.

book on adult education. What motivated us here was the desire to offer an understanding of what led her to work in this area in the political context of the Russian occupation of her country, through the political and nationalist activism of members of her family (particularly, her uncle “Bos”, who, as she wrote, initiated her into social activism). Unlike many women, she left behind a large number of published writings, including biographical writings. As in the previous case, we wanted to bring together details of an individual biography, family cultural characteristics and information on the broader political and social context in order to offer an in-depth understanding of what gave rise to her ideas and how they were received.

Progressive, but not always feminist, figures

In our book, the actions of the eleven female figures whose lives we described varied very much. They related to professional adult women’s education (for example, book-keeping and commercial training for women), trade unionism, health education, philanthropy, politics and democracy and social work. Some of these women were fighting for women’s emancipation, while others were clearly “non-feminists” whose purpose was not to change the social order or even to claim more rights: on the contrary, it is precisely because of what they suggested doing, or what they actually did – which sometimes reinforced gender norms – that they were tolerated or supported. Women’s education often progressed in those areas that were reserved to them, like motherhood or housekeeping. Of course, these published portraits make up a very short list. The European seminar in Paris in July 2018⁹ and this *Social Pedagogy* issue can be seen as a further development and, we hope, a new step in a long march that is now more open.

Conclusion

Shedding light on the role of women in the field of adult education is a real challenge for the entire history of the field, and may lead to a blurring of the frontiers between a number of different practice areas, both those to which women were admitted and those that were traditionally considered to be male adult educational activities.

⁹ *Pioneering Women and Men in European Adult Education*, European Seminar, Paris, University of Paris Descartes, History of Adult Education and Training in Europe Network, European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) Cerlis, Gehfa 4, 5 and 6 July 2018.

Given that so few women are known as pioneers in adult education, particularly in France – but in other countries, too, I fear – much still remains to be done. It is interesting to note that when struggling for their rights, women sought the support of a variety of international networks, which represented an opportunity for the spreading of ideas. Some should be selected and scrutinised in order to study the ways in which ideas on adult women's education circulated – from whom to whom, from where to where, and with what aims, support, hindrances and successes. Focusing on the European links among pioneering women is a very exciting project, as is assembling international teams who share the same objectives. I wonder whether this might be shared among different research networks: ours on the history of adult education and training in Europe¹⁰ and others such as Feminist Labour History and the Workers' Education Research Network with whom I have recently crossed paths at international conferences of European Labour History networks¹¹. Let us now think about cross-networking and shared actions on this topic in the future.

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¹⁰ ESREA (see previous footnote).

¹¹ <https://www.socialhistoryportal.org/elhn>

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