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Isabelle Gatti de Gamond (1839–1905): from liberal discipline to biopolitics

For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued. But *politics* and *representation* are controversial terms. On the one hand, *representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women. (Butler, 2006, p. 46)

ABSTRACT: Isabelle Gatti de Gamond is often presented as one of the first Belgian feminists: she fought for a serious and modern education for women – a set of claims that were at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth by no means traditional in Belgium, given the complete absence of public institutions for the education of women. She has been very much involved in building an entire archipelago of liberal institutions for women, from their childhood to adulthood. And her discourses and institutions have been largely taken up by a growing number of liberal thinkers throughout the second half of the nineteenth century (but also by Catholics or socialists) to become almost hegemonic at the turn of the twentieth century. But by redefining women as “natural educators”, we will show by analyzing her discourses and studies on her work, how she participated in the production of the belief that there are properties essential to women and which all women share.

KEY WORDS: Adult education, Belgium, educational sciences, feminism, woman education.

Zoé and Isabelle Gatti de Gamond are both often presented as the first Belgian feminists: they fought for equal social respect and equal payment for

male and female teachers, as well as for a serious and modern education for girls, with a program comparable to the official program for boys – a set of claims that were at the time, by no means traditional, given the complete absence of public secondary schools for girls and the often very low intellectual level required in the existing private schools (mostly Catholic). Note that in Belgium, throughout the nineteenth century, the movement for women's education is part of a political geography marked by a cleavage between the Catholic and the liberal party (hereinafter Catholic and liberal). This very significant conflict more generally characterizes the organization of society between Catholic and liberal organizations in Belgium, rendering illusory any attempt to maintain the question of women outside political parties. But for both liberals and Catholics, as elsewhere in the world, it is mainly the patriarchal order that is maintained and influences the status of women (Gubin, Piette, Jacques, 1997, p. 66).

The discourses of Zoé and Isabelle Gatti de Gamond and the institutions they set up have been largely taken up by a growing number of liberal thinkers throughout the second half of the nineteenth century (but also by Catholics, socialists or trade unionists) to become almost hegemonic at the turn of the twentieth century. Isabelle Gatti de Gamond has been very much involved in building an entire archipelago of liberal institutions for the education of women, from their childhood to adulthood. But by redefining women as “natural educators”, we will show how Isabelle Gatti de Gamond (1830–1905) – the daughter of Zoé Gamond (1806–1854), one of the first Belgian women founders of women's educational institutions, participated in the production of the category of women and more specifically, the belief that there are properties essential to women and which all women share.

Through her publications and various biographies as well as studies of the history of women and education in Belgium, we will present her work aiming to build an entire system of liberal education for women from a theoretical and institutional point of view. We will pay particular attention to the scientification of her discourse from the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century and the various tensions and paradoxes that explode at the end of her life between emancipation vs educationalization, science vs moral, gender equality vs women specificities.

Note that in this article the adult education term may be broader than in other articles in this review. On the one hand, because until the end of the nineteenth century, in popular circles, the *infants* was still the one who could not speak. Young people were at the time considered at a very young age as small adults in reduction who participated massively in the production, the revolts and the life of debauchery. As for bourgeois circles, until the First World

War, the notion of adolescence did not exist. Therefore, the notion of adult does not correspond to our representations of different ages, but more generally to what we would call adolescence. On the other hand, we will see that in each of the different theoretical initiatives or in the practical achievements of Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, through the idea of educating mothers or future mothers to become natural educators, we can always find the problem of adult education in a direct or indirect way.

The 19th century conjuncture in Belgium

Unlike France, in the early nineteenth century, Belgium did not have a feminist revolutionary tradition. However, the interest in girls' and women's education was very precocious for some women (Caroline Weissenbruch, Zoé Parent, Euphrosine Beernaert, Pauline l'Olivier, Eugenie Poulet...) and crystallized around Zoe Gatti, Isabelle Gatti de Gamond mothers, and her new theories on women's education. Defending social progress for women, she is often presented as the first Belgian feminist with her famous book *De la condition sociale de la femme au XIX^e siècle* (1834) [On The Social Condition of Women in the 19th century]. Born in a family of notables and intellectuals where the doctrine of "free examination" was always very important, Zoé Gatti was a pioneer in women's education and more specifically in women adult education with her adult school for workers, which she founded with Eugénie Poulet in 1835.

If during the first half of the 19th century Zoé Gamond's speeches were marginalized and her experiments were short-lived, from the 1850s onward, education of women became fundamental, in Belgium, in the struggle between Catholics and Liberals. A new strategy was taking shape. In order to allow the rise of liberalism, it was essential to fight the obscurantism of mothers and wives who were under the influence of the clergy. "The woman, future wife and educator, subject to the Church, appears like a Trojan horse in the heart of the liberal families" (Gubin, Piette, Jacques, 1997, p. 47). To put an end to this danger, it is the older daughter of Zoé Gatti de Gamond, Isabelle Gatti of Gamond, who will realize part of the ambitions of the first generation of "feminists" in Belgium, with the support of the communal administrations of the big cities (as Brussels) and the young liberals.

Isabelle Gatti de Gamond

Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, born in Paris in 1839, grew up surrounded by her mother Zoé Gamond, writer and pedagogue; her father, Jean Bap-

tise Gatti, an Italian painter; and two younger sisters, Zoe (1840–1859) and Marie (1848–1889). When Zoé Gatti de Gamond died in 1854, Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, was fifteen years old and in a difficult financial situation – after the investment of the family fortune by her parents in failed experiments of a phalansterian community in France. Isabelle Gatti de Gamond began therefore to work and became a nanny in the service of Polish aristocrats. She remained in Poland for five years and took advantage of this stay to perfect, by her own means, her training: she learned Latin and Greek and acquired a solid scientific and philosophical education (De Coster, 1961; Gubin, Piette, Jacques, Puissant, 2006).

When she returned to Belgium in 1861, she decided to take over her mother's work. As Eliane Gubin (2006) explains, "it is difficult to know if she stayed in touch with old relations of her mother that would have favored her projects". Anyway, between 1862 and 1864, she developed her theories and the whole program she was going to put into practice. She published a review "L'éducation et la femme" [Education and the Woman] that attests, through its collaborators, the relations of Isabelle Gatti de Gamond with a certain Parisian educational environment with Jean Macé (the founder of the Ligue de l'enseignement in France) as one of the central figures.

Isabelle Gatti de Gamond representation of women in "L'éducation et la femme"

Despite the fact that the journal was characterized as 'very progressive' (see Flour, Jacques, Marissal, 1994, p. 112), as exemplified in the following statement, the contemporary reader can be struck by the traditional character of Gatti's representation of gender:

What do we say about these overzealous champions who, in order to free women, wanted to deprive her of the attributes of her sex, to tear her from her duties as a girl, a wife and a mother to associate her with their political struggles? to the government of the States, to admit it to the tribune, to the bar, to the army, what do I know? These have misunderstood both the nature and destiny of the woman. Its part is beautiful enough, so that it does not envy that of the other half of the human race. To her, the domain of the family [...], the care to charm her man, to inspire him with the love of work and virtue (Gatti de Gamond, 1862, p. 10).

For Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, as for her mother Zoé Gatti de Gamond, even if they always defended a certain social status for women (both in society and in family), in any case, they never defended the idea that they must

share male functions or become like them. “It is crucial and even salutary, for a society to reach a better performance, that women play their female role as protector angels of the household” (Gatti de Gamond, 1834, pp. 8–9):

Mother and educator, the woman creates the moral atmosphere in which a nation lives (Gatti de Gamond, 1907, IV).

Since God has given her a special capacity to educate, she must consider her intellectual and moral education as a way of fulfilling the divine plan (Cited in Wils, 1999).

Teaching is a natural extension of motherhood. Therefore, all girls being destined to be mothers, that is to say educators, any primary school should be a normal school (Gatti de Gamond, 1907, pp. IV–V).

This is a quite popular male Victorian claim that radical British feminists will fight. As shown by Kaat Wils (1999), “it is of course difficult to assess how much of this language was due to a chosen strategy to attract a (bourgeois) reading public, and how much reflects Gatti’s ‘real’ conviction”. However, given the impossibility to find a solution to these kinds of questions, “it appears more interesting to investigate how this discourse could function within Gatti’s feminism, or how her feminism integrated or transgressed the gender identities she continually referred to” (Wils, 1999).

Isabelle Gatti de Gamond’s institutions during the second half of the 19th century

In 1864, with the help of Henri Berge, a chemist, free-mason and professor at the Université de Bruxelles and in collaboration with the city of Brussels, Isabelle Gatti de Gamond founds an institute of young women conceived on a new level (« un institut de jeunes filles, conçu sur un plan nouveau » – n°68 rue du Marais) : an “Education Course” (un Cours d’Education) that became quickly very successful.

As Eliane Gubin and Valérie Piette (2006) have shown, “more than a teaching method, the Gatti system” was a unique educational system” for two reasons (p. 269). Through knowledge of the rationally intelligible laws of nature, for the first time in Belgium, Isabelle Gatti de Gamond demanded a solid scientific education for women against two evils she considered typical of the world of many women (especially of the higher classes): superstition and the escape into a world of fantasy (Wils, 1999). Second, even if during the first part of her life she was not against religion, she imposed in her institution’s total neutrality in religious matters, leaving families to raise their chil-

dren in the religion of their choice. For these reasons, “the girl Gatti” quickly becomes the threat for Catholics and her “school without God” the target of their attacks (Gubin, Piette, 2006, p. 269). Nevertheless, students kept registering and as the requests for registration continued to rise, a second course was opened, rue de la Paille, on October 2, 1876, under the direction of Mr. Dachsbeck, a first-time worker at the girls’ school, considered as one of the most deserving collaborators of Isabelle Gatti de Gamond.

Given that the quality of teachers was a priority for Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, she also organized, alongside the “Education Course” and its three years of secondary education, a “Normal Course” (un Cours Normal) – draft of a teacher training school. The success of that initiative was also immediate: the sections multiplied and diversified, progressively offering the whole range of options for girls, from nursery schools to normal teaching (Gubin, Piette, 2006, p. 268). The trend was set. The same year an association for the vocational education of women was founded by Jonathan Bisschoffsheim (philanthropist, banker and liberal politician) and very quickly similar institutes opened in various cities (De Coster, 1961; Gubin, Piette, Jacques, 1997, p. 50; Van den Dungen, 2000, p. 191).

Isabelle Gatti de Gamond’s influence on adult education throughout the second half of the 19th century

Initially, the speeches and demands forged by Zoe and Isabelle Gatti de Gamond were mostly taken up by so-called “radical” liberals who took advantage of their electoral victories to impose certain reforms relating to the education of women: in 1880, the Liberals of Brussels organized for example a normal course for the training of teachers with the scientific elite of the Free University of Brussels (ULB) such as Vanderkindere, Stiénon, Denis, Marchai, Buisset, etc. ; and in 1881, Pierre Van Humbeek (the very first minister of public education) created for the girls, a lower secondary education organized by the State.

After 1886 and especially in the 1890s, the speeches of the Gamond Gatti were taken up by more and more important sections of society: the doctrinaire liberals, the socialists and even some Catholics. Everything happened as if confronted with the revolts of the late nineteenth century (from the industrialization of production), all relied on the establishment of a new family order, favored by the education of the young worker to her role as housewife (Grootaers, 1998). Thus, despite the long Catholic governance from 1884 to 1914, a whole architecture defending the teaching of women was set up, in-

cluding the ministerial circular on the institution of Household Schools of 26 June 1889 which established the need to educate the worker in order to overcome misery and protest movements (Ministerial Circular of June 26, 1889, pp. XXIII–XXIV). In 1890, the question of the education of women was timidly introduced into the Belgian law on higher education (granting women admission to all faculties and allowing them to practice medicine and to be pharmacist). In 1891, a Belgian League for the Rights of Women (Ligue belge pour le droit des femmes), like the French League, was formed around Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, who also founded, a year later, a pre-university section (preparing in three years, young girls to pass the state exam).

Isabelle Gatti de Gamond Higher Education Project for Women in 1893

In a Special Higher Education Project for Women written in 1893, Isabelle Gatti de Gamond continued to defend the philosophy of science in order to rehabilitate the housewife. The only objection that could be made to the broad expansion of higher education – she warns us – is to awaken needs and ambitions that society would not be able to satisfy. But she continues:

this objection is of no effect here, because it is about developing female skills for women's functions; to attach a social being to a necessary activity, to which the nature and organization of this same society is called upon. It is a reclassification, not a downgrading (p. 35).

Isabelle Gatti de Gamond therefore thought her project of higher education for an audience of young women stimulated by the same pious concern:

We can summarize the program in this simple formula: "Nothing that touches the child should remain alien to the mother". And to do this, "we will teach all that the young mother must know to bring into the world and bring up healthy children able to take an active part one day in the common work (pp. 35–36).

Thus, for Isabelle Gatti of Gamond, all women should master "the philosophy of the domestic economy", to bring, "in this industry as in others, a saving of time and effort and an increase in the results" (pp. 40–41).

Cultivating female skills is about taking up women's roles. The woman whose mind has been subjected to the scientific discipline, who has enclosed in a broad synthesis all the details of her activity, will establish order and harmony around her.

It will create an environment of morality, prosperity, from civilization and progress, which she will be the first to benefit from. In-depth knowledge of the domestic economy will be for her not only a means of asserting her personality in the circle of the family, but the key to lucrative professions; new professions born of new skills or new needs; old professions raised by the fact of the recovery of the agents and the circles [...] It is certainly not indifferent, to raise the condition and the salary of the women, that the greatest number of them represent the right woman in the right place. One of the advantages of these professions is that they would introduce the girl to her duties as a married woman, and that she, if pressed by the circumstances, could always resume her rank among the working women. [...] How not to speak beneficently to women? How not to teach some, the best job they can do of their fortune, the others of their time, all of their heart and their sympathy? (Gatti de Gamond, 1907: 40–41).

To do so, the first section of her program of higher education for women was devoted entirely to the domestic sciences : to anatomy and physiology, then hygiene in all its applications to domestic life (the hygiene of the mother and child, the care to be given in early childhood, the sick and convalescents, the elderly and infirm, the care to give in case of accidents); It was also important that they know physics, chemistry, and all the natural sciences applied to the domestic industry (the study of housing in depth as well as the domestic industry and appliances) ; Lastly, it was important to teach them the household's budget and its rational use (especially the comparative value of the cost of food and materials of the domestic industry). As for the second section, it was dedicated to the moral sciences:

It is repeated that the woman is a being of feeling, "but it is not enough to love one's child to give him health, strength and joy, one must know ; likewise, it is not enough to enter the conjugal house with all the imaginable goodwill, to make order and ease prevail in this domain, it is necessary to know. Finally, it is not enough to have your heart touched by the sight of misfortune, to bring about an effective change, you must know. Now, we do not know half, we do not know by almost; above all, we do not think, we do not foresee, we do not provide without strong habits of observation and reflection. If woman must fulfill her great social duties (and she cannot escape them without compromising the future of the species), she cannot remain a being of feeling; but all that is strong in her heart pushes her towards the light, exalts in her the will and the power to know (p.44).

What Isabelle Gatti de Gamond wanted, "it is not the dry acquisition, the notions piling up in the memory, the training of the pedants and the intellectuals" (p. 8). Like the Ligue de l'enseignement or the promoters of a new

educational science at the end of the 19th century in Belgium, she defends a suggestive teaching, based on the awakening of intelligences and the development of faculties (Roland, 2017).

Metamorphosis of Isabelle Gatti de Gamond's discourse at the turn of the 20th century

Although the scientific perspective has always been important for Isabelle Gatti Gamond and her mother, “during the first part of her career, Gatti remained close to a more traditional, somewhat abstract vision of gender difference, defined in the first place as a difference in mission and destiny, and inscribed in a metaphysically interpreted difference of ‘nature’ “(Wils, 1999). At the turn of the 20th century, Gatti de Gamond's philosophical orientation underwent a considerable transformation. As Wils has shown “her moderate rationalism was replaced by a virulent hostility towards any form of dogmatic religion”, “her deistic worldview was replaced by a positivist worship of science” and “gender difference was defined in terms of a scientifically established distinction, consisting of a biologically rooted sexual difference, legitimized and fortified by a sociologically established gender division” (Wils, 1999).

While until then, Isabelle Gatti de Gamond speeches were mostly oriented towards morality, they were now much more focused on science and, more specifically, on the new positive science of the Free University of Brussels (ULB) being constituted around Hector Denis and the new Solvay laboratories (of physiology, psychophysiology, physical education, sociology) (Roland, 2017). In this perspective, she claimed for women a new domestic economy linked to the vast synthesis of “experimental knowledge”. For Isabelle Gatti of Gamond, it was now hygiene that must prevail in all the elements that constitute the life of the housewife:

[...] feminine science par excellence; which must enlighten the whole activity of the housewife, guide her in all her choices, in all her purchases, in all the arrangements she makes for the well-being, the comfort of her family. In a word, positive science must motivate both its savings projects and its spending plans. Hygiene is the goddess who gives vigor to the work, the eagerness to study, the playfulness, serenity and peace to the whole house (Gatti de Gamond, 1907, p. 40)

Although Gatti was aware of the scientific research on women's intellectual incapacity (the idea for example that women's brains were smaller and therefore less capable), as Iospeha Ioteyko (1866–1928), one of the first women

in Brussels working in the Solvay laboratories, she nevertheless decided to join the debate and to fight with the same weapons (anthropometrical and statistical researches) to reverse the arguments on the physical inferiority of women. For Isabelle Gatti de Gamond, if their intellectual capacities were inferior indeed, this was a product of culture; by keeping girls away from school education, their 'cerebral development' had often been delayed (Wils, 1999). Like many of her contemporaries (socialists, liberals or Catholics alike), as shown by Wils, this argument echoed Gatti's more general and more far-reaching conviction that education could even reverse processes of physical degeneration, which she believed – as many contemporaries did – to be the result of miserable working and living conditions.

Political radicalization

Whereas, during her teaching career, Gatti has limited her public ideological involvement to a membership of the liberal Ligue de l'enseignement, and then to the Belgian League for the Rights of Women, she left it in 1896 (because it became for her too moderate) to join the Parti Ouvrier Belge – Workers Party of Belgium (POB). She also created her own journal with more radical content: Les Cahiers féministes [Feminist Notebook] (whose first editorial committee associated with the citizens of the Social Action of the Rationalist Women of Paris) and accepted the secretariat of the National Federation of Socialist Women founded in 1901 (Gubin, Piette, Jacques, 1997, p. 63). As shown by Wils (1999), « whereas Education de la femme had been read by well-off women and had been distributed in training schools for female teachers, many texts she wrote now were published in the socialist newspapers Le Peuple [The People] and Journal de Charleroi [The Charleroi Newspaper], or were in any case meant as socialist propaganda ». By doing so, at the turn of the 20th century, she distanced herself from what she considered now as 'bourgeois feminism' and came to identify the feminist cause with the emancipation of the working class.

Despite her political radicalization, she continued to claim a specific identity for women. As shown by Wils (1999) :

[...] angel of the house, biological and social protector of the human race and of society, representative of Nature, Life and Peace – Gatti de Gamond's image of women was both diverse and consistent. Gatti's discourse on women, however radical her actual demands were, shared the patterns of culturally dominant discourses on gender during the second half of the 19th century. Her representation

of gender relationships presupposed a fundamental difference between man and woman, equivalence or 'equality in difference' rather than equality as such [...] Gatti de Gamond does not seem to have questioned the double legacy of many of the gender divisions she referred to. This attitude was, of course, not exceptional – on the contrary – and it certainly was part of her reformist feminist strategy. However, some contemporaries did draw attention to the conservative potential of a 'naturalized' gender difference. The Dutch radical feminist Wilhelmina Drucker seems to have been one of them (pp. 437–438).

However, sending women back to their household (a claim that was widely found among progressive liberals and Catholic as a solution for the social and economic crisis of the late 1880s) was not a realistic solution for Gatti de Gamond because poor women needed their income to survive. Rather than joining the widespread political glorification of “la femme au foyer” [housewife], at the end of her life, Gatti wanted to give priority to the fight for more social legislation for men and women as a necessary condition for real women’s equal political and civil rights. But here again, education remained central for her. In this context, she became a member of the radical free-thinker organization “L’Afranchissement” and was appointed as director of the school and orphanage “L’Orphelinat rationaliste”, an initiative of the democratic wing of the Brussels free-thinkers association “La Libre pensée”. She participated in meetings of the international free-thinker movement and joined the Parisian mixed loge ‘Diderot’ of the “Droit humain in 1903, through which she became the first female freemason in Belgium (Wils, 1999). While the Belgian Amis Philanthropes wanted also to welcome Isabelle Gatti de Gamond to their masonic lodge, she died suddenly in 1905, during an operation performed at home. Her funeral was grand and showed the success of this pioneer of women’s education (Gubin, Piette, 2006, p. 270).

Conclusions

Unlike France, the Netherlands, England or the United States, the Belgian feminist movement, as an active movement, appeared relatively late (the Women’s Rights League was created only at the very end of the 19th century) and remained always very moderate in his demands – affirming the primacy of education over political demands. The striking figure of this movement during the second half of the 19th century is Isabelle Gatti de Gamond who, from the outset, presented herself as the heiress of her mother, Zoé Gatti. If for them education would gradually lead to political emancipation, it was also urgent to free women from economic constraints by training skilled work-

ers – not with the goal to make women equal to men as such, but by claiming female specificity (“equality in difference”). In that respect, if the nature of Isabelle Gatti de Gamond’s discourses changed between the beginning of the second half of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century – references to God and morality were gradually replaced by new positive forms of knowledge – her representation of women did not seem to vary much: There is a specific feminine nature that education must strengthen by teaching women daily practices (concerning the management of the home, how to prepare meals, fold clothes or educate children) to ensure the happiness of families, society and her own. It was a question of substituting ways of life governed by mores or “traditional remedies” with rules or norms that are obligatory ways of acting. In this perspective, if at the beginning of the second half of the 19th century, when Isabelle Gatti de Gamond created her *Cours d’éducation pour jeunes filles* (in 1864), the moral perspective was still predominant, at the turn of the 20th century, when she defended a special higher education project for women (in 1893), domestic economics had become an experimental science in a productivist perspective. Utilitarianism was becoming more and more important, as were references to physiology, biology and medicine. Although the practices did not change radically, the injunctions to be respected increased sharply: every single gesture was rationalized, standardized, decomposed. It is no longer advice that was formulated but rather a set of scientific rules applicable to all.

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