



Transnational Networks and School Reforms in France during the Belle Époque Period (1880-1914)

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Contemporary historiography shows a growing interest for transnational analyses, phenomena of transfers and the international circulation of knowledge regarding educational issues¹. Recent scholarship in history of education notably points out that the construction of modern school systems in Western Europe at the end of the 19th century was characterized by reform projects that engendered debates on the international level².

This paper focuses on the transnationalization of the “school reform” in France between 1880 and 1914. By considering primary, secondary and professional education, it will stress the production of knowledge on foreign school systems as well as the channels of the international circulation of pedagogical ideas. More precisely, the paper will analyze how and why French reformers progressively promoted transnational practices and institutional spaces that aimed at stimulating international comparisons and intellectual exchanges across national boundaries. The accent will be put on pedagogical missions of education experts to foreign countries and international congresses of education. Between 1880 and 1914, the French Department of Public Instruction organized and supported almost 90 missions to foreign countries, especially in Europe and in the United States. The aims were to collect data and information on school systems, new pedagogical methods, problems concerning the organization of primary, secondary and professional education as well as to think about the possible borrowings to be theoretically implemented in France. French reformers were also very active in organizing numerous international congresses devoted to education at the end of the 19th century. Congresses were informal gatherings for discussion, exchange and comparison, open to pedagogues, professors, school inspectors and civil servants of various countries. These meetings did not only tackle purely pedagogical aspects but also political, social and economic problems related to the construction of modern school systems.

The prominent place of French reformers in these transnationally oriented activities testifies to their high level of activism. On one hand, pedagogical missions and international congresses may be seen as places where social demands were stated and developed by specialists and experts who have various interpretations of school problems and seek to impose their particular models. Throughout the Belle Époque period, this generated an intense network of intellectual exchanges on a European level, which progressively resulted in the set up of formal transnational networks. The most important ones were the *Permanent Committee of the International Congresses of Technical Education* (1895), the *International Bureau of Teachers' Associations* (1905) and the *International Bureau of Secondary Education* (1912). Increasing contacts, connections and comparisons thereby contributed to create a transnational epistemic community, sharing common values and beliefs. On the other hand, the knowledge on foreign school systems was used as a policy learning strategy in order to shape national debates. In France, the organization of modern and classical secondary education, the introduction of compulsory

¹ Christophe Charle, Jürgen Schriewer, Peter Wagner (eds.), *Transnational Intellectual Networks. Forms of Academic Knowledge and the Search for Cultural Identities*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt/New York, 2004.

² Eckhardt Fuchs (dir.), *Bildung International. Historische Perspektiven und aktuelle Entwicklungen*, Ergon Verlag, Würzburg, 2006.



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education (1882) and the setting up of professional and technical teaching were always supported by foreign examples and models which were used in order to legitimate a particular reform. In the French case, actors and social groups who integrated the transnational sphere into their practices also exploited their expertise as a source of scientific legitimization and as a strategy for professional promotion.

From a methodological point of view, this paper addresses interactions between national and international levels, with special emphasis on the impact of transnational practices and discourses on French reformist debates. Unlike the traditional comparative approach, this analytical perspective allows to see some problems too often restricted to a national framework in the context of the international circulation of pedagogical ideas and schools models, crossing borders and mobilizing a set of solutions according to the political and cultural traditions of each national context.

Biography

Damiano Matasci is teaching assistant at the Department of History at the University of Geneva. After a licence in economic and social history at the University of Geneva, he obtained a master degree in social sciences (History) at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales of Paris. He is currently preparing a doctoral thesis on the international circulation of pedagogical ideas and schools models in Western Europe between 1870 and 1939 (cotutelle University of Geneva-EHESS). His research interest mainly focuses on the social history of education and childhood in a comparative and transnational perspective.