WOMEN WORKERS' EDUCATION

Maria Tamboukou
University of East London
mariatamboukou@gmail.com

Abstract

This chapter follows genealogical lines in the history of the movement for women workers' education drawing on archival research with personal and political writings in France, the UK and the USA. In doing so, it unravels material and discursive entanglements of this important cultural labour movement, mapping its contested notions, porous boundaries and diverse practices. What is argued is that women workers' presence as students, educators, activists, as well as creators and writers was catalytic in this socio-political and cultural movement for social change, while its radical pedagogical practices are still relevant in re-imagining what education is and what it can do.

Introduction: Charting theoretical and geographical trails in women workers' education

'Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it', Hannah Arendt wrote in her essay 'The Crisis in Education' (2006: 193). A core argument that she advanced throughout her work is that we live in a world that does not feel any more as a home to us, since our involvement in the web of human relations and therefore in action is the only way we can feel again 'at home in this world' (1998, p. 135). It is in this process of 'feeling at home in the world' that education becomes so crucial in Arendt's notion of *amor mundi,* love for the world. After all, human existence for Arendt is an 'everlasting Becoming' (1996, p. 63) and education is instrumental in its multiple formations, particularly as it becomes the motor for acting and thinking. Given Arendt's thesis on existence

as ‘everlasting Becoming’ (1996, p. 63), as well as her interest in the never-ending process of understanding as a prerequisite for action, it is not surprising that early on in her work she reflected and drew upon the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead, the philosopher of process (see Arendt 1998, p. 296). Drawing on the utilitarian philosophical tradition, Whitehead made the link between the usefulness of understanding and the usefulness of education. But hand in hand with utilitarianism went a concept of education as a process of joy and discovery, inherently entangled in the process of life itself. ‘Education is discipline for the adventure of life’, he wrote (1929, p. 98). Whitehead’s thought was formative in John Dewey’s educational philosophy highlighting the importance of experience in engaging with the world and its problems (see Dewey, 1937). Dewey’s ideas of education as an open platform cultivating the ability to think as a condition for democratic and participatory action underpinned the overall movement for workers’ education. Political action was indeed at the heart of the movement for workers’ education in France, the UK, the USA and elsewhere in Europe and across the globe, although there were different manifestations of the political within different national borders and traditions.

Although education has always been a project, as well as a dream at the heart of many workers’ lives, both men and women from the beginning of industrialization, it has also become a contested field since, ‘national histories, social systems, trade union developments, political attitudes, general educational policies and economic pressures have all intersected to produce around the world many different concepts […] and many different practical expressions’ (Hopkins, 1985, p. 2). It is the contested notions, porous boundaries, diverse practices, as well as the material and discursive entanglements of women workers’ education that are mapped out in this chapter, by looking at three national contexts, France, the UK and the USA in the first half of the twentieth century. In so doing, a line of philosophical thinking that sees

education as adventure, *amor mundi*, as well as an agonistic field for social change, is examined.

The 'philosophes' and the movement for public education in France

There was a strong movement for public education in France in the first half of the nineteenth century, which was inherited from the 1789 revolution and it included both the education of the children of the people, as well the education and training of adults. Although it was initially dominated by philanthropic discourses that aimed to moralize, instruct and discipline 'the working poor,' it soon took on a life of its own, particularly under the influence of the romantic socialist movements. It thus developed as a socio-political and cultural movement, which aimed to educate the people in general and the workers in particular, about their right to work, their right to enjoy life both materially and intellectually, as well as their right to participate in the political formations and processes of their time (see Jacquet-Francillon, 1995).

The movement for people's education in France had its heyday during the February 1848 revolution and the early years of the Second Republic. During this period many eminent academics delivered lectures at highly esteemed educational institutions, such as the *Sorbonne* and the *Collège de France.* The historian Jules Michelet was amongst them; during his *Collège de France* lectures between December 1847 and February 1848, he had highlighted the role of theatre in people's education, arguing that 'a truly popular theatre where the people played the people […] is the most efficient form of national education' (Michelet 1899, p. 241). Although Michelet's lectures were interrupted by the intervention of the French ministry of education, his ideas were expanded and advanced after the February 1848 revolution, this time including women in the project of universal education. Ernest Legouvé introduced and taught a course on *Women's History* at the Collège de France, which became very popular amongst women in general and women workers in particular (see Tamboukou 2015, p. 2017). The role of

intellectuals throughout the second half of the nineteenth century was further instrumental in a wider movement which sprang in Paris at the turn of the century, the *Universitaires Populaires,* the people's universities. Most arrondissements in Paris had their own university, with often more than one in working-class areas. Moreover, political parties and movements had direct links with such educational institutions. (see Poole, 1997, p. 233).

It was in the context of political interventions in people's education that the composer Gustave Charpentier founded the *Conservatoire Populaire de Mimi Pinson* in 1902. Its purpose was to teach the Parisian working women voice, piano, harp, dance, and choral singing without any fees. Charpentier had actually persuaded some very famous professors to come and teach to his conservatoire, thus contributing to a wider philanthropic project comprising a series of concerts and performances that the young Parisian seamstresses would take part in, once they had completed their musical education. What the popularity of the *Mimi Pinson* movement revealed was a wider interest in the importance of opening up cultural and educational opportunities to for working-class women. The movement for people's education in France was thus embedded in the overall project for a national system of education realizing the dreams of the *philosophes.* The state and its duties as educator of the citizens was central to this system, a feature that made it very different from the British movement for workers' education, which was very much embedded in the voluntary sector, which will be discussed next.

Adventures in working-class education in the UK

There were two major institutional movements in the UK, the *Mechanics Institutes* and what came to be known as the *Workers' Educational Association*. The *London Mechanics Institute* was founded in 1823 and its purpose was to provide vocational scientific instruction that would help workers to adapt to the demands of the industrial revolution. This movement was mostly

attended by aspiring members of the lower middle classes however, since the British proletarians 'were practically illiterate and quite unable to benefit from the courses offered'. (Jefferson 1964, p. 346).

It was in the context of grappling with such problems that the London Working Men's Association (LWMA) published its 'Address on Education, issued to the Working Classes', in 1837. Their project included a national system of public education for both sexes on four levels: a) infant schools, b) preparatory schools, c) high schools and finally d) finishing schools or colleges (Lovett 1876, p. 145). These colleges 'should be gratuitously opened for all who choose to cultivate the highest branches of knowledge' (ibid., p. 148), and they should therefore offer evening classes. The LWMA was a mass movement with radical ideas about social change and social justice: 'poverty, inequality and political injustice are involved in giving to one portion of society the blessings of education and leaving the other in ignorance' (ibid., p. 139), they highlighted in their address. Their overall project for equal opportunities in education prepared the grounds for a wider project with concrete institutional structures, activities and literature to emerge in 1903 when the *Association to Promote the Higher Education of Working Men* was founded in the parlour of a clerical worker, Albert Mansbridge, in Battersea, London. Its title disturbed its women members from the very beginning and in 1905 it was renamed *Workers' Educational Association* (WEA). It was according to Roberts (2003, p. 1) 'the largest and most successful provider of educational courses for adults in the voluntary sector of the United Kingdom' to our own days. The movement soon developed and expanded as a national and international network of educational activities: its Australian branch was founded in 1914, while in 1918 the Commonwealth WEA was set up. By 1923 associations had been formed in India, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Tasmania.

The workers' educational movement in the UK was initially driven by the ambition for preparing workers for university studies. It was thus organised along a three-year tutorial class of around thirty students taught by a professor and monitored and examined by a system of regular essay writing. However tutorial classes were just one of many methods and practices that the different local and international WEA branches adopted over the years. Lectures and shorter courses were added and the topics ranged from a wide range in the social sciences and humanities, including economics, government and literature. There have been many historical studies about the WEA's constitution and activities, covering its foundation and early years of its development, as well as looking at the specificities of its different local and international branches and collaborations (see Mansbridge, 1920; Stocks, 1953; Jennings, 1978, Fieldhouse et al.,1996; Roberts 2003). What has remained a grey area in this vibrant body of literature however is women's involvement in the WEA educational activities and programmes.

As Munby notes 'we know surprisingly little about the numbers of women who attended WEA classes' (2003, p. 216). Women's engagement was not statistically interesting, since the short courses or occasional lectures they would usually take up did not attract funding in the same way that as the three-year tutorial classes did. As such, the latter were meticulously recorded. Within the tutorial classes there were nevertheless 9% women students between 1910-11, while the percentage rose to 32% in the period 1919-20 but dropped again in the 30s (Munby, 2003, p. 216). It is not difficult to see why: tutorial classes demanded a long- term commitment, which was simply impossible for women workers with family duties and double and triple domestic and emotional labour shifts. Such classes could only be accessed by young women who were trying to imagine a different life and shape a new form of self, irrespective of whether or not this actually occurred.

Trade union classes on the other hand were both boring and irrelevant for many women workers. They were clever enough to understand that even if they took such classes they would

never survive the sexist hierarchies and structures of the trade union movement. There were very few women who had made it in the men's world of labour unions and they were only able to do that by sacrificing personal desires or family plans. Bondfield wrote in her 1949 autobiography: 'I just lived for the Trade Union Movement. I concentrated on my job. This concentration was undisturbed by love affairs. I had seen too much — too early — to have the least desire to join the pitiful scramble of my workmates' (pp. 36-37). Through her early experiences as a textile worker in Yorkshire and well before she became the first female cabinet minister in British politics, Bondfield had understood that being in love and having a family were not compatible with being involved in agonistic politics.

Few as they were, women tutorial students were passionately engaged in their study; this is how Maude Royden, an Oxford lecturer, remembers women mill workers at Oldham studying Shakespeare in the class of 1908-9:

> They not only stayed the course but, at the close of each class, accompanied me down the street to the railway station still arguing and discussing, stood on the platform while I, my head out of the carriage window, continued the class, and made their last contribution to the discussion in shouts above the roar of the train as it pulled out of the station. Can you beat it? (cited in Munby, 2003, p. 217).

Despite the lack of figures, a careful study of the WEA annual reports, as well as articles in its influential monthly magazine, *The Highway,* demonstrates that apart from the tutorial classes as well as the trade union courses, women workers overtook men in all other short courses, lectures and outreach activities (Munby, 2003, p. 217). As well as engaging as students on these courses, women workers were also involved in teaching courses they were passionate about. Although the names of women who organised and taught in women's education courses have largely been lost, the case of Sophie Green stands out as exceptional. Green was a garment worker at the Kettering Co-op clothing factory and despite her lack of formal educational

qualifications —apart from her tutorial classes — she was appointed as tutor organiser in Kettering in 1919. For twenty years she organised and taught a rich programme of studies that included tutorial classes, shorter courses, as well as community and outreach work with young people. As outlined in the WEA Eastern District's Annual Report, for 1928-29:

> throughout the past winter Miss Green has run a Social on alternate Saturday evenings, to which the young people have come […] it has done a good deal for young women working in Kettering, but living away from home, who have been brought in touch with a new group of people. Though it may be difficult to express it on paper, there is considerable evidence that Miss Green is a source of power and strength in and around Kettering (cited in Munby, 2003, p. 225).

Not only was 'Miss Green' a source of power, but also an exemplary case of how women workers' education went far beyond strictly learning outcomes and objectives. It was the force of education to encourage workers to imagine a different world and to develop a sense of collective belonging that made it so attractive to women who were oppressed by capitalist and patriarchal intersections. What Green's case also powerfully demonstrates is the idea that workers' education should be concerned solely with the workers themselves. Green must have been influenced by the ideas of the workers' education movement in the US, as she had won a scholarship for the famous Bryn Mawr summer school for women workers in Philadelphia.

International connections and exchange programmes became possible in the interwar period since the WEA activities soon expanded not only to the Commonwealth countries, as illustrated above, but also to other European countries and to the US. The organic relations of the workers' education movement with national and international trade unions and consequently with the International Labour Organization (ILO) played a crucial role in the project of internationalism. As Arthur Greenwood, member of the Workers' Educational Trade

Union Committee (WETUC), noted in 1919, 'it is probable that direct association with educational labour movements in other countries would increase our prestige and strengthen our position with the labour movement in this country' (*The Highway* xi, no.10, July 1919, p. 104).

It was in the context of internationalization that WEA delegates attended the first Conference on Labour Education that was held in Brussels on 16 and 17 August 1922. It was organized by the *Belgian Committee on Labour Education* (*Centrale d' Education Ouvrière)* and it was an excellent opportunity for participants from all over the world to exchange experiences and views on workers' education. Three important resolutions were adopted at this conference: a) an exchange scheme for students between Labour Colleges across countries and continents; b) the idea of an 'independent working class education' in the struggle against national and international capital; c) a request addressed to the Belgian *Centrale d' Education Ouvrière* to maintain and co-ordinate relations between the organization during the period leading to the second conference, which was eventually held at Ruskin College Oxford, 15-17 August, 1924. It was then that the *International Federation of Labour Organizations* concerned with workers' education was established. Its aim was to make preparatory work for an *International Workers' Education Federation,* but it was only in 1945 that this project was eventually realized with the creation of the *International Federation of Workers' Education Associations* (IFWEA).

Looking at WEA's history in the period 1918-1939, Atkins has critically observed that despite some efforts promoting internationalization, as well as its members' involvement in the international conferences on workers' education, there is overall 'a glaring absence of internationalism and international perspectives' in WEA's documentation concerning its educational and organizational policy (2003, p. 125). And yet the WEA's overall vision, its

democratic principles of education and most importantly its unique tutorial system profoundly influenced the workers' education movement in the US in the first half of the twentieth century.

Women workers' education in the UK was largely shaped by the WEA educational programmes and projects but was not solely restricted within them. The history of Hillcroft College is a different paradigm. The idea for a Residential College for working women emerged after the Great War and the changes it brought regarding women's role in society. The YWCA National Education Committee made the initial proposal for such a scheme, but it was through voluntary subscriptions, students' contributions, as well as bursaries provided by individuals, companies, as well as universities and schools that the 'National Residential College for Women', as it was initially called, was founded in 1920. According to its 1920 Annual Report, the aim of the college was 'to enlarge the vision of its students, to develop their latent capacities for leadership and service and to stimulate their mental and spiritual growth' [1]. The report highlighted the fact that vocational training was not amongst its objectives. The college was initially housed in 'the Holt', a rented building in Beckenham Kent, but in 1925 it moved to Surbiton, South London in its own premises, 'the Gables'. This was a red brick listed building, which was surrounded by 6 acres of land and could offer accommodation for 28 students. It was then that its name changed to 'Hillcroft College'.

The College adopted the motto 'Through Rough Ways to the Stars' and its curriculum included the following subjects: Bible Study, English Composition, the English Novel, English Constitution, Industrial History, Psychology, Biology, Mathematics, Economics, Physiology, French, Music and Handwork. Visiting lecturers from various London colleges and schools did most of the teaching. The College also organized a lecture series with invited speakers from prestigious university departments in London and beyond. Finally, the students were taken on several field trips, visited other colleges and schools and even attended concerts, operas and theatres in London.

When it first opened in February 1920, the College admitted 11 students aged between 18 and 35 years old. Among this first cohort there were 6 women workers in full bursaries from their employers and the rest of the group were students who were partly funded by organizations but also contributed to their fees. Apart from the Principal, Fanny Street, there were two members of staff: Ruth Hinder who was a resident tutor and Mabel Birtles, the bursar. They were both responsible for the internal management of the college, which was co-operative in nature. According to the 1920 Annual Report, all domestic issues were discussed by the House Committee, composed of all members of the College, while the Students' Council was a forum for students to express their opinions on general policies of the College. The College's first annual report also highlighted the importance of visitors from all over the world, who contributed to the creation of strong international sympathies and understanding. Over the years the College developed and strengthened such international relations particularly with the summer residential schools for women workers in the US. Despite its many influences on the WEA tradition and policy, as well as its connections with educational programmes and institutions outside the WEA, there were two distinctive features of the workers' education movement in the US: strong ties with the American trade unions, as well as women labour organizers' active involvement. The next section of this chapter will examine the movement for women workers' education in the US.

The Politics of Workers' Education in the US

The first signs of workers' education on the other side of the Atlantic emerged in 1845 when the Lowell Female Reform Association was founded in the context of women workers' industrial actions and organization in New England (see Dublin, 1994). The association launched a wide range of educational and cultural activities including evening courses and public lectures on a variety of topics including science, literature and art, as announced and

advertised in their journal, *The Voice of Industry.* Given the richness and vitality of New England's working class intellectual culture, it is no surprise that a vibrant literary movement and a rich body of fiction developed around women workers' in the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States, which Sylvia Cook has meticulously studied (2008). Despite the 'Mill Girls' pioneering industrial, educational and cultural activities, the first school for workers, *The Working Men's Institute,* was established at John's Hopkins University in 1879. But when in 1901, Walter Vrooman, one of the founders of Ruskin College in the UK, proposed the establishment of a similar institution in the US to the American Federation of Labor (AFoL), its leadership did not show any interest. However, the Socialist Party took up the challenge and in 1906 the Rand School of Social Science was founded in New York City. It is no surprise that socialism was at the heart of the school's vision and objectives, while politics deeply coloured the directions of the workers' education movement in the US from the very beginning. The Rand School of Social Sciences offered educational programmes for two major trade unions in the US garment industry in the beginning of the twentieth century: the *International Ladies Garment Workers' Union* (ILGWU) and the *Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Association* (ACWA). Both unions soon established their own educational structures and in 1917 ILGWU's educational department became the first recognized institution of workers' education in the US, followed by ACWA two years later. What also emerged in the first decade of the century was the *Women's Trade Union League* (WTUL) whose activities were very much directed to the education of working-class women with particular emphasis on their civil and labour rights. Women active in the US labour movement would move in between the ranks and leading positions of these unions; their involvement was crucial not only in how the movement for workers' education developed, but also to how connections were forged with the UK, France and other countries around the globe.

Thus, unlike France and the UK, where universities had a formative role—through university lectures in France and extra-mural departments and tutorial classes in the UK—it was the trade unions that took the lead in the US. Their educational programmes included workers' universities, labour colleges, evening and weekend classes, summer schools, as well as more informal educational activities such as reading groups and writing workshops. This is not to deny that universities as institutions or through the involvement of their academics did not play a crucial role in the US, rather that all such activities were organized, funded and administered by the trade unions, although the federal government eventually came to support workers' education. In the words of Arthur Gleason, a radical intellectual and journalist who supported workers' education from its very beginning: 'The heart of workers' education [...] the class, financed on trade union money, the teacher a comrade, the method discussion, the subject the social sciences, the aim an understanding of life and the remoulding of the scheme of things (1927, p. 5). This 'dream of a better world' was for Gleason a condition *sine qua non* of the movement for worker's education, which otherwise 'would fade away in the loneliness and rigor of the effort' (*Ibid*).

Gleason's ideas were largely influential in the 1920s boom time for workers' education in the US when more than 300 labour colleges emerged. In this context, 1921 was a particularly outstanding year: the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry opened its doors to its first students; the Brookwood Labor College started a two years' residence programme in Katonah, New York and the Workers' Education Bureau of America (WEB) was formed in New York City. In addition, the University of California started a programme specifically designed for workers, an initiative followed by a number of schools for workers at Barnard College, the University of Wisconsin, as well as the *Southern Summer School*, which organized courses at various university campuses throughout the South.

These summer schools and courses went through a range of organizational changes to survive financial, ideological and political pressures that unavoidably erupted through the radical programmes and subversive organizational structures that they adopted. In 1927, the summer schools of Bryn Mawr, Barnard and Wisconsin formed the *Affiliated Summer Schools for Women Workers.* They joined forces to co-ordinate recruitment and fund-raising from the trade unions and the government and to stop competing with one another. However, they all suffered from the Depression years, as well as from political antagonisms. Such conflicts emerged from the fact that social change was central to the vision, programmes and directions of workers' education in the US, its ultimate aim being to inspire workers 'to change economic and social conditions so that those who produce shall own the product of their labor', as Fannia Mary Cohn wrote in the socialist newspaper *Justice* on January 5, 1923. As an ILGWU labour organizer Cohn was a central figure in the development of the workers' education in the US; her ideas and practices shaped the curricula, literature and overall activities of ILGWU's educational department, the first recognized institution of workers' education in the US.

The movement for workers' education followed different trends that reflect geographical, national, historical, political and cultural differences. Women workers' presence was however catalytic in all of them: they took up and moved around a wide range of subject potions as students, teachers, activists, creators, as the next section illustrates.

Women workers as students

Women workers' educational encounters were catalytic in the course of their life trajectories. For the majority of them the idea of having an education was the result of their political involvement specifically wider political and social movements in France and the UK, and more specifically focused trade union politics in the US. Women workers' education was permeated by elements of what Rose (2010) has described as 'the autodidact culture', which was

nevertheless underpinned by different socio-political, cultural and economic conditions. In France and the UK, it was the romantic socialist movements of the nineteenth century that created strong educational and cultural movements amongst the workers of the early industrialization period. These movements were also spread on the other side of the Atlantic through the ephemeral utopian colonies and communes that were established in the second half of the nineteenth century.

It was thus from the romantic socialist circles that the first autonomous feminist movement emerged in France, led by young proletarian women, who fiercely campaigned for women workers' education. As already outlined above, the majority of these young women were self-taught and it was through their engagement with politics that they were able to advance their education and those of their contemporaries. Education or rather the lack of it emerges a strong theme in their autobiographical writings. Suzanne Voilquin, one of the editors of the *Tribune des Femmes* the first feminist newspaper[2], wrote powerfully about the sorrows, anxiety and anguish of searching for knowledge while working as a needle worker: 'Many times in public concerts and in museums, I would feel my tears flow. In those tears there was a mingling of the happiness of aspiring to the unknown with the despair of never being able to attain it' (1866, p. 20). Tears flowing in the young girl's face create a visceral image of women's desire for education and would become a constant theme of their future campaigns. As a Saint-Simonian writer, Voilquin felt no restriction whatsoever in exposing the force of her emotions, powerfully interrelating the intellectual and the material in the assemblage of the social and cultural conditions from which she had emerged. Happiness and despair were entangled in her experiences of seeking knowledge and reading opened up heterotopic spaces in the constraints of her environment: 'I passionately loved reading; I could indulge in this penchant in the evening next to my mother on condition that I read to her, while she worked' (1866, p. 20). Passion, joy, happiness, indulgence fill up and indeed overflow from the writer's

discourse alongside her tears. Moreover, reading to her mother in the evening while she was engaged with most probably needlework created a different pedagogical context for working-class girls than for those of their brothers.

Such gender differences were equally strong on the other side of the channel and the overall movement for workers' education in the UK. Elizabeth Andrews has written about how much she loved school, but being a miner's daughter she was not allowed to continue with her studies: 'I had to leave school at twelve owing to our large family and the coming ninth baby' she wrote in her autobiography (2006 [1957], p. 10). Although she had a strong desire to become a teacher, this was not possible; instead she became a dressmaker. Alice Foley concludes her autobiography with the sweet memories of attending a WEA's summer school in Bangor, North Wales: 'The various seminars were small but spirited; the tutors understanding and encouraging. On sunny days, in circles on the University terrace […] we read and explored Browning's poems. It was a strange joy […] a month of almost complete happiness' (1973, p. 92).

Foley's fond memories of her summer school echo the many summer schools for women workers in the industry that flourished on the other side of the Atlantic. In looking at the specificities of women workers' education in the US, the cultural effects of migration have been highlighted as a particularly unique phenomenon of their experience. Education gave migrant women workers the opportunity to learn the language of their new country, but once they had mastered the language they were able to unfold and deploy the rich cultural capital they were carrying with them from their countries of origin. Women workers' rich 'migration capital' (Tamboukou, 2017) was catalytic in the different dynamics that were developed not only in women workers' education in the US, but also more widely in the trade union politics and women's involvement within it. It is therefore no surprise that it was from the ranks of

migrant women workers that some influential educators, emerged, as the next section will demonstrate.

Women workers as educators and labour organizers

Women workers emerged as educators through the channels of 'the autodidact culture' (Rose 2010), the education they received as workers, as well as their political involvement in the European socio-political movements and in the American trade unions. Marie-Reine Guindorf left the editorial group of the first feminist newspaper in France to devote her free time to educating other young proletarian women, Jeanne Deroin worked hard and eventually became a teacher, while Désirée Véret-Gay experimented with Robert Owen's liberal educational ideas, founded and ran two schools — albeit unsuccessfully — and even published a book about the importance of mothers' involvement in the education of their children (Gay, 1868). Proletarian women's education was at the heart of the feminist clubs and newspapers that emerged after the February 1848 revolution in France. Deroin and her friend and comrade Pauline Roland founded the *Association of Socialist Teachers* in 1849 and became central figures of the Union of Workers' Associations, before they were both arrested and imprisoned for their revolutionary ideas and actions between 1850 and 1851. 'Your courageous declaration of Woman's Rights has resounded even to our prison, and has filled our souls with inexpressible joy' (in Bell and Offen 1983, p. 287) they wrote to to the *Convention of the Women of America* on June 15, 1851 from their cell in the Saint-Lazzare's prison in Paris. [3] But while joining their American sisters 'in the vindication of the right of woman to civil and political equality' (in Bell and Offen 1983, p. 289), they concluded by highlighting the need for solidarity and union with the working classes: 'only by the power of association based on solidarity — by the union of the working-classes of both sexes to organise labour — can be

acquired, completely and pacifically, the civil and political equality of woman, and the social right for all' (*Ibid*).

The French activists' message was well received by the newly emerging feminist movement in the US, but American working women had to grapple with a number of adversaries as educators. Sexism within their union, as well as the negligence and marginalization of workers' education in the overall priorities of the labour movement, were amongst the greatest difficulties they had to overcome. Their role as educators was complex and multi-faceted. First, they had to fight for resources and persuade their suspicious male comrades that spending money for workers' education was not a luxury, but a necessity. Once they had secured a meagre and precarious budget, they had to find, rent and maintain buildings and put in place other material infrastructure for educational programmes to become possible. They would further design educational programmes and curricula, search for suitable labour tutors and persuade famous professors to give lectures. Last but not least, they had to recruit students for their programmes, something that was far from easy or straightforward given the many pressures looming upon workers' lives, particularly during periods of prolonged unemployment as in the time of the Depression.

Cohn's correspondence provides a vivid image of the multifaceted and exhausting experience of being a women worker educator and labour organizer: 'I appreciate the fact that you realize how hard it is for us to "get across" health lectures for our members [. . .] those of us who are pioneers in this movement, must [. . .] suffer inconveniences', she wrote to Dr Ian Galdson in February 1923, in response to his letter about the difficulties of holding a lecture on occupational health for the ILGWU members. Cohn knew only too well how difficult it was to educate workers, but she was convinced that such difficulties were part of the struggle; indeed her correspondence shows how hard she worked to co-ordinate, sustain and support the educational and cultural activities of the union. Her letters to a range of ILGWU locals across

the country offer detailed advice on what to do, including feedback about the level of the classes as well as the time slots chosen for the lectures. Apart from being a tireless organizer, Cohn was also a highly respected mentor: 'I think it is a well written, clear and exact statement' she wrote in April 1923 to Emma Yanisky, a young woman who had sent her statement for her application to Brookwood College and was asking for feedback. This letter is also one of many she wrote throughout her life in support of young people's educational aspirations within the union and beyond.

Cohn's tireless efforts on behalf of the American movement for workers' education were documented thanks to her decision to collect and bequeath her papers to the New York Public Library (NYPL). British women workers' participation in the WEA's educational programmes in the first half of the twentieth century is unfortunately not very well documented. As already noted above, women were less involved in the WEA's university led tutorial system. However, their autobiographical sources reveal the importance of education in changing their lives and improving the conditions of their community. In writing the biography of her father as a case study of a labour farmer in a Warwickshire village, Mabel K. Ashby noted how her mother never thought of intellectual pursuits or endeavours, 'for it seemed her duty to be perpetually poised for swift service –to husband, child, animal, neighbour and the chapel' (1961, p. 243). But while her mother 'naturally [passed] into the background of her husband's and children's lives, not often to emerge' (*Ibid* p. 244), her daughter grew up to become Principal of the Hillcroft Residential College for Working Women between 1933 and 1946. This was perhaps because despite her indifference to cultural matters, Mabel's mother participated in 'the rich autodidact culture' that Rose's (2010) important study has explored. Her husband taught her to read and enjoy Walter Scott and George Elliot, as he firmly believed in the importance of education according to his daughter (*Ibid*, p. 258).

But as already noted above, it was not only the development of cultural and intellectual interests that women workers pursued through education. It was also though the channels of formal and informal learning that many of them got involved in labour politics. 'The spirit of the WEA was to sustain and accompany me through long years of humble toil' (1973, p. 92), Foley wrote in the concluding passage of her autobiography, which finishes at the point where her involvement in trade union politics and the WEA's educational programmes begins. Despite their active involvement in the movement for workers' education however, British women workers remained on the margins of the WEA's organizational structures, unlike their American sisters, who became the driving force of workers' education in the US.

Women workers as creators and writers

Women workers' intellectual and cultural life was rich and diverse on both sides of the Atlantic. Not only were they avid readers, theatre goers and art fans, but they actively participated in the cultural production of their times and geographies. It was their formal and informal education that created conditions of possibility for such intellectual pursuits and it was through different channels that they unfolded their creative forces. Their creativity has made forceful connections between ethics, aesthetics and politics, although they were differently shaped by the intellectual and cultural trends and movements of their specific national and socio-economic contexts.

Autobiographical writing was a crucial component of working-women's literary creation, but poetry and drama were also high on the agenda of their cultural contribution. There were many women workers, who immersed themselves in historical, sociological and economic research and became political analysts, journalists, historians, economists and social scientists. Whether in the academy, or in the wider public intellectual sphere, women workers brought material grounding in the abstractions of theoretical approaches to the question of

women's labour and their overall social and economic condition. Writing about their experiences of work and action, women workers shed light on the blurring boundaries between the private and the public and exposed women's vulnerability in the interstices of waged, unwaged and domestic labour, as well as their impossible position in the male dominated hierarchies of the labour movement. What they wrote are the only tangible traces in the gendered memory of work (see Tamboukou, 2016).

Here again it was the autonomous feminist movements that sprang up in the second half of the nineteenth century that created conditions of possibility for the figure of the woman worker/writer to emerge, very conscious of her uniqueness in the cultural histories of her time: 'I believe I am the only worker who has become a writer. Margueritte Audoux, who is also a seamstress is a novelist, but I feel attracted by historical research',[4] Jeanne Bouvier wrote in an article in *La Française* in 1928. It goes without saying that in all of the above, imagination played a crucial role: to begin with, women workers imagined that they could actually write. Indeed, such an imaginative leap was a condition of possibility of the project of writing itself. They all expressed their fear of writing, they revealed how humbled they felt in respect of the task, as well as how uncertain they were of its outcomes.

When Georges Renard, Professor of Labour History at the Collège de France, asked Bouvier to write the history of the linen-goods industry and its workers, as a contribution to a series of 58 volumes comprising *La Bibliothèque sociale des métiers* [The Social library of trades] which he was editing, she confessed that she felt utterly out of her depth: 'When alone, I was thinking: "M. Georges Renard has been deluded about my value and my knowledges. No, it is not possible for me to accept to write a book, I have always suffered by my ignorance' (Bouvier 1983[1936], p. 214). But putting her fears aside, Bouvier threw herself in the pleasures of research and produced a rare study of the French linen-goods industry in the twentieth century that has become an invaluable source in women's labour history (Bouvier,

1928). ‘You have written a book and you will write others’ (Bouvier 1983[1936], p. 216), Renard told her when she delivered her manuscript and indeed research and writing became her life-long passion.

‘I had the material and the urge, but soon realized that I was not equal to the task before me’ (1987, p. xxi) Pesotta wrote in the acknowledgements of her political memoirs *Bread Upon the Waters.* And yet she decided to write this book since she was convinced that it would be useful for the women workers she had unionized through her career as a labour organizer. As she wrote to a friend her book was written for those women ‘who would never read such books as the Needle Trades by Siedman, which are too technical for them’.[5] Her book became very successful not only for the women workers who read their experiences in it, but also for many college and university students who were studying labour economics at the time (see Tamboukou, 2016).

Conclusion: imagination and creativity in women workers’ education

Imagination played a crucial role then not only in working women’s creativity, but also in opening up vistas of another world that was possible. How is then creativity to be understood in the context of the adventure of women workers’ education? As already noted at the beginning of this chapter, the role of education for Whitehead is to support the adventure of ideas and facilitate ‘creativity’ a notion that very few know that originates in Whitehead’s work: ‘creativity is the actualisation of potentiality […] viewed in abstraction objects are passive, but viewed in conjunction they carry the creativity which drives the world. The process of creation is the form of unity of the Universe’ (1967 [1933], p. 179). Creativity for Whitehead then is an open and ever-changing process in which the universe is engaged. Being part of nature human beings emerge in the world with cognitive capacities, while the ultimate aim of their actions is to seek change. It is thus in the realm of sustaining and supporting change that

education takes up creative dimensions: it becomes an assemblage of ideas, practices, knowledges, discourses and actions, a plane wherein women workers' creative forces can be charted.

References

Andrews, Elisabeth. 2006 [1957] *A Woman's Work is Never Done: And Political Articles.* Edited by Ursula Masson. Aberystwyth: Honno Honno Welsh Women's Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1996. *Love and St Augustine*, edited by Joanna, V., Scott and Judith, C., Stark. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, Hannah. [1958]. *The Human Condition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 2006 [1954]. 'The Crisis in Education'. In H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future.* London: Penguin, 170-193.

Ashby, Mabel, K. 1961. *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe, 1859-1919.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bell, Susan G. and Karen M. Offen. 1983. *Women, The Family and Freedom: 1750-1880.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bondfield, Margaret, G. 1949. *A Life's Work.* London: Hutchinson.

Bouvier, Jeanne. 1928. La Lingerie et les lingères. Paris: G. Doin

Bouvier, Jeanne. 1983 [1936] *Mes Mémoires: Une syndicaliste féministe, 1876-1935*. Paris : La Découverte/Maspero.

Cook, Jenkins, Sylvia. 2008. *Working Women, Literary Ladies: The Industrial Revolution and Female Aspiration.* New York: Oxford.

Dewey, John. 1937. 'Whitehead's Philosophy'. *Philosophical Review* 46 (2), 170-177.

Dublin, Thomas. 1994. *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Fieldhouse, Roger. 1996. *A History of Modern British Adult Education*. Leicester: The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).

Foley, Alice. 1973. *A Bolton Childhood.* Manchester : Manchester University Extra-Mural Department.

Gay, Désirée. 1868. *Éducation rationnelle de la première enfance: manuel à l'usage des jeunes mères.* Paris: Adrien Delahaye Libraire and Geneva: J. Gay et Fils.

Gleason, Arthur. 1921. *Workers' Education: American Experiments (with a few foreign examples).* New York: Bureau of Industrial Research.

Jacquet-Francillon, François. 1995. *Naissances de l'école du peuple, 1815-1870*. Paris: Les Éditions de l'Atelier.

Jefferson, Carter. 1964. 'Worker Education in England and France, 1800-1914. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 6 (3), 345-366.

Jennings, Bernard. 1979. *Knowledge is Power: A Short History of the WEA: 1903-78.* Hull: University of Hull.

Hopkins, Philip, G.H.1985. *Workers' Education: An International Perspective.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Lovett, William.1876. *The Life and Struggles of William Lovett in His Pursuit of Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom with Some Short Account of the Different Associations He Belonged to and of the Opinions He Entertained.* London: Trübner & Co.

Mansbridge, Albert. 1920. *An Adventure in Working-class Education, being the Story of the Workers' Educational Association 1903-1915.* London: Longmans, Green & Co.

Michelet, Jules. 1899 [1877] *L'Etudiant.* Paris: Calmann Lévy.

Munby, Zoë. 2003. 'Women's Involvement in the WEA and Women's Education. In *A Ministry of Enthusiasm : Centenary Essays on the Workers' Educational Association,* edited by Stephen K. Roberts, 215-37. London: Pluto Press.

Pesotta, Rose. 1987 [1944]. *Bread Upon the Waters.* Ithaca: Industrial and Labor Relations Press.

Poole, Mary Ellen. 1997. 'Gustave Charpentier and the Conservatoire Populaire de Mimi Pinson'. *19th-Century Music*, 20 (3), 231-252.

Roberts, Stephen, K. 2003. 'Introduction'. In *A Ministry of Enthusiasm: Centenary Essays on the Workers' Educational Association,* edited by Stephen K. Roberts, 1-11. London: Pluto Press.

Rose, Jonathan. 2010. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes.* Second Edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Stocks, Mary. 1953. *The Workers' Educational Association. The First Fifty Years.* London: George Allen & Unwin.

Tamboukou, Maria. 2015. *Sewing, Fighting and Writing: Radical Practices in Work, Politics and Culture*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Tamboukou, Maria 2016. *Gendering the Memory of Work; Women Workers' Narratives.* London: Routledge.

Tamboukou, Maria. 2017. *Women Workers' Education, Life Narratives and Politics: Geographies, Histories, Pedagogies.* Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan.

Voilquin, Suzanne. 1866. *Souvenirs d'une fille du peuple ou Saint-simonienne en Égypte*. Paris: Libraire E. Sauzet.

Whitehead, Alfred, North. 1929. 'Universities and their function'. In *The Aims of Education and other essays,* 91-101. New York: The Free Press.

Whitehead, Alfred, North. 1967[1933] *Adventures of Ideas.* New York: Free Press.

Keywords: creativity**,** genealogies, labour histories, material entanglements, women workers

Cross-references: Comparative, international and transnational histories of education; New cultural histories; Gender and feminist histories; Relation between theory and method in historiography; Progressive and informal classrooms and pedagogies; Women's international organisations and education; Beyond the University: Higher education institutions across time and space

[1] College's First Annual Report, p.13 available at: http://www.hillcroft.ac.uk/media/documents/Annual_Report_1920.pdf [Accessed 20-3-2016].
[2] This newspaper changed many names during the 3 years of its publication (see Tamboukou, 2015)
[3] For more details about these events, see Tamboukou, 2015: 161.
[4] *La Française,* 17-11-1928, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris/Archives Marie—Louise Bouglé /Fonds Jean Bouvier/Divers.
[5] Rose Pesotta to Sue Adams, letter dated, 11 November, 1943, (Rose Pesotta Papers/New York Public Library/MSS2390/General Correspondence).