

The saint, the poet, the lord and the cardinal

LEARNING FROM YOUTH WORK'S HISTORY

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Youth work is a very diverse field of practice. There are huge variations within and between youth work in different European countries. One thing we seem to have in common is that all youth work practices are constantly asked to redefine and reshape themselves according to new societal trends and developments. Policymakers on different levels, researchers, youth work practitioners and sometimes young people themselves participate actively in this debate. Sometimes it's difficult. Our market-driven and knowledge-based risk societies confront us with new challenges. Policymakers ask us to join other social professions, to contribute to young people's employability and to prevent risky behaviour. The new EU strategy 'Youth – Investing and Empowering' addresses youth workers very directly. We are being told that these are the new challenges to be met and that youth work is an important factor in the contribution to the objectives

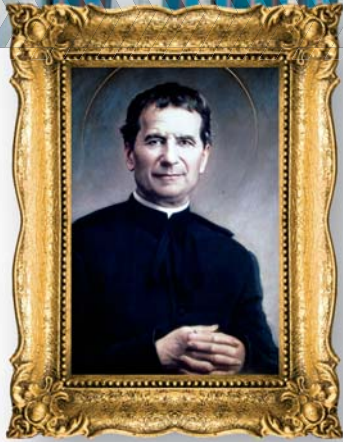
identified in the Lisbon strategy. Youth workers take an ambivalent position to this. On the one hand they are flattered. It feels good to be recognised as an important social actor. On the other hand they are a little suspicious. Are these challenges really new? And what about youth work's professional autonomy? Is youth work defining its own goals or is it an instrument used to work towards the goals defined by 'outsiders'? And when talking about professionalisation: what about the role of volunteers in youth work?

We are so close to our own practices and often also our own personal youth work experiences that it is not always easy to take critical distance. A cross-comparative perspective can be inspiring. An historical perspective can also improve our discussion. These are exactly the two mutually strengthening perspectives we want to highlight in the first half of July in the historical city of Ghent.

The saint

Don Bosco and his preventive social work

Torino, Italy, 1841: the priest Giovanni Bosco was concerned about the social distress of his time. The industrial revolution went hand in hand with proletarianisation and very often the exploitation of the emerging working class. Other developments connected to these drastic shifts in the organisation of society were urbanisation, migration to the cities, social fragmentation and increasing poverty. Bosco's attention was primarily focused on the situation of working class children who were out of work or too young to work. Often their parents spent 14 hours a day and even more in a factory. The kids stayed at home by themselves or hung about a bit and wandered the streets. Father Giovanni transformed his confirmation classes into an alternative youth care practice. Young people could come to what later was named the 'Oratorium'. They found a warm place and could experience a sense of freedom and belonging and enjoy a basic form of education.



What began as a rather small-scaled social work initiative grew into a youth centre visited by over 500 young people. The method spread around Europe and became better known in different countries as 'the patronage'. At the heart of the patronage we find the typical pedagogical paradox: protecting young people from 'evil' society while promoting their social participation. In his work with children and young people Giovanni Bosco introduced pedagogical and methodical elements which we still recognise as essential parts of the current youth identity. Don Bosco started where young people were, taking their lives as the starting point. He created a climate of recreation and confidence. He made an appeal to educated young people to help him, assuming that young people themselves were good and credible guides for their peers. Above all, he made an appeal for society to take responsibility for

the education of its children. His argument was a preventive one. In his view all social problems could be traced back to educational problems. It sounds very relevant to our times: invest in young people and empower them and you will prevent problems.

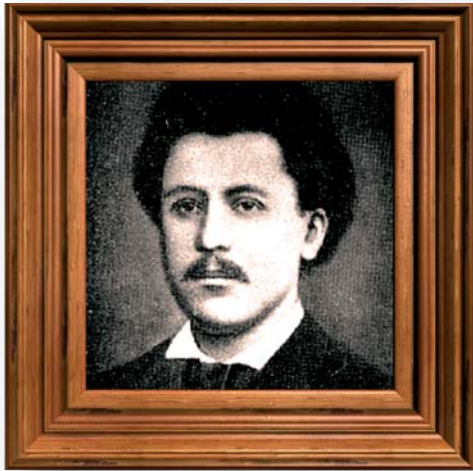
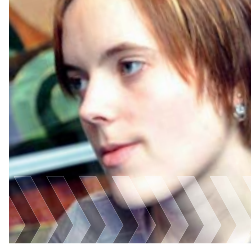
The poet

***Albrecht Rodenbach* and his romantic youth movement**

Roeselare, Belgium, 1875: the Flemish college student Albrecht Rodenbach was concerned about the marginalisation of his language in the educational system. Another trend that worried him was the growing secularisation of society. Therefore he was very interested in Flemish history, which at his time was increasingly being romanticised and glorified. Rodenbach started writing poems and plays evoking the glorious past of the Flemish people, denouncing the shortcomings of his time and idealising the role of a youthful elite in changing society. Inspired by German student movements he united college students from all over Flanders and creates a youth movement: The Catholic Student Action.

Similar youth movements sprang up in different parts of Europe. The most well-known is undoubtedly the German Wandervögel movement. The Wandervögel movement criticised urbanisation and industrialisation and romanticised the organic *Gemeinschaft* by opposing it to the pragmatic *Gesellschaft*. Going hand in hand with the emancipation of women and workers, the youth movements expressed the emancipation of the (student) youth.

In these distinguished youth work roots we can already identify two main sources of inspiration: the social question and the youth question. The former deals with the integration and emancipation of a social class in society while the latter deals with the integration and emancipation of a distinct age group. In both cases the attention on social integration also meant that a group was being defined as 'non-integrated', be it in the middle class society or in adult society. It would need further research, but this may be one of the reasons why girls'



work or girls' movements did not come into the picture at that moment. Their integration into society did not cause great concern for the leading elites of that time. This would eventually change with the shift in attention from 'integration of the working class' to 'integration of the youth category' into mainstream society. Most countries had groups such as the Girls' Brigade although this kind of work was almost exclusively focused on the confirmation of Christian values and the acquisition of household skills.

Depending on the perspective one takes, integrative work should take into account either social context or the development of young people. Or, one can try to make a synthesis, as will be illustrated with the story of the lord and the cardinal. This is what happened in the years following our first two accounts. This is the moment when we started to talk about 'youth work'.

The lord

Robert Baden-Powell, social work + youth movement = youth work

Mafeking, South Africa, 1899: So far the concept of youth work had not yet been identified as a distinct social field of working with young people. There were many social work initiatives similar to that of Don Bosco and there were also many youth movements, but not a single concept of youth work. A serious attempt to define a single concept of youth work was made by Robert Baden-Powell. He was a British officer who had been fighting in the South African Boer War, where he discovered that young people were terrific scouts.

At the beginning of the 20th century, youth was increasingly seen as a distinct phase in the life cycle, with its own characteristics and needs (see Stanley Hall's 'Adolescence', 1904). The introduction of compulsory education in many countries strengthened this construction and helped to set boundaries between young people and adults and to demarcate different educational contexts: family, school and leisure time.

The need arose to create a more comprehensive and thorough system to guide and support young people in their process of growing up and growing into adult society. The call to invest in young people is very typical for a society that is faced with growing social distress and concerns about the cohesion of society. The time was ripe to create a method that would cover educational concerns in the third context: leisure. Therefore Baden-Powell lets himself be inspired from different angles. He shared the concerns of his time about a moral and physical degeneration of the young (as expressed in the work of the Boys' and Girls' Brigade), but he also knew of the German Wandervögel and the American Woodcraft movements.

He was very well aware that young people are not passive recipients of the educational interventions from adults. Therefore Baden-Powell made a synthesis of the distinguished ways in which some people were working with youth. Social work initiatives were too conservative and the youth movements were rudderless and often turbulent. What was needed was a method that 'guided without dictation'; a method that gave young people a sense of self-government and that applied the longing for adventure and nature to learning different skills and instilling a sense of citizenship.

Baden-Powell created a single concept of youth work, based on a single concept of youth. And it worked. The first Boy Scout camp was organised on Brownsea Island in 1907. A few years later, Baden-Powell's sister, Agnes, founded the Girl Guides. Mister Baden-Powell was quite clear about the pedagogical aims of girl scouting. Girls were addressed as obedient servants, as seen in one of his letters, 'as a faithful wife and a spirited mother'. (Reynolds, 1942: 151) He was quite clear on boy scouting too: 'If the public schools were made to produce



gentleman prepared to lead, the scouts must produce young man ready to follow.' (Rosenthal, 1986: 104)

Later on the method grew into a worldwide movement, reaching also to Belgium. In this country a Catholic priest added the finishing touches to another youth work method, one that seemed to appeal to the working class youth. Something that scouting did not achieve, at least not in Belgium.

Women in youth work history!

It is very nice that you quote my husband!

Perhaps in the seminar we can talk more about women's influence on the history of youth work! And afterwards do some research on this topic?



Lady Olave Baden-Powell

The cardinal

Jozef Cardijn, social work + youth movement = social movement

Laken, Belgium, 1912: Jozef Cardijn was also worried about the moral integrity of young people, especially those from the working class. Unlike Baden-Powell however he did not express these concerns in an exclusive orientation on individual citizenship training. Cardijn called out for societal responsibility. He agreed with Baden-Powell that existing initiatives guided by adults (patronages, boys brigades, church girls' brigades) were not very appealing to the young. They are too conservative and too little focused on acquiring active life skills. Cardijn wanted to set up a revolutionary movement, fighting for better working conditions, while very well aware of the fact that the socialists were gaining ground. But very soon both the Catholic Church and the Catholic trade union determined the limits of his movement. It could not install social political ambitions that were too high. In this way Cardijn was obliged to follow in the footsteps of Baden-Powell and create 'a youth work method' out of the synthesis between social work and the youth movement. However, where Baden-Powell created an ideal youth work method starting from an abstract view of an active citizen, Cardijn started with an analysis of the actual social situation of his target group, the working youth. Cardijn started where young people were, not where society wanted them to be. In founding the Catholic Workers' Youth, he was less bothered with the youth question and took the social question as his starting point. His movement also conquered the world, rapidly followed by the equivalent for girls and the farmers' youth (founded by Cardijn's niece). But the movement was gradually transformed into a youth work organisation. This shift is illustrated in a discussion between two founding fathers of youth work.



Cardijn versus Baden-Powell: 'methodisation' in the social context?

London, 1911: Baden-Powell and Cardijn met and the former asked the latter to become chief scout for Belgium. According to the priest however, the officer did not at all understand that there is a difference

between 'youth in general' and working class youth. This is what Cardijn and Baden-Powell told each other (Cardijn, 1948: 137):

Cardijn: *do you know that there are young workers with their very own problems?*

B-P: *I do not know young workers. I only know citizens and I want to shape strong-willed men.*

Cardijn: *do you realise how young workers have to survive in factories and how they are influenced by the workers' milieu? How could we*

help them, not just to stay good, but even to have a positive influence in their milieu?

B-P: *I don't know the workers' milieu!*

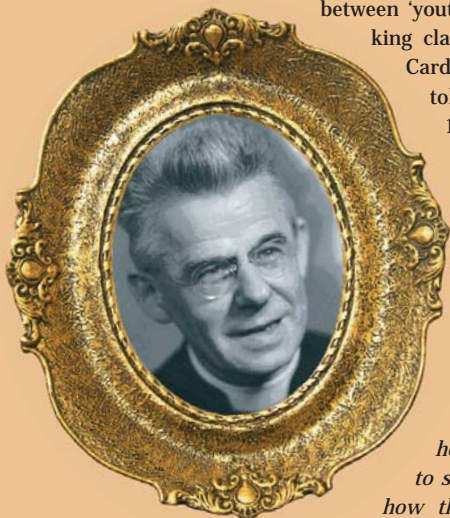
In this fragment one can clearly observe how the development of 'youth work' was from the very beginning interwoven with questions on diversity and equality as well as questions on exclusions and inclusion. Do we invest in youth work as a general provision aiming at the ideal development of young people and trying to reach out to all young people? Or do we aim towards a differentiated youth work field that supports young people's aspirations and consequently reaches out to different categories of young people? Which investment gives young people the best chances for empowerment?

A methodical, universal concept of youth work

There are obvious differences in all European countries. In Flanders, the methodical approach to youth work had a very strong influence. All existing youth work initiatives, reaching out to a huge diversity

of young people, gradually transformed into 'scout look-alikes', for this method was believed to appeal to young people and it seemed to give the best results. What followed is an institutionalisation of the youth organisations. There is still a little bit of Cardijn's wish to differentiate according to social background: there are workers' youth, student youth, merchants' youth, farmers' youth, etc. For each there are boys' branches and girls' branches. The social revolution is restricted now to the cultural domain of leisure time, the place where young people can experience some autonomy and learn to become responsible adult citizens. This did not only happen to Catholic student movements and patronages. Also the socialist youth movements in many European countries withdrew into 'youth land', a self-acquired space. The socialist Young Guards are now Red Falcons. Emancipation is disconnected from social class and has become something individual, something typically youthful. The Catholic Young Workers are a world movement. But does youth work still represent a social movement? Speaking for Europe at least, this is very doubtful.

A second evolution becomes also very clear. Youth work lost sight of social pedagogical questions on the conditions in which young people grow up and have to find their way in society. They made room for questions on the positive and harmonious development of individual young people and the correlations between youth work participation and positive youth development gradually became self-evident. The re-differentiation of youth work – expressed in the 1960s comeback of 'open youth work' – is in the first place a methodical differentiation that tries to reach out to young people. The fundamental social pedagogical questions concerning the different social positions of young people are lost. They have given way to questions on equal outcomes for all young people which maintain that the youth work method can make a contribution to this social policy framework. Some forms of youth work, like scouting, seem to contribute in a very informal and easy way, while other youth work forms are asked to work in a more structured manner and to focus more on outcomes. They are asked to produce the same results as the 'better working forms of youth work', forgetting that 'the best results are produced with the best students'. Youth work cannot compensate for society.



From social practice to youth land?

These are two recurrent youth work dilemmas: universal versus targeted and autonomous versus joined provision. These dilemmas are in fact the motor of a huge differentiation in youth work. To the socio-economic criteria that were applied by Cardijn we added through the years other criteria (gender, handicap, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.), but in the meantime we seem to have lost the awareness of our social history. The youth work method stands on its own and we keep focusing on the accessibility of youth work to young people. Emancipation seems to have become an evident characteristic of youth work provision. Of course this is not possible given the diversity of young people. Emancipation is not the same for a young migrant girl in a poor neighbourhood as for the children of a prince. Do we believe that youth work can cope with all these differences? The main focus of our interventions is often to increase the participation of young people, but to which purposes? What is the significance of youth work for young people and for society?

It seems as if the social question has been framed in the youth question: youth work has increasingly been moving in the direction of a separate youth land. This is a place where young people can foster a sense of 'being young together', where they find a safe place to experiment with different behaviours and identities. But this pushback and withdrawal into youth land also has paradoxical consequences: empowerment seems to be restricted to the social-cultural field. This has the most negative consequences for the most disadvantaged young people. For the main obstacles to empowerment are not situated in the context of leisure time, but are to be found in the educational system and/or in the labour market. Baden-Powell's active citizens for sure are employable citizens, but what happened to Cardijn's call for decent employment?

Professional autonomy versus joined service?

This question reveals the vulnerable position of youth work. The same happened in the relationship between youth work and schools. Where Rodenbach was fighting for the democratisation of the educational system, today's youth work is often restricted to an individual remedial practice: running language courses and prep classes. The attention has shifted from the failure of schools to the failure at school.

If youth work wants to reconnect its practice to broader society without running the risk of being instrumentalised, we need to discuss the essential social and pedagogical nature of our practice. Youth work is not a mere contribution to targets that have been defined in other fields, but professional autonomy cannot be attached one-sidedly to a methodical understanding of what youth work is. This also means – and this brings us to another field of tension that is central to the new EU strategy – that the professionalisation of youth work is not only about training youth workers to become high-profile methodical workers. The creativity and the engagement of volunteers in youth work cannot be neglected. Otherwise we run the risk of an increasing formalisation of the informal aspects of our work. Professionalisation would be a huge social investment, but one that easily could lead to very negative consequences, especially for the most vulnerable young people.

Unity in diversity?

Therefore we have to reactivate a vivid discussion on youth work's identity. A shared social and pedagogical identity with respect however to the most needed differences in our practices. There is no single concept of youth work because there is no single concept of childhood. This requires an open mind and the willingness to prevent our identity from becoming rigid and stereotypical. This is true for young people, but it is also an essential task for youth work. History teaches us that we should take this discussion beyond questions of accessibility and efficiency. As all other social professions, youth work should start where young people are, not where we want them to be. We have to invest in youth work, but without formalising the informal, as this contributes to the further marginalisation of the most vulnerable young people. The main question is not how we can motivate all young people to participate in youth work, but how youth work can position itself as a basic supportive resource for all young people. Let's forget about accessibility and shift attention to the question of how useful youth work is, and can be, and for which young people.

This is the biggest challenge for the Ghent youth work week in July: celebrating diversity while renewing our shared social and pedagogical mission.

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