

History of Popular Education Movement, Scoutism and the Eclaireuses Eclaireurs de France

EDF = Eclaireurs de France

FFE = Fédération Française des Eclaireuses

EUDF = Eclaireurs Unionistes de France (protestants)

GDF = Guides de France (protestants, filles)

SDF = Scouts de France (protestants)

SGDF = Scouts et Guides de France (protestants, filles + garçons)

CEMEA = another popular education organization

I'm going to tell you my story. It begins in 1789.

In the midst of the struggle against obscurantism and the French Revolution, an idea began to spread: the necessity of education for all, by the people, for the people. One man in particular, Nicolas de Condorcet (a French mathematician, politician, and philosopher), committed himself to building this idea. In 1792, he presented a report on public instruction to the Legislative Assembly in which he stated the following:

"As long as there are men who do not obey their reason alone, who receive their opinions from foreign opinions, in vain will all chains have been broken, in vain will opinions by decree become useful truths. Humanity will remain divided into two classes: those who reason, and those who believe. The masters and the slaves."

Though relations of domination between the exploited and the ruling class persisted, emancipatory ideas like Condorcet's would nevertheless continue to grow.

Let's now move forward a few years into the 19th century. Several major secular associations, following this intellectual current, were created to push back against the obscurantism maintained by the Church, to firmly establish the Republic, and to create the conditions for social progress. In 1866, the Ligue de l'Enseignement (Education League) was founded by Jean Macé, a republican journalist and author of popular science works. A secular movement for popular education, the League focused its activities on ecological questions, mutual learning, solidarity, the fight against inequality, and democracy.

A few years later, in 1871, at the end of the war against Prussia, the Paris Commune—a republican insurrectionary movement opposing a National Assembly elected by male universal suffrage—claimed individual freedoms and promoted direct democracy. It enacted reforms such as free and secular education, as well as vocational education led by the workers themselves. The movement is often remembered for its direct actions and the violent repression it suffered from the state. Yet despite being crushed, it contributed to many social advances.

In 1881, French politician Jules Ferry established free, compulsory, and secular schooling, with the dual goal of removing children from religious influence and preventing the workers' movement from educating its youth. A colonialist, Ferry was dismissed in 1885 after the defeat in Tonkin during the Franco-Chinese War.

Then, at the very beginning of the 20th century, in 1901, a law regulating the legal status of associations was adopted. This law allowed any individual with a shared project or cause to engage in an association, regardless of age, nationality, or skills. These non-profit associations encouraged civic engagement above all and were governed by formal statutes.

Let me now introduce a new figure in the popular education movement of this period: Maria Montessori. Her first experience with children took place at a psychiatric clinic in Rome. Believing that mentally disabled children needed to be respected, stimulated, and active, she took the time to observe them, studied the works of two 19th-century French doctors, and used the educational materials they had created. Impressed by the children's progress, Montessori expanded her work to include children without disabilities, seeking to understand what hinders or encourages their development. In 1907, she created the first "Children's House", developing what is now called the Montessori method, based on individual learning and guidance, in opposition to a standardized school system.

Meanwhile, across the Channel in 1907, Baden-Powell, a military man, organized an eight-day camp on Brownsea Island with 20 boys from various social backgrounds. During this stay in nature, he experimented with learning through play and built a pedagogy focused on independence and trust. Following the success of this camp, he launched a new autonomous movement called Scouting, based on five principles: health, practical skills, the individual, service to the community, and spirituality.

A new protagonist now enters the stage: Nicolas Benoît, a French naval officer. During a military campaign in England, he met Baden-Powell and embraced his values and practices. He decided to import the movement to France, and in 1911, founded the Eclaireurs de France (EDF), based on values of secularism, eco-citizenship, democracy, solidarity, and co-education. The movement spread and eventually led to the creation of the FFE (Fédération Française des Éclaireuses) for girls in 1921. Multiple scouting movements emerged, all rooted in this context of social progress and popular education—for the youth, by the youth, and with the youth.

Another key figure in the history of popular education emerged in the interwar period: Célestin Freinet, a French educator and pedagogue. A politically and union-involved activist during a time of intense ideological conflict, he viewed education as a tool for progress and civic and political emancipation. He traveled widely, notably in Germany, where he discovered new educational approaches and developed what he called "modern pedagogy." He created schools where students were encouraged to express themselves, individually and collectively, produce their own writing using printing presses, and choose topics and skills to develop. A committed communist, Freinet often faced opposition from both parents and the state.

Back to scouting—in 1923, several associations such as the Scouts de France (Catholic), EDF (secular), and EUDF (Protestant) created the Inter-Federal Scout Bureau to establish a common organization and shared principles across their associations. Similarly, in 1931, the Coordination

Committee for Girl Guides was created, bringing together GDF and FFE, the female scouting movements.

Under the Popular Front government, in 1936, a man named Léo Lagrange, a former French scout, took charge of the Ministry of Youth and Sports—a ministry that would later disappear in that form. The following year, 1937, saw the first training session for voluntary youth leaders, later known as BAFA, led by Gisèle Defailly from CEMÉA and André Lefevre, also known as "Vieux Castor", from the EEDF.

Scouting movements continued to spread, grow, and organize themselves. Closely tied to social issues and defenders of equality and solidarity, these movements also had an impact beyond their organizations. For example, many members of the EEDF joined the Resistance against Nazi and Vichy oppression during World War II.

Even afterward, this spirit of collective coordination and regulation gave rise to a new idea: co-education—that is, the idea of the same education for girls and boys, men and women, and people of other gender minorities. In 1964, the EDF and FFE merged, giving birth to today's EEDF, a mixed-gender movement for girls, boys, and non-binary individuals. The EEDF promotes an education free from gender roles, considering children and youth as active citizens before labeling them by gender. The merger of SDF and GDF, forming the SGDF, took place later in 2004.

Today, our association remains deeply engaged in social issues and social progress. For example, the EEDF at the national level recently voiced support for oppressed populations, notably Palestine, and called on its volunteers and members to mobilize massively against the far right during the last legislative elections following the dissolution of the National Assembly by President Emmanuel Macron. The association's founding statute was also revised at the last General Assembly, shifting from "apolitical" to "non-partisan."

The association also takes a firm stand against all forms of violence, particularly gender-based and sexual violence, and strives to be a key player in education for freedom and respect.