

“Creating Europeans” through popular education

The role of the European Centre for Culture in the 1950s

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ABSTRACT

Created in Geneva in 1950 in the wake of The Congress of Europe in The Hague in May 1948, the European Centre for Culture (ECC), which was directed by the writer Denis de Rougemont, notably had the mission of “promoting a sense of European community through information and initiatives [...] in educational institutions, namely schools, universities, and organizations for popular education.” Education-related matters thus played a central role in the agenda of this small NGO, which was independent of political authorities despite being firmly rooted in the Western bloc at the beginning of the Cold War. While there were many projects developed in school and university circles, here will mentioned the initiatives conceived outside of schools, an area of action fostered by Rougemont in the 1950s.



Denis de Rougemont and l'abbé Pierre Martel (founder of the Alpes de Lumière movement) during the “pilot experiment for European education” held in Mane, 1958 (© Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Neuchâtel / Rougemont 2.0)

Why “create Europeans” outside of schools?

“We have a motto that governs all of our activities: *Creating Europe firstly involves creating Europeans*. [...] How to shape these Europeans? It is obviously first and foremost a question of education, both inside and outside of schools.” This is how Denis de Rougemont summarized the ECC’s primary aim in a radio interview in 1957. To achieve it, the writer reserved a special role for popular education, which he defined as the “forms of teaching that are more concrete and closer to life, which take their place alongside school hours, and outside of the school term.” Through its roots in an environment in which people live and can “act,” popular education corresponded to de Rougemont’s federalist philosophy, consisting of tension between diversity and unity, local autonomy and continental union. The writer’s credo – the goal of a “European education” worthy of the name – involved shaping “free and responsible” people on the level of their municipality and region, while making them aware that Europe was their shared destiny. De Rougemont contrasted this “active” conception of education with “instruction,” which he painfully experienced on the benches of primary schools and vehemently criticized as a kind of overload in a youthful pamphlet (1929) entitled [*Les Méfaits de l’Instruction publique*](#) (The Harmful Effects of Public Instruction). Believing that the school of the 1950s had not fundamentally changed, the writer temporarily turned away, mobilizing the associative sector and defending the notion of a “European Community of cultural centers,” a prelude to the creation of a Bureau européen de l’éducation populaire (European Bureau of Adult Education).

From the “European Community of cultural centers” to the Bureau européen de l’éducation populaire

What did de Rougemont mean by “cultural centers”? “It is not easy to say,” admitted one of his collaborators. The term encompasses diverse realities, including cultural centers, community centers, youth centers, and popular universities, among others. De Rougemont affirmed that these “centers” embodied the cultural vitality of Europe; for him culture was alive only on the scale of a local group (“there is no national culture”), and could survive only through exchange with other groups. The objective of the “European Community of cultural centers,” which was founded in Geneva in 1952 with support from the European Youth Campaign among others, was to identify these “centers” and their leaders, and share their experiences and methods. For de Rougemont, the operation had obvious advantages, such as more widely diffusing his vision of Europe, serving as an outlet for ECC brochures, and creating synergies with other associations affiliated with the ECC. For those invited to join, the advantages of the Community were nevertheless less obvious, hence the occasional difficulty in agreeing on regulations and making it operational. There were diverging perspectives between the French and Belgians, who supported de Rougemont’s federalist approach, and the British and Scandinavians, who wanted to develop relations between popular schools, but had reservations regarding the “European” character of the undertaking. The Community’s degree of independence in relation to the ECC was also discussed. The diverse forms of extra-scholastic education – what did the vague term “cultural center” entail – made the sharing of experiences between organizations that sometimes had little in common an awkward exercise.

The situation was freed up by two Dutch persons, Oscar Guermonprez and G.H.L. Schouten, both of whom were active in the field of adult education. They had solid experience in the field, had already developed their own project for bringing together other advanced popular schools (a project to which the Scandinavians were receptive), and were more selective and less politically connected to the union of Europe. They convinced de Rougemont to begin activities immediately with the resources he had in Bergen, where they created a Bureau européen de l’éducation populaire. Functioning autonomously and enjoying occasional financial and material support from the European Youth Campaign, the Bureau organized regular training sessions and published a bulletin in three languages entitled *Notes and Studies*, which reported on popular education efforts in various countries. Its administrative affiliation with the ECC was symbolic, as the latter was struggling to meet its own operating expenses.

“Pilot experiments in European education” in a rural setting

The creation of the European Cultural Foundation in Geneva in 1954, in the offices of the ECC and under the

direction of de Rougemont, enabled him to revive his extra-scholastic projects. One of the first grants provided by the foundation was for “pilot experiments in European education” developed between 1956 and 1959. Four of them were conducted in a rural setting according to different formulas: field surveys and opinion polls; sending experts and teaching materials; study days; exchanges between twin towns; grants for development projects. The experiment conducted in Mane, in Haute-Provence, gives an idea of the spirit in which de Rougemont wanted to pursue European educational activities on a local level. Its launch grew out of the encounter between the Alpes de Lumière movement, which was founded in 1953 by Pierre Martel to revitalize the Haute-Provence area, and de Rougemont’s desire to support initiatives that contribute to the influence of the regions, which he considered to be part of European heritage. A survey was conducted by sociologists from the University of Geneva to better define the expectations of the local population, as well as the economic and social needs of the “Quadrilateral” consisting of Mane and three neighboring municipalities, which had faced massive depopulation for a century, due especially to the closing of a mine and problems developing the land. The drawbacks and advantages of the site were evaluated, including industrial and agricultural activity, natural resources, and archeology and architectural heritage. The survey concluded that tourism should be developed, as recommended by Martel in his project to renovate and improve housing and the territory. This vision did not garner unanimous support among “locals,” especially farmers, who overwhelmingly supported a new irrigation system to improve yields, and considered tourism to be a “second best” practice. However, certain initiatives apparently deserved to be supported more than others. There was the paradox between the stated desire to respond to the “real needs” of a community, to put it in control of its fate, and the need to “educate” it, to guide it (wrongly or rightly) in its choices. Aside from financing the sociological survey, the ECC provided a grant to the Alpes de Lumière movement, and held a conference series in which de Rougemont and his collaborators defended their ideal vision of Europe and federalism.

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Multimedia resources

Audiovisual archives

- [Education at the European Centre for Culture](#) (1957). © Radio Télévision Suisse / Rougemont 2.0
- [The 20th Anniversary of the European Centre for Culture](#) (1970). © Radio Télévision Suisse / Rougemont 2.0

Websites

- [Rougemont 2.0 : the complete works of Denis de Rougemont in open access](#)

- [European Association for the Education of Adults](#)
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