

Ellen Key and the concept of *Bildung*

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Who remembers Ellen Key today? Certainly some have heard her name somewhere. But what she did and what she stood for are probably not known by many. Around the turn of the century in 1900 her name was on many lips, not just in Sweden but also in major parts of Western Europe. Alongside Selma Lagerlöf and August Strindberg, she was the Swedish author best-known abroad. Her book *Barnets århundrade* [The Century of the Child] had come out in more than twenty editions just in Germany at the beginning of the 1920s, and she made many long lecture tours there in the early 1900s. When she died in 1926, the entire first page of the major Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* was devoted to her death; the text's implacable announcement "Ellen Key dies" almost gave the impression that the entire country was in compulsory national mourning.

Ellen Key belongs to Sweden's intellectual and cultural history, and in fact not only its history. Hardly a day passes without a mention of the problems she thought about turning up in the public debate. This is especially so concerning her ideas about education, schools, and teaching. It also concerns the ideas that the school should stimulate students to do their own knowledge-seeking, that education is not just intellectual and knowledge-oriented but also has its emotional sides, and especially that education involves a commitment to public affairs. The goal of the school is citizenship, a citizenship that includes all, regardless of gender or social class.

Ellen Key was not a particularly original thinker. But she was very well-read, and was influenced not just by the age in which she lived but also by thinkers of earlier times, such as Goethe, Rousseau and Montaigne. She was in the best meaning of the word a European intellectual, and one of the last people in Swedish cultural history for whom the whole European tradition of ideas was real. She often associated herself, where education was concerned, with traditions that had roots in other times. In order to properly understand Ellen Key, we must learn to understand these traditions. But we also need to use them to understand ourselves, because the idea traditions that Key believed in are central in the history of ideas in the Western world.

My intention in this article is to present Key's educational concept, as well as to show her place in the radical educational tradition of which she is a part. Ellen Key believed that she participated in a discourse that has continued throughout the history of thinking, in which one reply gives rise to another. This makes it important not to just emphasise the points by which she may have been influenced, but also – within reasonable limits – to try to describe the entire long discourse. In other words, I intend to be quite detailed in my review of the early ideas to which Ellen Key connects.

Knowledge, education, class

Ellen Key saw a distinct difference between knowledge and education. She wrote in her eighth journal, dated May 1873:

In a person's development the soul is either a space that is filled with knowledge, or a God-image that is created through education. The former is the material for the latter; there can be knowledge without education; it is the lower foundation which is built upon or not built upon.

The statement is a little complicated, but what Key thought is that knowledge is ethically neutral; it can be filled with both good and bad contents. Education is like that, it always makes us slightly better people, more like God (Key's world of ideas was still quite Christianity-based at this point).

Education is connected, said Ellen Key, to opinions, which in turn are based on different perspectives. Opinions cannot fill a space because they are not constant; they grow from the perspective shifts with which life presents us. We are thus forced to use an organic imagery in discussing opinions; they “root themselves”, “mature”, and give birth to new “seeds of thought”. Knowledge can be accumulated, amassed. But education cannot, as it does not emanate only from knowledge, but also from opinions about that knowledge. It is important to remain open to new opinions, although only to a certain limit. Opinions must be based on knowledge and have its origins in our personalities. Ellen Key argued thus – the quote comes from her third journal, February 1870:

Persons who never change their opinions have opinions that are stone fruits from which no life can sprout. Those who change their views every day, their views are weeds that a summer night's rain brings forth, but which just as quickly are torn up or dried out, they are never fully developed nor do they generate anything lasting, hardly even the seeds of new weeds. Only those who have opinions that can be likened to slowly maturing, healthy fruits, which eventually in the natural order die after they have given life to new noble, vigorous seeds – only these opinions benefit others as well as the persons who possess them.

With this approach, from an early stage Ellen Key was critical of the school, not just of the state secondary grammar school, but also of the primary school. The school builds on the concept that there is a general education which should be made available to all pupils. But such a general education is, said Key, an abstraction, as education always proceeds from individual experience and personal needs. The latter also applies to learning basic skills like writing and reading. The child must understand that writing fills a personal need.

For each proficiency a goal should be set that the child herself can understand to require this proficiency. In the case of writing, it is not like getting blood from a stone, but rather having the pleasure of being able to write a letter ...every reward should grow out of the work, and not grow beside the work...

It is thus important that the child study the subject that interests her just then. There must be a possibility to choose the field of study; the choice itself has an educational function. It should also be pointed out at this early stage that the strong individualism that characterized almost all of Ellen Keys' texts was not a goal in itself. It was rather the great number of individual voices that together create the good society.

Education is also a matter of understanding the context. Here, said Key, narratives play a major role, especially for the small child. The narrative indicates a basic chronological, and often also a geographical order. For that reason one should not jump here and there in history or geography but rather bring together details into larger units in which the internal connections are apparent. The best upbringing small children can receive, according to Key, is in the home. It is there that it is most natural to combine theory and practice, the worlds of the book and the kitchen. It is also in the home that the best narratives are born, ones that often take on the forms of fairy tales or nursery rhymes.

The home appears as the central socialising milieu even in the early letters Ellen Key wrote to various family members. Frequently recurring in her pedagogical ideas is the idea that the first instruction a child receives should be in the home, which in her descriptions appeared to be very much like her own childhood home, but with the eradication of the dissension that occurred there. The school should give knowledge, but it is the job of the home to create an atmosphere in which knowledge appears naturally.

It is also in the home that the child obtains the morals that are required of her as an adult. Ellen Key was a firm believer in the consequentialism that was first expressed in *Émile*, Rousseau's *bildungsroman* (to which we shall return later). Someone who commits a wrong should feel the consequences of that wrong. Key wrote in her fourth journal (1869):

I have through my observations of myself and Hedda come to the great truth that all the advice, learning, and veracities one

uses in education do not bear fruit until one has been able to *experience* their truth.

For the same reason Ellen Key was very critical of corporal punishment. One should never beat a child. Beating seldom makes the child realize what error she has made; it only awakens feelings of revenge. And furthermore, bodily punishment appeals primarily to the “beast in man”, the beast that one otherwise strives so hard to obliterate in the child.

These thoughts appeared in a more developed form in the essays she wrote in the 1880s and 1890s, as well as in the book *The Century of the Child*. But it was as a teenager that she first had these thoughts, no doubt as a result of the unique position she occupied in the Keys’ home. A schematic description of her conception of knowledge could look like this: knowledge is a prerequisite for education, which in turn is based on various perspectives that one has acquired through reading or through meeting people with varying opinions. Education is a prerequisite for insight, a word that Key now and then used (to indicate a deeper understanding).

In her essay *Bildning* [Education], Key first discussed various definitions of the concept. Some see education, she wrote, as primarily a matter of comprehension, and think that the educated person is distinguished by a certain measure of knowledge in various subjects. Such a definition is however, claimed Key, too narrow. She also rejected the idea that education first and foremost refers to an educated manner or an educated taste, which of course is nothing more than an “unoriginal imitation” of certain modes of a temporary nature. Nor did the expression “education by the heart”, often used in Sweden, find favour with Ellen Key, in the sense that it just refers to benevolence. The very kind-hearted parent can often, for example, not understand that a daughter is more interested in studies than in household work. Here one can suspect that the author was talking from her own experience (even though Ellen Key’s mother accepted the fact that her daughter had little interest in kitchen matters).

Each one of these definitions has, confessed Key, a great deal going for it. But it isn't until they are collected into a whole that we can talk about education.

The less we can distinguish the heart's, the brain's or the sense of beauty's expressions, the more completely each educational material is incorporated and implemented by the *whole* personality, and the richer and more real the education is (p.6).

The basis of Ellen Key's education concept is what she called "the fundamental soul capacities" which include memory, imagination, intelligence and feeling. True education lies in a "lively interaction" between these capacities. With the help of the soul's capacities, images are formed in the soul that contribute to intensifying and refining the character. Key saw the soul as a kind of bank for such images. "The soul should be filled with images, idea associations, personal experiences from knowledge's various areas." (p 12) The images are transformed the whole time, entering into new combinations, loaded with new feelings, and acquire other contents; education is a process that is continuously activated. This means that the educational work has no end; a school cannot issue a certificate for a completed educational passage.

However Ellen Key was painfully conscious that there are class barriers to break down here; she was in fact lecturing to a Social Democratic association made up mostly of women workers, but it was given in the Royal Swedish Academy of Science's auditorium, which not all might dare to enter. She also said in the lecture that "differences in levels of education make up the deepest of all class marks", an opinion that she often voiced, and which was an important background for her long labour for general education. In her lectures at Stockholm's Workers Institute, it was precisely the value of literature that, aside from history, was a recurrent theme. She wanted to convey a message about literature's great men and women, not to create respect for them, but rather to establish a sort of "dead poets society" and let Shakespeare, Dante, Sophocles and Goethe become "friends and acquaintances" of the lone reader in his "attic room" (p 19). There was a strong civic element in Ellen Key's educational view. She also expressed the basic humanistic idea that the individual human being is de-

veloped by studying humanity's historical and collective experiences. And finally, there was in Ellen Key's educational view an increasingly apparent aesthetic dimension.

The influence of Herbert Spencer

Ellen Key's pedagogy was strongly centred on the individual. She criticised the concept of "general education" and would like to have replaced it with an education shaped around the needs and temperament of the individual. She also stated that real education requires personal involvement and individual knowledge acquisition. One thinker whose message she was influenced by early on was Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), one of individualism's first interpreters. Spencer, in turn, is often connected with Charles Darwin (1809–1882), the great pioneer of the doctrine of evolution. There is also an evolutionary concept in Spencer's work, and in Ellen Key's time Spencer was probably quoted as often as Darwin, at least among authors. While Darwin's argument concerned primarily biological circumstances, Spencer developed the evolutionary theory into a model for all areas of life – both human and other biological species – of slow, ongoing change. This process was characterized, said Spencer, by three simultaneous phases: a transition from the simple to the complex, from the indefinite to the definite, and from the loosely conjoined to the increasingly connected. Even in the most subtle areas of human existence, such as ethics and psychology, Spencer believed that an evolutionary process could be discerned, in which a later stage was more valuable than an earlier one. The independent individual functions as a well-integrated and coherent personality, capable of definite and well thought-out decisions.

Spencer also believed that the habits that people developed grow into qualities, a condition that is vital to understanding Spencer's evolutionism, which is based on the assumption that acquired qualities are hereditary. Qualities that the educator seeks to develop in the child thus become an investment for the future; they are inherited by the next generation and will later, if education is made general, become a part of the culture.

Spencer's book on education, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*, was published in 1861, which was early in his career. But even by that time he had developed the main theories of his philosophical system. The evolution that Spencer saw everywhere in life also applies to education. The child's education must be designed so that it connects with this development – that is the meaning in what Spencer called “natural education”.

The most important element of a natural education is that the instruction takes place step by step. The educator must be cognizant of the fact that there is “a universal order” according to which the child develops. “The development of the soul is, like all other development, a progression from the indefinite to the definite”.¹ The little child sees the world as adults in the Stone Age saw it. The ever-present nature gave the prehistoric man a firm reality to struggle with, and the child must repeat this, though in a much shorter time span – and when possible, under the supervision of an educator/advisor. The child is, according to Spencer, a primitive creature:

In her early years every civilized person goes through the same character development as the barbaric species from which she is descended. Just as the child's facial features – the flat nose, the nostrils that open forwards, the thick lips, the widely-spaced eyes, the undeveloped forehead, and so on – for a time resemble those of the savage, so do its instincts. Hence the child's inclination for cruelty, thievery, and lies... (p. 167).

The child should be civilized with the help of its education, or in other words go through the same civilizing process that humanity has gone through during its development from “barbarism” to civilization. Spencer's description of the child is simultaneously a description of primitive people, especially Africans as they were described in the rapidly increasing numbers of travel books appearing at the time by travellers like Stanley, Burton, Speke and others. The description stresses the comparison of “the primitive human” to a child who cannot care for itself, but must be

¹ p. 83. The quote is from Herbert Spencer, *Uppfostran i intellektuellt, moraliskt och fysiskt afseende* [Education in an Intellectual, Ethical and Physical Reference] (Stockholm, 1883), p. 90

led by the hand, so to speak, into the civilized world. Spencer's evolutionism furnished in this way an argument for colonialism, while it also guided parents, teachers and staff at institutions for juveniles.

This concurrence should however not hinder us from seeing the emancipatory elements in Spencer's educational theories. The blind discipline which at that time was dominant in most schools and certainly in most homes in both Sweden and England, was severely questioned by Spencer, who was a spokesman for milder methods, and allowed space for the child's self-activity. Educating the new generation, writes Spencer as he expressed himself in terms that Ellen Key would repeat later, must be an art that that was embraced by everyone. It is certainly high time to educate the future educators now.

Ellen Key read Herbert Spencer's *Education* in a Danish translation in 1879, which can be seen in her journal of the books she read.² During the 1880s she studied several of Spencer's works, including *The Data of Ethics* and *The Study of Sociology*. In reading Spencer, Key entered into the philosophy of progressive education and its traditions. Spencer was certainly not very generous in referring to precursors, but we know that he was influenced by the Swiss educator Johan Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827).³ Spencer of course also knew about Pestalozzi's source of inspiration, Rousseau's *Emile, ou de l'Education* [Emile, Or About Education] (1762), and he also refers to John Locke (1632–1704) and his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693).

But what especially attracted Ellen Key to Spencer was the theory of evolution, the accomplished perspective on development. Our way of thinking and feeling is not a given for all time. It has gone through a series of basic changes, and can be changed in the same way in the future. This gives us freedom, but it also makes demands. If acquired characteristics are inherited, which

² "Lästa böcker [Books read] 1878-79-80" L 41 2:2.

³ Herbert Spencer, *Critical Assessments*, - vol., ed. John Offer (London & New York, 2000), vol. IV, p. 29off.

Key argues along with Spencer, then education has a strategic role in society. The character-forming at which education aims then becomes not just a matter for our own time. The qualities that education forms in an individual are inherited by that person's descendents. The educator must therefore always have the future in mind. For Ellen Key, education had, like so much else in her philosophy, a utopian dimension. The children and young people we educate today will make possible another, better society tomorrow.

This utopian dimension separated her thinking from the naturalism that was so popular in the literature of the end of the 1800s, and that stressed the inevitable role of biological heritage. Milieu and education could only have a surface influence on the character we have inherited from our forefathers. Especially the French literature came to isolate the problem; heritage was often placed against milieu. This provoked the question of which of these factors were the most meaningful, and which had the decisive influence on the character of the individual. Here the French naturalism came to put the emphasis on heritage. In Sweden it was especially Strindberg who took up the French naturalism's speculations on the significance of heritage, and in Norway it was Ibsen and Björnson.

Björnson differed, however, from Strindberg in questioning the determinism that characterized the French naturalism. Here Ellen Key stood closest to Björnson, as she did in so many other contexts. In a long review in the journal *Verdandi* of Björnson's novel *Det flager i Byen og paa Havnen* [Flags are Flying in Town and Port], which was published in 1884, Key discussed heritage and milieu. The novel is about how a man, Tomas Rendalen, who from his entire heritage was predestined to become a man of dissolute habits, is transformed by his mother's upbringing, and attains, as Key put it, "ethical purity". The book's main principle can, according to Key, be expressed in Björnson's words as "Heritage is only a condition, not a determination". Björnson's main effort lay, writes Key, in that he so forcibly underlined that "education can modify the heredity factors". What Björnson hoped to achieve, wrote Key, is "transformed heredity factors", espe-

cially regarding the species' relation to ethics and responsibility. This shall be achieved through changed education, especially for women, "the mothers and first educators of the species".

Spencer's evolutionism was, in many ways, a constructive idea in Ellen Key's philosophy. It determined, as we shall see, her position in a number of areas that concern not just upbringing and education, but also gender power balance, outlook on life and the big question of war and peace. Evolutionism gave Key a scientific basis for the opinions she maintained. But it should be noted that Key's interpretation of evolutionism did not exclude the biological necessity that often characterizes the evolutionary philosophy. We are not steered by any unavoidable fate. Will and choice still have decisive roles in our lives.

Montaigne

Montaigne is, Key pointed out, the first to require realism, the key concept in upbringing and education in the 1880s; "Montaigne always prescribes reality for the children".⁴ In Montaigne's realism, said Key, not only does the adult demonstrate or lecture, but he also lets the child himself try out whatever it is he/she is to learn. The boy – and of course it was a boy in Montaigne's time – should not only repeat a lesson orally, but also "repeat it in his actions".⁵ Montaigne introduced the tradition of the activity method, which would come to play an important role in the development of the modern progressive education.

Key had also been caught up in what Montaigne stated about the significance of independence in one's studies. She cited with delight Montaigne's advice that the teacher/educator should sometimes allow the students to "trot ahead of himself" in order to get to know him/her better.⁶ The child should "taste things for him-/

⁴ *Barnets århundrade II* [The Century of the Child II], p. 198.

⁵ Michel de Montaigne, *Essäer* [Essays], I–III, Swedish translator Jan Stolpe (Stockholm, 1986–92), part I, 213.

⁶ *Barnets århundrade II*, [The Century of the Child II], p. 191; Montaigne, a.a., 190. When horses were to be broken for riding, the first step was to let the horse trot in front while the trainer held it on long reins.

herself”; Montaigne understood “dedication’s” decisive role. The teacher should not be frightened of losing the respect of the students or being seen as an “impossible” teacher in reference to discipline – here Key pleaded her own cause – it is necessary to allow the students to think and speak themselves.⁷

In Montaigne Key found someone who shared her views, someone to whom she often returned and cited in various contexts. It could be about the meaning of realism in instruction, the importance of independence, criticism of beating, and especially the strategic role that Montaigne gave to education. Education is, wrote Montaigne (anticipating Spencer), one of the most important of all human activities. But we don’t care how it is done. In fact education is a very difficult art – “the greatest and most meaningful difficulty in human knowledge seems to lie in the area that includes children’s physical and moral training.”⁸

Montaigne was not an unknown personage in educational circles at that time. He had received a detailed presentation in the journal *Verdandi* by its editor, Anna Sandström, who saw in him a pioneer for realistic education.⁹ Sandström claimed that Montaigne understood that important knowledge arises in meetings between people, not only the ones who are alive now, but also the ones “who only live in books”. The latter thought was one that Key also expressed.

Ellen Key does not seem to have read Montaigne until the middle of the 1890s, when she borrowed his *Essais* from the Royal Swedish Library.¹⁰ But she of course knew of him much earlier. In a notebook that she began in February 1883 (and ended in October 1884), she mentions Montaigne in an argument on French literature.¹¹ In a later notebook, dated 1896–97, she wrote a long

⁷ *Barnets århundrade II* [The Century of the Child II]; Montaigne, a.a., p. 190.

⁸ Montaigne, a.a., 188.

⁹ Uffe, “Historiska auktoriteter för den realistiska pedagogiken” [Historical Authorities for Realistic Pedagogy]. *Verdandi* 1884:4.

¹⁰ Lengborn, *En studie i Ellen Keys pedagogiska tänkande...*, [A Study in Ellen Key’s Educational Thinking] p.65.

¹¹ L 41 2:5.

account of Montaigne's life and ideas; this apparently was a draft for a talk in a lecture series that she called "The French moralists".¹² The description of Montaigne is very long, 154 pages, and it is probable that it functioned more as a collection of material than as a proper manuscript. This can be deduced from the fact that Key often did not bother to translate the quotes, or translated only half of them. As a sort of preamble she has jotted down a few sentences that are repeated in the continuing text, and make up a kind of leitmotif: "Self-searching – a modern trait: free from authority and tradition... See oneself to follow oneself!"

It was the classical picture of Montaigne that Key adopted, the quiet thinker who had penetrated the world's strivings and now viewed life from the tower of his little castle outside of Bordeaux – "everything's uncertainty, the pleasures of the now, mankind's fleeting existence". Key believed that Montaigne does not actually want to stand out as learned, but rather as a layman who embraced literature because it pleased him. "Indefinite meditations, in which he never takes sides, judges neither himself nor others, and seeks the reasons for weakness, but doesn't judge it." As a comprehensive estimation of Montaigne, Key uses a phrase of her own invention: "a feeling for humanity". All that Montaigne achieved is conveyed in his "hatred of lies and the the strongest sense of humanity".

In *Century of the Child* we meet Montaigne's ideas about upbringing – mostly concentrated to a passage (no. 26) in the first book. Like Anna Sandström, Ellen Key made a big point of Montaigne's "realism", his striving to always proceed from the tangible example. If one can choose between "painted figs" and real ones, one should choose the real ones. Books are important, but reality is most important. Like Key's other pedagogical heroes and heroines, Montaigne is said to have "hated school". He hated "pedants", a word that Key sometimes uses to characterize teachers. Key gave a very bright picture of Montaigne's educational ideals. A good education need never be boring. "The way

¹² L 4I 2:16. The manuscript about Montaigne is not paginated.

to wisdom and virtue is shady, pleasant, and flower-strewn...” The child should learn the art of life, not the “niceties” of philosophy.

But for all that the child need not be afraid of philosophy: “*il n’est rien plus gai, plus gaillant, plus enjoué et à peu que je ne dis folâtre*” – (Key often reproduced long bits of text without translating them). The above reads in translation: “There’s nothing happier, more exhilarating – more devilishly, I might even say”.¹³ But one should not “dumb down” the child with abstract knowledge. Our daily lives give us more than enough examples in which to find learning. Key referred to and quoted:

The table and the garden, the bedroom and the society, morning and evening, everything gives material for study – that is, to philosophy that creates meaning and [illegible word], physical exercises, music, dancing, hunting, riding, martial arts – it is all education; the means should be merged with the soul. *Ce n’est pas une âme, et n’est pas un corps, c’est un homme: il ne faut pas faire à deux* but rather care for both as a pair of horses and rather give the body more time, for the soul learns via the body instead of the other way around.

The French quote above can be translated thus: “It is not a soul, and not a body, it is a person, and one may not divide [it] into two...”. This is a key statement for understanding Ellen Key’s concept of the world. The church, religion and established moral is wrong; our world is not divided into two, or dualistic, instead body and soul make up a unit, as material and soul. Ellen Key called herself at this time a “monist”, a word constructed from the Greek *monos*, which means one.

John Locke

Montaigne, the sixteenth-century thinker, exerted a great influence on later thinking and literature, primarily the French thinking, of course, but also the English. In England he was often (to a certain degree rightly) perceived as English in his manner of thinking and writing. One English philosopher who was influ-

¹³ Montaigne, a.a., 203.

enced by Montaigne was John Locke, who was introduced to Montaigne's *Essais* during a stay in Holland in the 1680s. Montaigne's frequently-quoted formulation about the body's and soul's essential oneness appealed especially strongly to Locke.¹⁴ He was presumably also attracted to the educational ideal that permeated Locke's little publication – that acquisition of knowledge is not its own goal, but instead primarily a means in the education for wisdom and ethical judgement. Ellen Key referred, not surprisingly, to Locke in her article "A review and survey" in *The Century of the Child II*. It is not possible to find any information on in what context Key was introduced to Locke, but she may have read Locke in *Skrifter af uppfostringskonstens stormän* [Writings of the Great Men in the Art of Education], a series published by Otto Salomon in 1886–97, in other words comparatively late.¹⁵

Like Montaigne's pedagogical thoughts that formally have the character of a letter, Locke's paper was also a long letter to a friend and benefactor. The advice on education that Locke gave in his "letter" is to a father, and deals primarily with sons who will be educated to be "gentlemen". The education is the same as character-shaping, and in that context he touched upon beating. Physical punishment creates quite simply, says Locke, bad characters.¹⁶ Either it breaks down the boy's self-esteem, or else it makes him into a hypocrite. The goal of education is not to crush the boy's spirit, but on the contrary to strengthen it and give it a direction that in the long term will encourage the boy's character. The boy must learn to "take command of his inclinations". It is important to be able to resist the moment's temptations in order to instead follow the path that reason points out. The goal is self-control, the civilized man's – the gentleman's – foremost characteristic.

¹⁴ Axel Herlin in the foreword to John Locke, *Tänkar om uppfostran* [Thoughts on Education] (Stockholm, 1926); the quotations from Locke are from this edition.

¹⁵ Lengborn, *En studie i Ellen Keys pedagogiska tänkande...*, [A Study in Ellen Key's Educational Thinking] p.64.

¹⁶ Locke, a.a., 44f.

Locke was influenced by the puritan currents of his time, and there he differed from Montaigne. Locke believed also that a father who beats his son (and he talks only of a father, never of a mother or of both parents) is a bad example for the boy, in the sense that the father in his beating often loses his head and gives an impression of not being able to control himself. If beating is necessary, which may sometimes be the case when other methods prove insufficient, then it should not be given in connection with the offence itself, but preferably a while afterward “so that anger is not mixed into it”¹⁷. The educator should always appear balanced and the punishment necessary, an educational ideal that the 19th-century middle class embraced (and which was expressed in the 1900s in both literature and in Ingmar Bergman’s film *Fanny and Alexander*).

Rousseau

Between Montaigne and Locke on one side and Spencer on the other stood a figure that Ellen Key came to embrace: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The line from Montaigne, to Locke, Rousseau and Spencer appears to be the most meaningful in her pedagogical philosophy. She also saw, as she wrote in *The Century of the Child*, a likeness between Montaigne and Rousseau. Rousseau’s education novel *Emile* (1762) originates, she says, in a “direct line” from Montaigne. However, she doesn’t seem to have read *Emile* until about the middle of the 1880s, when the work is mentioned in the list of books she had read. Nonetheless she must certainly have heard about his ideas; both her father and her paternal grandfather were named after the book – both were called Emil. By 1874 she had read *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* [Julie, or the New Heloise], Rousseau’s epistolary novel from 1761; this is documented in a letter to Julia Kjellberg (28.9; the book can be found in the library at Strand, in an 1843 edition from Paris). Although it was the depiction of love that interested her – *La nouvelle Héloïse* was one of modern love’s earliest and most-read erotic portrayals – the novel also contains a great deal of thinking about education. Julie’s beloved Saint-Preux takes in

¹⁷ Locke, a.a., 89

the latter part of the story, after the lovers have been separated for a long time, a job as a teacher of Julie's children. In a long letter to his friend and benefactor, Saint-Preux describes the education that Julie and her husband, de Wolmar, give their children.¹⁸ The basic principles of that upbringing are strongly reminiscent of Montaigne's ideas; Montaigne is also one of the authors to whom Rousseau often referred. They have the same shining belief in the child's own curiosity and capability. Julie describes her "educational art" as "that of a gardener"; she allows the plant to grow with its own energy and just sees to it that it has a good soil to grow in.

Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse was published in 1761, and one year later came *Émile, ou de L'éducation* [Emile, or About Education] a book whose main theme was education. *Émile* is a kind of intermediary form between novel and thesis. It is about a teacher who devoted his life to educating the orphaned Emile until he marries and has a family. *Émile* exercised a strong influence on pedagogical debate from the end of the 18th century and well into modern times. Its indirect significance was also great via the effect it had on influential philosophers like Kant, Goethe and Spencer.

Although women had no prominent places in the story of *Émile* itself – to the extent that we can talk about story here – they nevertheless are given a great deal of mention in the discussions that were carried on, especially where the development of very small children is concerned. The earliest upbringing of children devolves without a doubt on women, writes Rousseau in a prefato-

¹⁸ I quote from David Sprenkel's translation, *Julie eller den nya Héloïse* [Julie or the New Heloise] book 2, part 5, letter 3 (Stockholm 1999). Sprenkel's translation was done in the 1930s, but has remained unpublished at Bonnier publishing company, which had originally ordered it. This edition is revised by Jan Stolpe. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (Paris, 1843).

ry note.¹⁹ Nature itself has given a broad hint of this relationship by giving only women the capacity to breastfeed. Thus whoever gives advice about upbringing – here Rousseau refers of course to himself – must primarily address the women. It is also true that women, as a rule, are more attached to the children than are the fathers. He writes in an agitated tone about the “fathers’ ambitions and greed...their negligence and harshness” (p 4). In reality he even turns on himself here, even though he might not agree with that. He took his own children to an orphanage, no doubt to have a quieter atmosphere in which to write (about them). Ellen Key noted this situation in a memorandum in 1893.²⁰ Rousseau’s ideas were so intense, Key wrote here, that he had difficulty living up to them in real life.

If he had raised his own five children, he would not have written *Emile*; if he had been happily in love, he would not have written *La Nouvelle Héloïse* – the absence of venting his feelings in action made the *feeling of the ideal* so passionately intense.

The books became Rousseau’s children. One could probably say the same of Ellen Key.

Of course there was no family described in *Emile*, but the whole account leads eventually to the family that Emile himself will form; the novel ends as Emile stands on the threshold of marriage. This book is one of the first in the tradition of “difference feminism”. According to this doctrine men and women are fundamentally different; the man’s strength lies in the area of rational reasoning, and the woman’s strength lies in that of intuition and empathetic capabilities. The married woman thus has a key role in the family that for Rousseau (and later for Key) appears

¹⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile eller om uppfostran* [Emile, or About Education] Swedish translator C. A. Fahlstedt, revised by Inga-Britta Hansson. Göteborg, 1977. *Emile* can be found in the Norwegian national library at Strand in a French edition from Paris, undated. It is underlined, but it is not known by whom. I quote the Swedish translation from 1977, and compare it with *Émile, ou de l'éducation*, Paris 1966.

²⁰ “Litteraturhistorieanteckningar 1893 J. Jacques Rousseau” [Notes on the History of Literature 1893 J. Jacques Rousseau] L741:2:11. The notes are not paginated.

as the ideal. The family depends on the woman, who is, according to Rousseau a much more important person in the family than is the husband. The woman who neglects her family causes havoc in the family life, and the natural bonds are dissolved: "There will no longer be fathers and mothers, children, or siblings because the one hardly recognizes the other, and how can they love each other then? People think only of themselves" (p 16). And as if to lay a further burden of guilt on the woman he added threateningly: "The home becomes a dreary wasteland, and a man must seek his pleasures elsewhere" (the reader can almost hear a door slam there.)

If the woman decides against her role as a mother she also makes it impossible for the child to develop; roles in the family define each other and create expectations that the partners try to live up to in order to gain acknowledgement. There is a special family dynamic that forms the characters around which the family life revolves. But it is on the wife and mother that the greatest responsibility lies. This is true especially for the children's upbringing and development. Rousseau expressed this in his laconic way: "If the mother is no longer a mother, then the child will no longer be a child" (p 17).

This discussion actually undermines, as Ellen Key pointed out, the whole pedagogical project that *Émile* was to make up. Rousseau's "I" character, the one who expresses Rousseau's ideas, must simultaneously be father, mother, friend, and teacher – a relationship that underlines the project's experimental character. The novel as a whole acquires the character of a construction. When Emile's wife-to-be, Sophie, appears in the fourth part of the book, she fulfils completely the ideal picture of a woman, as the educator has described it to Emile. *Émile* contains a strongly manipulative character, which is a consequence of the educator being always a step ahead of his pupil, arranging circumstances so that the result is the one he wants.

We are all born, claimed Rousseau, with the capacity to learn. All education is based on that capacity. There are no evil children, only children who have been brought up in the wrong way.

Wet-nurses and mothers grow attached to the children by caring for them, a care that awakens the child's love of other people. Emotion precedes intellect, said Rousseau: "we had feelings before we had concepts".²¹ Feelings are therefore completely crucial in education. Emotions can be developed and made richer."Someone who has lived the longest is not the one who has counted the most years of living, but rather the one who feels that he has lived" (p 12). This lesson is varied throughout the whole book. The important thing is not, it is said at one point, to keep the child from dying, but rather to "teach it to live". For Ellen Key this idea became the most central in her whole pedagogical project and the nucleus of the ethics she tried to teach in publications like *Lifslinjer* [Lifelines] and *The Century of the Child*.

Feeling is also the keystone in what Rousseau called the natural education. Books are not, at least at the beginning, a necessary part of education; it is sufficient that the child assimilates the contents of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. The school finds no mercy with Rousseau. It concentrates far too much on book learning. Those who want to learn anything must try it themselves. Rousseau pursued the concept of the activity method from Montaigne. Rousseau's example of the gardener is well-known. Emile is to plant a bean in a certain place in the garden. He must water it and care for it, and after a while he feels that it is *his* plant and plot of ground. The educator explains that he, through his work, has made it his own. There is, says Emile's educator to him, a bit of himself in the plant and the soil. One day, however, the whole garden has been dug up and the plant is gone. It turns out that it was the gardener's plot that Emile mistakenly took for his own. He had planted his bean in a plot that the gardener had reserved for growing melons. Emile received a tangible lesson. "In this example of a way to convey to the children the earliest concepts, one can see how the concept of property goes naturally to the right of whoever, through his work, laid claim to something" (p 92). The controversy is solved by Emile being allowed to lease a bit of the garden. He has thus not just learned a concept, but

²¹ *Emile, eller om uppfostran II*, 47; *Èmile ou de l'éducation*, [Emile, or About Education] p. 377.

has also received an insight into the difference between renting and owning. And above all, the incident has made him reflect on where ownership actually has its basis – Rousseau’s perception was built upon the classical financial labour theory of value which he had learned from John Locke.

Yet another ethical gain is that Emile learns to appreciate manual labour. He also must learn a craft, and he is trained in carpentry. The reader has of course understood at an early stage that Emile is wealthy and does not need to work. But riches can disappear overnight, while the skill that he has developed in his hands can never be lost. The craftsman is, according to Rousseau, the freest of all people. He is not bound to the turf as the farmer is, nor to a family and a name as the nobleman is. He carries his knowledge with him in his hands and his body. Rousseau saw the craftsman as the authentic human being. I want, says the educator of his pupil, “to raise him to the rank of human being”.²² The idea of the authentic human being, a person who fulfils him-/herself by free choice and one’s own capacity, is met in all of Key’s later works – it became there a theme with many variations.

In her notes on Rousseau in 1893 Ellen Key compared him with Nietzsche; both express protests against their times. In Rousseau’s case it was the democrat’s protest against the monopoly of the nobility, and Nietzsche’s case it was the educational aristocrat’s protest against his times’ reduction to a uniform level. Key talked about “the principle of the personality” that she claimed Rousseau represents, saying that there is a difference between egoism and what she calls “personalité”. Egoism is self-preservation, an aptitude of which Rousseau doesn’t have much. However, he does have “personalité”, or “self-assertion”. He wants to assert his personality’s individuality, and therein lies his importance, Key believed. She appears at that point to have read Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* [Confessions], which she called “the Iliad of the personality”.²³

²² p. 233; “je veux l’élever à l’état d’homme” *Émile, ou de l’éducation*, [Emile, or About Education], p. 254.

²³ An underlined copy of *Les Confessions* can be found in the Norwegian national library at Strand, in an edition from Paris, 1894.

Goethe

In the radical educational tradition that Ellen Key professed herself an advocate of, it was individualism that she accentuated – criticism of the force of habit and the culture’s artificial influence on education and teaching. She also bore in mind the line from Rousseau when she approached German pedagogues such as Johann Bernhard Basedow (1723–90) and Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827). In *The Century of the Child* she recommended the work of the latter, *Huru Gertrud undervisar sina barn* [How Gertrud Instructs her Children], which was included in the series of education’s classical works published by educator Otto Salomon (1849–1907).²⁴ In both Basedow and Pestalozzi it is the emphasis on “attitudes” that she accentuated. Instead of “talking” the teacher should “show”.

She found examples of such instruction in Goethe’s life. John Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) became one of the authors that Key most frequently quoted in the 1890s. But it was just as much his life as his poetry that she focussed her interest on. Goethe did not have to go to school, she writes in “Från Goethes värld” [From Goethe’s World], an extensive essay about Goethe and his authorship, published in *Människor* [People] in 1899.²⁵ Goethe was educated by his mother. She perceived that a child needs love in order to be able to develop. She taught her son to hate “all empty pretence....all hollow phrases”. And especially, she understood his special individuality, his exceptional character. Such a being could not adapt to a school without being harmed. The young Goethe found instruction in reality instead. “At the goldsmith’s he learned the value of precious stones, at the painter’s the mixing of colours, at the copperplate engraver’s

²⁴ Henrik Pestalozzi, *Huru Gertrud undervisar sina barn. Ett försök att gifva mödrarna ledning att själfva undervisa sina barn*. [How Gertrud Teaches her Children. An Attempt to Give Mothers Guidance in Educating Their Own Children. Writings of Great Men in the Art of Education] by Otto Salomon VIII (Göteborg, 1896).

²⁵ Ellen Key, *Människor* [People](Stockholm, 1899), p. 186; the essay was originally in a considerably shorter form, but with the same title, published in *Ord och Bild* 1895.

he learned how to wield the etching needle.” (p. 191) In Goethe’s education Ellen Key saw her pedagogical ideal carried into effect. Here she found the realism that was missing in the schools of the day. “This whole education – through realities for realism, in the midst of life for life – was the diametric opposite of today’s”.

She had already found realism in Montaigne and Rousseau. But in Goethe an ideal is added, neo-humanism’s education ideal. For German neo-humanists like Johann Winckelmann, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Goethe, fiction was the educational subject above all others, especially the fiction of classical antiquity. Classical antiquity’s literature as well as the art and architecture of that period sent Goethe into raptures, wrote Key. “It was in Italy that Goethe became completely Goethe”. (p 279)

Here lies an idea that was to become more and more prominent in Key’s work. Personality is a work of art. This idea is already latent in Rousseau’s *Émile*. Emile is brought up, of course, to be the perfect person. But it is not Emile himself who designs this education, but rather his teacher/friend. In *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Goethe’s *bildungsroman*, it is, states Key, the individual who educates him/herself; Goethe is, as she formulated it, “permeated by the significance of self-education” (s 211). Wilhelm Meister’s big project is to form his person into a “harmonious, consummate person”. We also meet this thought in Friedrich Schiller, a close friend of Goethe. Schiller especially emphasises the role of aesthetics in educational activities, an idea that he presents in *Briefe über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795), [Letters About Man’s Aesthetic Upbringing]. In looking at beautiful things we free ourselves from the physical, material conditions of our existence. Human beings have a unique inclination towards shaping and embellishing their existence, not just living it. Therein lies our freedom, a freedom that has its beginning in play.

A European intellectual

With *The Century of the Child*, Ellen Key’s name became known in Europe. John Landquist, a philosopher and later educator

who published a little paper about Ellen Key in 1909 in Bonnier's series "Svenskar" [Swedes], mentions that *The Century of the Child* had by then been translated into nine languages – Danish, German, Dutch, Italian, French, English, Russian, Polish, and Latvian.²⁶ Her name was on many lips, as she was seen to be a significant author in pedagogy. Outside of Sweden, it was mostly in German progressive education circles that Ellen Key's ideas were accepted. In some cases her ideas actually had an influence in the German school sector. Progressive education work attracted attention and was also an inspiration in a generally new approach to schools on a larger scale.²⁷ During the following years there was a renewed interest in Key's ideas; radical German and Austrian teachers that came to Sweden in the 1930s brought with them new ideas that were based on Ellen Key's concepts. Progressive educational ideas also characterized the final report of the 1945 school commission in Sweden, and after that the radical education methods also gained a footing in the Swedish schools. However the institutional environment by then was of course a different one from that in which Ellen Key had been involved.²⁸ The issues of power and the relationship between teacher and student to which Key gave so much importance were long gone from the picture.

The school reform today that most consciously follows Ellen Key's pedagogy is the anthroposophical Waldorf School. One of the two Waldorf schools in the Stockholm area bears her name – the Ellen Key School in Spånga, a Stockholm suburb. There are many similarities in the outlooks on humanity held by Ellen Key och Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), the founder of anthroposophism. Key read Steiner's work *Philosophie der Freiheit* [Freedom's philosophy] (1894) in the middle of the 1890s. Steiner was not yet an anthroposophist; that was a doctrine that he developed in the very early 1900s. He was however in the process of publishing Goethe's collected scientific works, and it is not impossible that Goethe's ideas came to act as a bridge between them. Nor

²⁶ John Landquist, *Ellen Key* (1909), p. 77.

²⁷ Ellen Key, *Barnets århundrade* [The Century of the Child] (1996), p. 168 (Stafseng's comments).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

is it impossible that Steiner heard Key speak at one of her lecture tours in Germany. Key met Steiner in Paris, according to an undated newspaper clipping from the beginning of the 1900s.²⁹ They had evidently visited a museum of medieval statuary together. Steiner was in Paris to hold a series of lectures on theosophy; since 1902 he had been the general secretary of the German section of the Theosophical Society. As he left that society and started the Anthroposophical Society in 1912, the meeting must have taken place between 1902 and 1912, possibly in the spring of 1906, when Key spent some time in Paris.

Hans Möller, also an anthroposophist, pointed out in an article in the society journal *Anthropos*³⁰ that there are a number of concordances between Key's pedagogy and that of the Waldorf school. In both, the traditional school's division of subjects was criticised for what they saw as breaking the material up into small snippets. The Waldorf school recommended block study, in which the same subject is in focus for a longer defined period, usually several weeks. The pupils also create work notebooks, in which their own activity is encouraged as far as possible. Like Key, the anthroposophists criticised the traditional schoolbooks, which they wanted to replace with ordinary books. They were also critical of marks. Instead each teacher gives a judgement on each individual pupil.

Another similarity between the two is the role one attaches to aesthetics. It is important that the pupils are surrounded by beauty, as it contributes to the harmony that is necessary for learning. Even the anthroposophical pre-school education shows similarities to that which Key recommends. Free play dominates, and the pre-school staff should stay in the background, intervening only in exceptional situations in the children's activities. The imagination is hampered, say the anthroposophists, by too much lecturing. Imagination is a necessary part of personality development;

²⁹ K.B. L41: p. 31

³⁰ *Anthropos: tidskrift för antroposofi* [Anthropos: Journal for Anthroposophy] (2001:1–2).

this was an opinion that united Ellen Key with Steiner and with the philosophical tradition from Goethe and Schiller.³¹

Aside from Rudolf Steiner, another of the great educators of the 1900s, Maria Montessori (1870–1952), may also have been influenced by Ellen Key. The connection has been pointed out by both Kerstin Signert, pedagogue, and Christine Quarfood, researcher in the history of ideas.³² Montessori herself mentioned Ellen Key and *The Century of the Child* in her own book *Il segreto dell'infanzia* (1936) [The Secret of Childhood]. Several of Montessori's books can be found in the Norwegian national library in Strand. Key and Montessori had met at a women's conference in Milan in 1908, and they moved in the same social circles in Rome during the time that Key was there.³³

At first glance their philosophies may seem different. Montessori's ideas are based on care of the disabled and are designed to train and develop the rational capacities. They had an unmistakably cognitive goal. Under scrutiny, though, similarities emerge in the educational ideals emerge, as Christine Quarfood points out in a paper. She emphasises especially that both forms of pedagogy have forward-looking visionary dimensions. Both Key and Montessori wanted to create a new, more self-reliant person. It was also important to Montessori to give the children an atmosphere that was as free as possible from adult domination. Quarfood believes that in this respect Montessori can have been influenced by Key – not an unreasonable conjecture. But of course it was not

³¹ On the tradition of philosophy of self, Steiner and Key, see *På väg att bli människa: om jagfilosofins och personlighetsfilosofins utveckling*. [On the Way to Becoming a Human: About the Development of the Philosophy of Self and the Philosophy of Personality].

³² Kerstin Signert, *Maria Montessori: anteckningar ur ett liv* [Maria Montessori; Notes from a Life] (Lund, 2000), p. 78; Christine Quarfood, “Den nygamla förskoledebatten: Fröbel, Key och Montessori” [The New-Old Preschool Debate: Fröbel, Key and Montessori] in *I skuggan av framtiden. En vänbok till Sven-Eric Liedman och Amanda Peralta* [In the Shadow of the Future. A Companion Book to Sven-Eric Liedman and Amanda Peralta] (ed. Johan Kärnfelt), p. 367ff

³³ Maria Montessori, *Barndomens gåta* [The Secret of Childhood] (Stockholm, 1986), p. 7.

necessarily so. The libertarian ideals that characterized the new progressive education probably are evidence of a more general turn of the tide in the methods and ideals in education. Montessori's pedagogy also had a didactic direction that was alien to Key. Key's education was instead, as we have seen, an element in her criticism of civilisation. Ellen Key's new human being had of course been developed from the child's free play, the world of fantasy and creation that was guaranteed by the child's being allowed to remain a child as long as it was psychologically possible.

Outside of Europe Key's educational authorship received considerable attention, especially in Japan and the USA. In 1916 *The Century of the Child* was translated to Japanese, and by 1970 the book had been published in Japan in no less than 12 editions.³⁴ In the USA Key played a fairly important role in progressive education, especially as her teachings were associated with the ideas put forth by John Dewey (1859–1952), who was often depicted as “the father of American pedagogy”. Like Key, Dewey emphasises the connection between school and society – that democracy rises and falls with the school form. The school should give everyone equal opportunities to develop, and should also allow space for independent work. Dewey's book *The School and Society* is mentioned in the second edition of *The Century of the Child*, but it is not certain whether Key had read it. It is probably more reasonable to see Key and Dewey as branches on the same tree, that of the European progressive education which had its roots in the Renaissance (Montaigne) and the Enlightenment (Locke, Rousseau, Pestalozzi).

In conclusion: did the 1900s become the century of the child, as Ellen Key dreamed it would? That depends on how we understand the question. Certainly child labour is rare today in Europe and North America – the affluent parts of the world. But in many less affluent parts of the world children continue to labour under about the same conditions as the children in the more affluent

³⁴ Lengborn, *En studie i Ellen Keys pedagogiska tänkande...*, [A Study in Ellen Key's Educational Thinking], p. 135.

world did about a hundred years ago. We can only hope that this century will be a century of the child for them too.

However the question is really a little more complicated. How do we define children in the century of the child and in the 21st century? In the affluent world the concept of childhood, with today's longer school attendance, has lengthened to apply to older and older people. In that context we can ask ourselves if the century of the child has not instead become a century of the young people. The young people have great spending power, and today set the trends and lifestyle – a lifestyle to which more and more age groups strive to conform. Perhaps this is good; perhaps this is how we want to live, with greater freedom and less responsibility. But how is it going to be for the children who come into this world – children of children, as they are in a way?

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