

ARTICLE

From the East to the West: Trajectories of Foreign Women Studying the Social Sciences at the Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles (1894-1919)

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of foreign women studying the social sciences in a Brussels university during the Belle Époque. It seeks to unravel the motivations behind foreign women's pursuit of social science studies, by examining the educational and professional opportunities available to them. The paper begins by examining the challenges faced by women in higher education in Europe. It then delves into the social science curriculum, within the context of its early-stage of institutionalisation, and analyses the discrepancies between its different disciplines through the lens of gender. By focusing on some women' individual trajectories, this research aims therefore to provide insights into the intersecting realms of migration, gender, and academia.

Keywords

social sciences ; student migration ; women history ; university ; Belgium ; fin-de-siècle

“[my diploma] reminds me of so many beautiful memories of my stay in Brussels [...] I still keep my sweetest feelings from there. Yes, you will say [...] the student life is always the most happy than anything else. Alas [...] what a big difference since that day until now, especially as I am married with my three boys. Anyway it is life, isn't [...]?”

This quote originates from a 1927 letter, written by Christina Velitchkova, a Bulgarian former social science student at the Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles from 1911 to 1914. Thirteen years after her graduation, she finally requests her diploma. She becomes quite emotional as she holds it, for it reminds her of a distant time when she was a student abroad, a time very different from her current situation as a mother in her home country. Although it may seem like an insignificant letter, the discrepancy between her current family life as a mother and her previous experience as a student in a foreign country perfectly encapsulates the various themes of this paper: the trajectories of foreign

¹ Archives of the Université libre de Bruxelles (AULB), Fonds of the Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles (1ZUNB), 357. Letter of Christine Velitchkova to Miss. Hauman, secretary of the Institut des Hautes Études, 23 January 1927. The letter was originally in French with some grammatical errors retained in the translation.

women travelling Europe, from East to West, to study the social sciences at the Université Nouvelle in Brussels.

The Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles was a peculiar institution within the European educational landscape. Whereas the social sciences were slowly institutionalised within European higher education by the end of the 19th century (Duller and Fleck 2017: 5–6), they represented some of the central courses provided at the Université Nouvelle. In 1888, the rector of the *Université libre de Bruxelles* (ULB), Eugène Van Der Rest, opposed the creation of a sociology chair, arguing that this new scientific field was not yet a distinct area of study (De Bie 1988: 72; De Brouwer and Jottrand 2022: 112). The reservation of the ULB's administration regarding the social sciences, and their positivist methods, were key reasons leading to the foundation of a second university in Brussels in 1894 (Van Rooy 1976; Noël 1988), the Université Nouvelle, directed by Guillaume De Greef (1842–1924), first internationally known Belgian sociologist (Wils 2001: 313), with the help of numerous Belgian socialist intellectuals. In a nutshell, the founders of the Université Nouvelle were mostly socialist men, interested in the development of the social sciences, who felt that the administration of the ULB was too conservative and unable to offer an education suitable for a society facing contemporary social issues. “The teaching of the social science [...] must be considered as a necessity and a benefit”², stated Guillaume De Greef in 1894 and, accordingly, a doctorate in the social sciences was created at the Université Nouvelle in 1898.

In view of the disturbed context of its foundation, the Université Nouvelle faced severe difficulties if it were to be regarded as a legitimate institution by the Belgian authorities. As its diplomas bore no legal value in Belgium, the institution struggled to attract Belgian students. To survive in the very congested and competitive Belgian academic market, a small country with already four universities (De Messemaeker and Verbruggen 2019: 797), the Université Nouvelle developed a recruitment strategy targeting foreign students, a migratory phenomenon that intensified at the end of the 19th century (Karady 2002: 47). Between 1900 and 1914, more than 90% of the students at the Université Nouvelle were non-Belgian, sometimes even reaching 99%, such as in 1902³. In comparison, the most international university in Belgium was in Liège, with half of its student population being non-Belgian between 1906 and 1910 (De Messemaeker and Verbruggen 2019: 794). Nevertheless, this internationality was also the death knell of the institution. Unlike any other universities in Belgium, the Université Nouvelle remained open during the First World War. When the war ended, after years of administrative struggle with the Belgian authorities and during a time of post-war national union, the Université Nouvelle partially merged with the ULB and finally closed in 1919.

The intersection between a social science-driven institution and an international hub for foreign students led to the unfolding of a peculiar phenomenon that caught our attention: the foreign female students of the Université Nouvelle were, for the largest part, following the social science curriculum. Out of all the female registrations along twenty-five years of the institution's existence, 69% were in the social science. On the other hand, male registrations in the social science studies only represented 36% of the total number of male registrations⁴. What motivated those foreign women to pursue, in

² Guillaume De Greef, « La Liberté de la Science », *La Réforme*, 10 janvier 1894, p.1. Text written originally in French, the translation is mine, as for the rest of the quotations in the article.

³ AULB, 1ZUNB, 247-263, Registration forms of the Université Nouvelle, 1895-1919.

⁴ As for January 2023, out of 539 female registrations at the Université Nouvelle, 374 were in a social science or economic science curricula. On the male side, the ratio is of 1018 registrations in social and economic science out of 2818. One registration does not necessarily equal to one student, as a student could register several times during the same academic

such proportion, social science studies? Was this new scientific field more welcoming towards women, less burdened by strong disciplinary traditions? Was a degree in the social science useful in developing their careers? By trying to unravel these various themes, this paper follows a twofold aspiration: first, to better apprehend the realities of female students' migrations at the turn of the century, with a focus on the reasons that led them to leave their country and to matriculate in that peculiar Belgian institution. Second, this article aims at understanding the attraction that the social sciences had on foreign women, questioning their education and professional opportunities, in Belgium or abroad, and asking therefore if this gendered choice of education was constrained or not. At the intersection of the history of migration, the history of gender and the history of science, this work intends to approach the interconnections between a social science education and female student migration at the end of the 19th century.

Although women have traditionally been erased from the history of international thought and international relations (Owens and Rietzler 2021: 2), several women's trajectories can be highlighted by archival materials, as the Université Nouvelle left behind a considerable amount of institutional and students' documentations. Their registration forms include information regarding their name, date and place of birth, nationality, current and past studies as well as their local addresses in Brussels. This material enabled the creation of a database of almost every student who came to the institution during a twenty-five year period⁵. In order to gather private information, this work also makes use of the thousands of letters exchanged between the general secretariat and the students, displaying some of their personal stories and preoccupations. Moreover, the institutional archives also include some students' dissertations, which are especially enlightening to perceive how women approach their own gender condition within their academic work. Finally, each foreigner who came to the Belgian territory had to register with the local authorities, which led to the creation of millions of individual files available in the Belgian police archives. Despite this material, this article does not provide an extensive analysis of the trajectories of every woman who studied the social science in Brussels. Many students did not leave numerous traces of their stay in Brussels, and women even fewer. First, because they often came abroad with their husbands, the archives often revolve around their status as a couple rather than their individual circumstances. Second, the majority of women did not engage in any professional activities after their studies, which remains one of the main means to identify students. Because of this structural archival bias, corresponding to the gendered limitations of the time and because, until recently, women "were [...] not considered legitimate subjects of history" (Chaudhuri, Katz, and Perry 2010: xiv), the female footprints are complicated to follow. As a result, this article focuses on a handful of women for whom information is available, highlighting the trajectories of these often overlooked protagonists in history.

This paper begins by examining the situation of women's higher education in Europe, highlighting the various difficulties women faced and how this led them to travel to complete their studies. This section aims at understanding the Université Nouvelle's position in this complex landscape, and how it successfully attracted numerous foreign women. The second part focuses on the studies these foreign women pursued, namely the social sciences. The "social sciences" is a broad concept still in embryo at the time, and the various scientific disciplines it involved were not equally accessible to

year or across different years. Moreover, students whose gender is unidentified made 191 registrations. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that these numbers (and the rest presented in the article) are subject to slight changes in the future. Indeed, the Belgian administrations did not always correctly spell the foreign names, making their identification and their counting sometimes challenging.

⁵ As for January 2023, we have counted 2213 individual students, of whom 366 are women, i.e. 17%.

women. Based on the educational offer of the Université Nouvelle, the social science curriculum means both a degree in “social science” and in “economic science”, but this section will analyse the discrepancies between these two curricula, through the lenses of gender. Finally, the article concludes by trying to build a bridge between female students’ migrations and the social science studies, two new phenomena at the end of the 19th century. By understanding the entanglements of the social sciences and migration, the conclusion aims at balancing the constraint factors and the new opportunities that early female higher education represented, but also, at questioning the active role foreign women played in the institutionalisation of the social sciences.

“REGRET AND FEAR”: THE ADMISSION OF FEMALE STUDENTS IN EUROPE AND AT THE UNIVERSITÉ NOUVELLE

The educational path of Maria Skłodowska, better known as Marie Curie, was far from unhindered and illustrates the many obstacles women faced while trying to access higher education at the turn of the century. She and her sister, Bronislawa, first had to enrol in a clandestine Warsaw structure, the *Flying University*, a patriotic institution fighting against the russification of the Polish territory, where many women trained. In 1891, she then left Poland to complete her education in Paris, as almost every female student of the Flying University did (Bartnicka 2014: 27–28). A complete education would indeed have been almost impossible in her home country, as women were not allowed to study in Russian Poland until 1915 (Lišková and Holubec 2020: 187).

In 1906, a former female student of the Université Nouvelle asked for a recommendation to enter the University of Freiburg, stating that “the admission of foreign women to universities in Germany is very difficult, almost impossible”⁶. Indeed, the Polish women were not the only ones struggling to enter universities, and issues regarding women’s education rose in every European country. In Austria and Germany, women could not become regular university students before the end of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th century, depending on the university’s regulations (Pfefferkorn 2017: 122). The latest to accept women was the Kaiser-Wilhelms-Universität of Strasbourg, in 1908 (Hillenweck 2014). In contrast to Central Europe, South-Eastern European countries, with their rather new higher education institutions more open to reforms, stood out for their relative early acceptance of women in universities: the University of Bucharest and the Serbian *Grandes écoles* have admitted women since the 1880s (Lišková and Holubec 2020: 187). Nevertheless, in Bulgaria, a newly constituted country with only one university in Sofia (founded in 1888), women were not admitted as regular students before 1901, and after graduating, continued to be confronted with many barriers for decades (Daskalova 2004: 92). Moreover, even when women could access higher education classes, they did not have the same opportunities as male students. The Russian example is very telling: whereas Russian women had various training opportunities, with the existence of higher education courses for women - 43% of medical students in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century were female (Tikhonov-Sigrist 2009a), these structures could not accommodate every woman leaving high school and wishing to pursue their education. Furthermore, the courses given in these female institutions were less advanced than those given to their male counterparts and very unevenly developed depending on the branch of study (Karady 2002: 53). In 1903, the secretariat of the Université Nouvelle received a letter, confirming this bias: Claudine Antchoukova complained about Russian women's schools giving “no solid knowledge”⁷. Consequently, and like others such as

⁶ AULB, 1ZUNB, 322-335, Letter from R. Kowarsky to a professor, 2 September 1906.

⁷ AULB, 1ZUNB, 316-321, Letter of Claudine Antchoukova to the administration of the Université Nouvelle, 23 December 1903.

Maria Skłodowska, many Eastern European women travelled to the West in order to complete their education.

At the end of the 19th century, the student migrations indeed materialized in a one-way traffic: from Eastern to Western Europe, drawing a clear pattern of “unequal exchanges” within the European academic market (Karady 2004). Western European capitals, as well as the French and German languages, indeed held a strong “symbolic capital” attracting foreign students (Karady 2002). More precisely, Belgium, France and Switzerland were the main receiving countries of the female student’s migration before the First World War, but they were not immune to the debates surrounding female admissions within their university structures. In France, regardless of an early opening, with the example of Julie-Victoire Daubié, the first French woman bachelor of Letters in 1861, the presence of women in universities remained a limited phenomenon (Pfefferkorn 2017: 117). Switzerland was an “ambiguous avant-garde”, paving the way in 1860 but only in some universities - Geneva, Lausanne and Neuchâtel-, while the more religious ones in Fribourg and Basel were less prone to organise a mixed education and waited respectively until 1895 and 1905 (Tikhonov 2014). In the same vein, in Belgium, women could enter university from 1880 in Brussels, but the Catholic University of Leuven only accepted them in 1920 (Despy-Meyer and Becquevort 1980: VII). In general, both Belgium and Switzerland, two small countries with numerous universities, were more welcoming towards foreign female students, because the national higher education offer largely exceeded the national demand, and universities needed to extend their students’ recruitment beyond the country’s frontiers. Nevertheless, although foreign students were appreciated, their presence had to be regulated: in order to avoid overflowing the national professional market, foreign students obtained a special type of diploma that granted no benefit to the Belgian territory, especially in regard of the liberal professions (Dhondt 2006: 120).

The Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles, a new university facing four others in Belgium, clearly aimed to attract female students. During his speech at the inaugural conference of the Université Nouvelle, on the 25th of October 1894, Edmond Picard, one of the founders, declared:

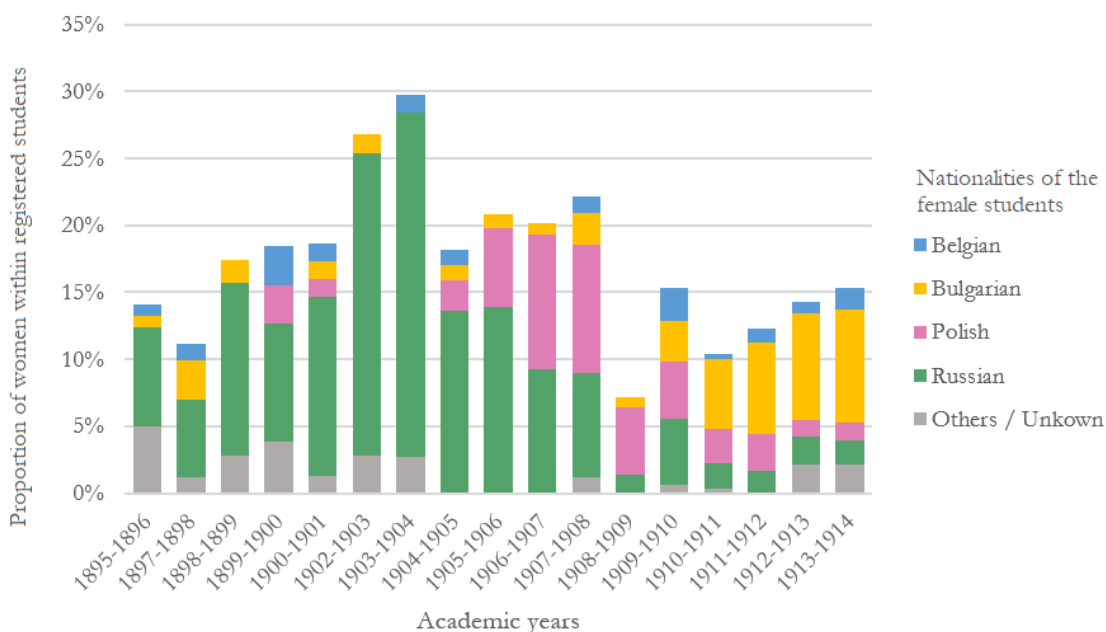
“Until now, Women have only been admitted to universities with a reservation that lead to regret and fear. It is natural that this attitude should change [...] Our sisters will find [at the Université Nouvelle] the serene and fraternal hospitality which is due to them and [we] need to have, no longer simply instruments of pleasure and housewives, but true and trusting collaborators [...]”⁸.

This hearty welcome towards women bore fruit, since they represented, on average, 17% of the students at the Université Nouvelle before the First World War. During the same period of time, at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), the main university in Brussels, the number of female students was much lower: in 1913, only 111 women were enrolled out of a student body of more than

⁸ Gallica, Correspondance et Papiers Elisée Reclus, t. VII., Edmond Picard, « Le But, les tendances, l’organisation de l’Université Nouvelle – discours prononcé par M. Edmond Picard à la séance solennelle d’ouverture le 25 octobre 1894 », *L’Université Nouvelle, organe de l’Ecole libre d’enseignement supérieur et de l’Institut des Hautes études de Bruxelles*, 9 December 1894.

a thousand and, in 1919-1920, women represented only 7.9% of all the students (Uyttebrouck 1984: 18; Gubin and Piette 2004). The vast majority of the female students at the Université Nouvelle were non-Belgian. If this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the Université Nouvelle was an institution oriented towards international students, it is important to note that Belgian women faced additional barriers to enter universities. Since 1890, a complete diploma of secondary education was mandatory in order to register within universities, which was not available to Belgian women. Therefore, they were required to pass a certification in front of a jury before being able to go to the university. This situation ended in 1920, when the secondary schooling systems for men and women were unified in Belgium (Despy-Meyer and Becquevort 1980: X–XI). Swiss women were confronted with the same types of difficulties, which also explains the prevalence of foreign women within the higher education institutions (Tikhonov 2014).

Figure 1: Proportion of women within the registered students, with their nationalities, at the Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles, from 1895 to 1914



Regarding the nationalities of foreign women, the situation at the Université Nouvelle was quite similar to other Western universities at the time, where the vast majority of international female students came from the Russian Empire (Tikhonov-Sigrist 2009a). At the Université Nouvelle, foreign women mostly came from Russia (40%), Bulgaria (26%) and Poland (18%)⁹. However, 80% of Bulgarian women came after 1910¹⁰, concordantly with the expansion of a female student body in Bulgarian universities (Sretenova 1994: 872). Amongst female students of the Université Nouvelle,

⁹ The Polish students of the Université Nouvelle, for the vast majority, self-identified as « Poles » in their registration forms, although Polish territory was scattered between the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires before 1918.

¹⁰ AULB, 1ZUNB, 247-263, Registration forms of the Université Nouvelle, 1895-1919.

most numerous were those of Jewish heritage, coming from the Russian Empire¹¹. In 2009, the historian Natalia Tikhonov-Sigrist estimates at 60% the percentage of Jews among Russian students in Switzerland and Belgium between 1870 and 1914 (Tikhonov-Sigrist 2009b: 118), which is consistent with the two thirds of Jewish Students within the foreign students who came to Paris from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, according to Victor Karady. The high proportion of Jews from the Russian Empire in Western universities was due to the *numerus clausus* they were victims of since 1887, limiting their admission to a quota in universities (Gouževitch and Gouževitch 2002: 122). Moreover, pogroms and persecution were still common in the Russian Empire at the end of the 19th century, leading many Jewish people to choose the path of permanent emigration (Karady 2009). Finally, the Jewish population of the Russian Empire was actively seeking education as having a doctor's degree allowed them to live outside their confined areas or to have a well-paid job. The proportion of educated Jewish women was even higher than Jewish men: on the one hand, Jewish families preferred to send their daughters to secular Russian schools, while their boys were destined to undertake traditional religious studies; on the other hand, there was no *numerus clausus* in Russian female high schools (Tikhonov-Sigrist 2009a).

The Jewish community was not the only one marginalized within the Russian Empire and seeking refuge in Western universities. Foreign students in France, Belgium and Switzerland were often recruited among minorities living in Russia, such as Poles, Armenians, Georgian or Germans (Tikhonov-Sigrist 2009a). At the Université Nouvelle, only five registered women were German, two were Georgian, none were Armenian but Polish women came to the Université Nouvelle in large numbers after 1905. This increase in Polish women can be explained by the political turmoil of the Revolution of 1905 and its fallout, leading to a massive emigration of the youth and political opponents from the territories controlled by the Tsar (De Messemaeker and Verbruggen 2019: 795; Weill 2009: 191). Belgium, which had an established reputation as a liberal shelter for political refugees after welcoming Karl Marx, Victor Hugo and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in the 1850s, was already an attractive destination for Polish patriots or Russian political exiles (Stengers 2004: 341). Moreover, the Université Nouvelle, with its connection to the Belgian Socialist Party and the École russe des Sciences Sociales de Paris – an institution originating from excluded Russian intellectuals (Gutnov 2002), such as Maksim Kovalevsky who gave lectures for years at the Université Nouvelle – was strongly attractive for these political and ostracized communities. Angelica Balabanoff, one of the pioneers of European socialism and the only female member of the International Socialist Bureau alongside Rosa Luxemburg, studied at the Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles from 1897 to 1899. In her memoirs, she explained her decision to go there in these words:

"At that time, most Russian high school students went to the University of Zurich, but one of the girls [...] told me about a university that immediately fired my imagination - the Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles. Until then [...] I had never met anyone who openly declared himself a socialist or anarchist. In Brussels, there was a place where such people lived, where they expressed themselves freely, where they were admired and respected, and where students from all over Europe came to sit at their feet. As this girl described to me the life of the students, their

¹¹ It is difficult to assess, with certainty, the percentage of Jewish students at the Université Nouvelle. In some few cases, Jewish students put as their nationality in the registration forms "Israelite" or "Jew". In the police archives, it is sometimes specified when the foreigner is of Jewish faith. The names of the students can also help to determinate their religion.

freedom to investigate, the men who taught there, I realised at once that it was Brussels rather than Zurich that I should go to” (Balabanova 1981, 32–33)¹².

From what the archival materials display, women seemed to be fairly treated at the Université Nouvelle. Indeed, while universities were accessible to women, it did not always mean that this feminine presence within science networks was appreciated. Going back to Marie Curie’s example, the controversy surrounding her candidacy in 1911 at Académie des Sciences, reluctant to nominate a woman – despite her Nobel Prize and Davy medal – proves the persistence of sexist obstacles (Pigeard-Micault 2017: 1273). In 1893 at the Parisian Sorbonne, a students’ group was protesting against the “invasion of women” in Letters studies (Tikhonov-Sigrist 2009b: 124). In a 2020 article, Monika Bednarczyk shares the testimony of a female Russian student, Inna Kalinina, in Geneva in 1887, who was sexually harassed during the lessons by a male student who went under the bench to look at her legs. She then left the class with another female student, the Polish Józefa Krzyżanowska, under the shouts of protesting classmates and kissing sounds (Bednarczyk 2020: 14). Years later, in 1895, Inna Kalinina became a student at Université Nouvelle but no trace of similar events can be found in the archives. In 1894, when a professor at the Sorbonne was still opposed to the entry of women into universities, several female students were highly esteemed by the teachers of the Université Nouvelle. Angelica Balabanoff noted in her memoirs that she was Elisée Reclus’ favourite student (Balabanova 1981: 36) and that her literature professor, Célestin Demblon, always spoke highly of her and followed her work until his death in 1924 (Balabanova 1981: 36–39). In 1911, Paul Reclus, professor of geography, wanted to give a grant to a polish student in the social sciences, Zofia Unszlicht, insisting that “of all the students [...] Miss Unszlicht is one of the most intelligent and hardworking”¹³.

In addition to the lack of evidence of discrimination endured by women, several other elements seemed to indicate that the Université Nouvelle was rather welcoming to foreign women. First, foreign women were encouraging each other to come to the Université Nouvelle: for example, in 1916, Marthe Schoppof came to the Université Nouvelle being “sent by” a former student, Maria Liloff¹⁴. Second, numerous female students came with their husbands, or another female family member. This “chain” migration is very typical of the Jewish community, displaying their will to emigrate permanently (Falek-Alhadeff 2011: 141), but could also emphasise the existence of informal networks, with close friends or family members advising each other about universities accepting foreign women. For example, Zofia Unszlicht arrived in Brussels in January 1907¹⁵, followed by her two sisters, Melanie and Stefania, in May 1907¹⁶. All three enrolled at the Université Nouvelle in the social science curriculum, but Melanie only stayed for one year, while her two sisters stayed for three years. Zofia even resumed her studies in economics two years later, in 1911-1912¹⁷. Esther and Rachelle (Richa) Lipnik, two sisters born in Grodno in 1883 and 1884, arrived in Brussels as a pair

¹² The book was originally written in English in 1938. However, we could only access the French translation of the book made in 1981. This is, therefore, a personal translation from French to English.

¹³ AULB, 1ZUNB, 176-183, Letter from Paul Reclus to Arthur Hirsch, 4 February 1911.

¹⁴ AULB, 1ZUNB, 205-218, Letter from Joseph Octors to Guillaume De Greef, 11 December 1916.

¹⁵ Archives Générales du Royaume (AGR), Fonds de la Police des Étrangers (PdE), 831844 Sophie Unszlicht. City of Brussels, Information sheet, 11 February 1907.

¹⁶ AGR, PdE, 838305 Mélanie et Stéphanie Unszlicht, City of Brussels, Information sheet, 13 May 1907.

¹⁷ Later on, Zofia and Stefania (who became Brunowa, following her marriage to the communist journalist Julien Brun), became active members of the Polish Communist Party together with their brother Józef. In 1937, Zofia and Józef were sentenced to death during the Stalinist purges.

in October 1903 to attend, initially, courses at the ULB,¹⁸ though both subsequently enrolled in the social science program in 1903-1904 at the Université Nouvelle¹⁹. Esther married the Russian engineer Boris (Ber) Woulbroum and their family settled in Belgium²⁰. Finally, the two cousins, Adèle and Régina Plonskier, took social science courses at the Université Nouvelle between 1905 and 1907 and lived together²¹.

Another female mutual aid network surrounded Jozefa Joteyko. Born in 1866 in Poczujki (in current Belarus), Joteyko, who studied in Geneva, Brussels and Paris and earned a PhD in Medicine, was indeed actively recruiting female students to the Université Nouvelle. In 1898, she became a lecturer in physiology in 1898 at the ULB, where she was appointed director of the laboratory of experimental psychology and also worked at the Solvay Institute of Physiology (Wils 2005). Joteyko founded an International Faculty of Paedology in Brussels (Löwy 2005: 149) that maintained strong connections with the Université Nouvelle. In June 1912, Joteyko intervened with the administration of the Université Nouvelle to reduce the registration fee of the Polish student, Marie Winska, who, for lack of funds, had to stop her studies in social science²². She also recommended to the administration Kato Mikeladze, a young Georgian woman²³. Finally, Joteyko helped to organise the lectures of two Polish female scientists at the Université Nouvelle²⁴, Wanda Szczawinska, about childcare, and Michalina Stefanowska about physiology.

The migration of female students at the turn of the century was rooted in a double discrimination, being a woman, and also often being a member of a marginalized group, especially the Jewish community. Beyond the optimistic image of the construction of an European intellectual space, student migrations were often, conversely, the result of constraints and exile strategies. While the Université Nouvelle appeared as a welcoming host institution for women rejected from their national structures, leading to family or group emigration and recommendations between foreign women, the studies that foreign women underwent at the Université Nouvelle revealed, nonetheless, that the institution was not immune to several gender bias.

“JOURNALIST, WRITER, EDUCATOR, ETC.”: WOMEN STUDYING SOCIAL SCIENCE

At the end of the 19th century, female students were scattered among three main scientific fields within European universities: medicine, natural sciences and letters. Since women were perceived as “naturally” inclined to heal and care, medicinal professions were more rapidly accessible to them, whereas letters’ studies offered the possibility to become teachers, as well as being a typical part of the bourgeois education (Puche 2021: 6; 2022: 93). In contrast, the law sector was mostly closed to women (Tikhonov-Sigrist 2009b: 65), as the Belgian example of Marie Popelin illustrates: doctor of law in 1888 from the ULB, she was never able to practice law during her lifetime. Women were only allowed to become lawyers in Belgium in 1922 (De Bueger-Van Lierde 1972). However, because a social science education and its degrees were still very rare in higher education, there is little data about women and the social sciences at the time. In her work about female students at the ULB,

¹⁸ AGR, PdE, 719363 Boris Woulbroum, Commune of Ixelles, Information sheet, 10 September 1903.

¹⁹ AULB, 1ZUNB, 270, Course registration book, 1903-1904.

²⁰ AGR, PdE, 719363 Boris Woulbroum, Naturalization act of Esther Lipnik, Watermael-Boisfort, 1 October 1928 & Naturalization act of Boris-Ber Woulbroum, Watermael-Boisfort, 11 August 1928.

²¹ AULB, 1ZUNB, 271-272, Course registration books, 1905-1907.

²² AULB, 1ZUNB, 18-32. Letter of Jozefa Joteyko to Joseph Octors, 4 June 1912

²³ AULB, 1ZUNB, 18-32. Letter de Jozefa Joteyko to Guillaume De Greef, undated.

²⁴ AULB, 1ZUNB, 33-40. Letters of Charles Van Borren to Joseph Octors, 14 June 1909 and 23 May 1910.



Andrée Despy-Meyer notices, with surprise, that many of them registered at the *École des sciences politiques* (School of political sciences) even though “this school grants very few career opportunities to women”. Unfortunately she does not extend on this matter (Despy-Meyer and Becquevort 1980: XIV). This next section is therefore an attempt to understand the attraction of social science studies for women at the turn of the century, from the case study of the *Université Nouvelle*.

As explained previously, foreign women at the *Université Nouvelle* were mostly following the social science curriculum. This phenomenon can first be explained by the educational offer of the university. The faculties of sciences, medicine, or letters, which hosted the majority of female students, closed in 1899. For example, Maria Ulyanova (1878-1937), Lenin's younger sister, enrolled at the *Université Nouvelle* to study natural sciences during the academic year 1898-1899. Nevertheless, after unsuccessful attempts to have the diplomas of the *Université Nouvelle* officially reckoned by the Belgian authorities, the administration of the *Université Nouvelle* decided to restructure its educational offer and to focus on a handful of faculties – social science, economic sciences, and law – and closing the others. As law remained rather inaccessible, women were directed towards a training in the social or economic sciences.

However, women tended to pursue the social science curriculum and not economics. Out of all female registrations in social science studies, only 12% were in economic science. On the other hand, 64% of male registration in the social science was in economics. In fact, economic studies were specifically designed to prepare the future public servants of new Eastern European countries. For example, between 1898 and 1910, the Bulgarian government funded 451 grants for Bulgarian students to study abroad, in order to train the future public servants, doctors and engineers of the country (Karady 1998: 96). More precisely, economics was conceived in 1909 by the *Université Nouvelle*'s administration with the help of a former Bulgarian student, Philippe Panayotoff, with the precise goal of training professors, public servants of the Ministry of Commerce, and economic journalists (Elmer 2022: 185–86). These professions were not accessible to women, which explains their absence in this field. More generally, economics, like history (Smith 1995), was still widely perceived as a masculine discipline, displaying the persistence of informal masculine spaces within universities open to both genders. Angelica Balabanoff explained in her memoirs that, after two years of study at the *Université Nouvelle*, she decided to pursue her education in political economy in Leipzig. She wrote:

“There were a few women among the students, but they were subject to special regulations. It was probably the combination of three circumstances that made me the object of special attention: I was a woman, a Russian, and I did not want to study arts and letters, but political economy. I found out that I needed a signed permission from each professor to attend his classes and that the more conservative he was the less likely I was to get it [...] As a woman and a graduate, why would I still spend time at university? And above all, why did I want to study political economy?” (Balabanova 1981: 43–45).

If women were not studying economics, what was the content of the “social science” lessons they attended? The social science curriculum at the *Université Nouvelle* was organised according to the scientific conception of the rector, Guillaume De Greef. Inspired by Auguste Comte's classification of the sciences, De Greef saw the study of social science as a progression between scientific disciplines, from economy to genetics, aesthetics (art studies), collective psychology, ethics, law, and finally, politics, while sociology was the link between all the various social science disciplines²⁵.

²⁵ AULB, 01Q/5036, Guillaume De Greef, *Précis de sociologie*, Paris, Felix Alcan, 1909, p. 9.

Scientific disciplines such as physiology, in which he included pedagogy and paedology (studies of the child) were not, according to De Greef, actual social sciences but necessary fields to know before approaching social science²⁶. More specifically, in order to obtain a degree of doctor of the social sciences from the Université Nouvelle, students had to pass exams in sociology, criminal sociology, geography, physiology, philosophy, political economy, statistics, evolution of legal institution, and biology. The diploma of doctor of economic science was more oriented towards political economy, evolution of credit, accounting, and commercial law²⁷. In other words, the diploma in social science that the foreign women of the Université Nouvelle pursued offered a broad transdisciplinary education across an extensive spectrum of human science disciplines, which was however difficult to translate into professional opportunities. However, what professional perspectives could women with a social science education expect to achieve?

In January 1913, the secretary of the Université Nouvelle, Joseph Octors, explained to a young woman named Marie-Thérèse Koerner that she could be interested in a training in the social sciences “for a career as a journalist, writer, educator, etc.”²⁸. Octors was not wrong in his enumeration. Indeed, two main opportunities existed for women trained in the social sciences: first, to become a schoolteacher or a teacher, especially in girls’ school, and second, to use their knowledge to approach their own gender conditions, sometimes by journalistic mediums.

The increase in young women’s schooling had made teaching a widespread career option for women. As such, several female students at the Université Nouvelle were connected to the networks of Belgian pedagogue Ovide Decroly (1871-1932), founder of several schools at the beginning of the 20th century in Brussels. Decroly introduced innovative teaching methods, based on a renewed pedagogy and scientific methods, with the goal of ensuring the children’s happiness, self-sufficiency, and moral qualities (Wagnon 2016: 127). Numerous links existed between the Université Nouvelle and Decroly’s networks: on the one hand, Decroly’s pedagogues often gave lectures there, and on the other hand, Decroly encouraged the female teachers employed in his schools to attend classes at the Université Nouvelle, such as the Belgian Germaine Geelens who joined the Université Nouvelle in 1911 (Smolski 2001: 106).

The example of Emma Vittenberg²⁹ clearly demonstrates these connections between female employment and the new social science of pedagogy. Born in 1886 in the parish of Līgatne in present-day Latvia, she was raised in a wealthy family, her father working in agriculture (Marihina and Zigmunde 2015: 62). In 1905, after marrying Eduard Trauberg, she became a home teacher of history and German³⁰. The couple left Latvia for Belgium in 1908³¹, both becoming students at the Université Nouvelle. While her husband studied law, Vittenberg trained in the social sciences. During her studies, she also worked in Ovide Decroly’s schools (Marihina and Zigmunde 2015: 62). The outbreak of the First World War prevented her from obtaining a PhD and she fled with her

²⁶ Mundaneum, Fonds d’Henri Lafontaine, 235. “Projet présenté par M. De Greef : Tableau général ou plan d’ensemble sérié des cours et Conférences de l’Institut des Hautes Études et Sciences sociales”, undated.

²⁷ AULB, 1ZUNB, 435. Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles, 13^e année universitaire (1906-1907). *Programme des cours*, Brussels, Veuve Ferdinand Larcier, 1906.

²⁸ AULB, 1ZUNB, 322-335. Letter of Joseph Octors to Marie-Thérèse Koerner, 13 January 1913.

²⁹ Her birth name was Vittenberg, which also could be spelled Vitenberga. She married in 1905, becoming “Vittenberg-Trauberg” and remarried in 1921 becoming Liekne. Today she is better known as Emma Liekne.

³⁰ AGR, PdE, 878941 Emma Wittenberg. Note of the Brussels police, 10 October 1911.

³¹ AGR, PdE, 878941 Emma Wittenberg. Commune of Ixelles, Registration sheet, 12 October 1908.

husband to England in 1914. Back in Latvia in 1917, Emma's studies in Brussels were not recognized, so in 1919, she resumed her study in pedagogy at a Latvian University, but did not graduate. However, she became, in the same year, the head of a female secondary school in Riga, a position she held for nearly 20 years until the outbreak of the Second World War, during which she was executed by the Nazis with her family³². During her career, she attended the international congress of language teachers held in Paris in 1937, as well as the international congress of secondary school teachers in Riga in 1933. She also wrote several articles on pedagogy, the education of girls, and the importance of language learning, using her education in Belgium to compare the situation in Latvia and in Belgium. Her tragic path emphasises the difficulties students could face when returning to their home country with a foreign degree, especially in the “social sciences”, a very new discipline.

The social science curriculum was also one of the first levers that women used to discuss their own place in society. The example of Emma Vittenberg, who addressed the education of girls through her work, shows that pedagogy was already a means of addressing the issue of gender. Kato Mikeladze used her studies in the social sciences at the Université Nouvelle to develop a more distinct feminist perspective. Born in 1877 in Kutaisi, in actual Georgia, Mikeladze arrived in Brussels in 1910, after studying in Moscow, to take courses in the social sciences at the Université Nouvelle. After living in Paris, she returned to Georgia where she founded a women's league and a newspaper, *The Voice of Georgian Women*, through which she helped to elect five women to the Georgian parliament in 1919, during the country's first democratic elections. In this newspaper, Mikeladze analysed and compared the different legal provisions concerning women's rights. Already in 1898, she wrote that science demonstrates that the discrimination endured by women comes from economic and political inequality and not from a lack of agility or intelligence. Mikeladze died in 1942 in poverty and anonymity, twenty years after having been excluded from the Georgian writers' union for having criticized some male writers on their ways of describing women only as mothers or prostitutes (Barkaia and Waterston 2017: 28–30).

The connections between the social sciences and the issues endured by women unfold clearly in the intellectual production of female students. Within the twenty-five years of the Université Nouvelle's existence, only 60 student dissertations (namely an end-of-study written work, in order to obtain a doctoral degree) were preserved in the archives. Among these, seven dissertations were written by women, and four of them addressed gender issues directly. After studying the economic sciences, Hélène Bornstein submitted a thesis in 1910 entitled “La femme dans l'industrie” (“The Woman in Industry”), a pamphlet on female workers which concluded that “the dignity and freedom of women” must be achieved through their work and under socialist conditions³³. In order to obtain a doctorate in economic science, Debora Rabinovitch defended, around 1914, a thesis on the “protection of maternity”, in which she advocated for a maternity insurance to protect all mothers, even working ones³⁴. For this thesis, the administration of the University asked Jane Brigode, a liberal and feminist politician, and member of the Belgian League for Women's Rights (Jacques 2006), to be a member

³² AGR, PdE, 878941 Emma Wittenberg. Considered by Nazi Germany as a communist, she was shot on March 27th 1942 in the Bikernieki Forest in Riga, shortly after the execution of her husband and son (Marihina and Zigmunde 2015: 66). Emma Liekne's affiliation with socialist and communist ideas is, however, uncertain, although both her husband and her son certainly were. The Russian police nevertheless warned the Belgian police in 1908 that she had been a “member of the socialist-revolutionary party”. (Letter from the Deputy Director of the St. Petersburg police to the Director General of the Brussels Public Security, October 23, 1908).

³³ AULB, 1ZUNB, 478. Hélène Bornstein, *La Femme dans l'Industrie*, 1910, p 149.

³⁴ AULB, 1ZUNB, 534. Debora Rabinovitch, *La protection de la maternité comme problème de la politique sociale*, 1914.



of the jury³⁵. Marthe Schopoff presented a dissertation at the end of the war, in 1919, on the education of women through literature. She considered that the woman, after having "freed herself from the humiliating yoke that the secular prejudices had inflicted on her" must continue to seek the "ideal of the manners"³⁶. Finally, in 1912, after a social science curriculum, Zofia Unzslicht investigated the economic conditions of crime. A large part of her work therefore focused on prostitution caused by economic conditions, and she claimed: "to cure the woman it is necessary to assure her needs and to provide her with the resources that she draws from the prostitution, deprived of other means of existence"³⁷.

In summary, women's choice of training at the Université Nouvelle was very limited, with the absence of medical or natural sciences studies. Deprived of the opportunity to become a lawyer or a public servant, women were left with only one curriculum: social science. With this education, women specialized mostly in children's and girl's education, which were not even proper social sciences, according to De Greef's scientific classification. In other words, women were confined to a narrow and less prestigious scientific and professional direction. However, these constraint factors should lead us not to overlook the positive aspects that some trajectories have shown. As demonstrated by Angelica Balabanoff's example, women at the Université Nouvelle could still pursue an education that was almost impossible to access in other higher education structures, such as political economy lessons. Furthermore, women could discuss their gendered condition within university structures, at a time when they struggled to even be admitted as regular students. The intersection of gender issues and social science studies at the end of the 19th century reveals a very ambivalent conclusion: although it was one of the few options available to them, it still enabled women to find a place and to have a voice in a very masculine scientific setting.

CONCLUSION: FOREIGN WOMEN TRAINED IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCE, AN UNPRODUCTIVE PHENOMENON?

When Christine Velitchkova emotionally recalled her time as a student in Brussels, while being a mother of three, she highlighted the feeling of freedom and happiness foreign women felt studying abroad. Even though European universities were reluctant to admit women, female students were warmly welcomed at the Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles, both as women and as foreigners, and could follow classes traditionally restricted to men, such as political economy. However, this happy outcome should not overshadow the several discriminatory policies that underlie these hindered female paths towards higher education. Foreign female students at the Université Nouvelle were, indeed, primarily coming from Eastern Europe, where they could not access university and, in addition, they were often members of marginalised communities, especially the Jewish one. Moreover, the fact that the Université Nouvelle effortlessly opened its doors to foreign women should not only be perceived as a selfless decision purely based on internationalist and feminist ideals, but also as a very pragmatic play from an outcast institution in order to secure students' registrations. Finally, women's choice of a field of study was influenced by their place in society and most women still chose to study a discipline that suited their gendered condition. At the Université Nouvelle, because the number of faculties was limited, the female student body was concentrated in the social science curriculum, which was a new field at the forefront of this peculiar institution's scientific agenda. Trained in pedagogy and education, women could use their education mostly to become

³⁵ AULB, 1ZUNB, 205-218. Letter of Joseph Octors to Jane Brigode, 9 December 1915.

³⁶ AULB, 1ZUNB, 540-541. Marthe Schopoff, *Esquisse littéraire et éducative*, 1919.

³⁷ AULB, 1ZUNB, 508. Zofia Unzslicht, *Des conditions économiques de la criminalité*, 1912, p 26.

teachers in schools, often schools for girls, while also having the opportunity to speak about their female condition within their university work.

However, as occurred with Christine Velitchkova, most women who studied the social sciences at the Université Nouvelle did not make use of their education and did not subsequently pursue any professional activity. Actually, foreign women stayed on average only one year at the Université Nouvelle and often left without any diploma (Kympers 2012: 149). Does it mean that this social science training for foreign women was merely an incidental effort that bore no fruit? Clearly, according to the Belgian authorities, it was. Such an institution seemed to bring nothing to the Belgian civil society: it educated foreigners and women, neither of whom were able to practice in the Belgian territory; and most of all, it trained *social scientists*, a new type of scientific persona without any clear career path. The education of foreign female social scientists must therefore have seemed, for many actors of the time, a pointless and useless occupation. As a result, Belgian authorities repeatedly refused to consider the Université Nouvelle de Bruxelles as a legitimate higher education institution.

Nonetheless, such a perception is flawed; these foreign women had an impact on the course of the feminisation of higher education in Europe as well as on the institutionalisation of the social sciences within these structures. Because they represented no threat to the professional market, and, therefore, seemed inoffensive to the patriarchal order of Belgian society; foreign women were more easily accepted within Belgian universities than Belgian women, and the same phenomenon can be perceived in Switzerland (Tikhonov 2014). While Belgian feminism, largely coming from a bourgeois upbringing, was mostly focused on women's political rights (Jacques 2009: 7–15), foreign women fought for their right to education (Kołodziejska-Smagala 2022), and by doing so, they helped to open the way to a truly mixed-gender higher education. Moreover, their studies in social science demonstrate their resilience, their adaptability, and their desire to be educated. Turned down in most universities, unable to freely choose their career, women had to make the most of what they got, and they did not refrain from training in a still new discipline, whereas their male counterparts were following more typical educational paths. Therefore, whereas it is difficult to show with certainty a positive outcome from the emergence of the social sciences for female education and professionalization, except for some glimpses shown in this article, it seems undeniable that these foreign women helped to institutionalise these new disciplines. Nowadays, the social and human sciences witness more female students than males (Huang et al. 2020) and perhaps this phenomenon is no stranger to these pioneer women who, either by choice or through lack of choice, became *doctoresses* in social science.



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