

Education and childhood, a coveted field. The International Bureau of Education, an intergovernmental body seized in its relational network

Emeline Brylinski, University of Geneva, Switzerland
Rita Hofstetter, University of Geneva, Switzerland

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It is questionable whether such the delicate question of teaching can be dealt with objectively in an organism fatally subject to political influence like the IIIC, if it can be done in an institute whose headquarters are not located in a neutral country, but in the capital of a large country where, therefore, ambitions of cultural hegemony are very likely to exert their influence

(Piaget, director of the International Bureau of Education, 1932).

At the very moment, when the ICIC met for the first time (August 1922), when the 3rd Assembly of Nations took up its quarters in September 1922 also in Geneva, a nucleus of intellectuals, pedagogues, diplomats, and pacifists were joining together to try to build a "sanctuary for children". Why should children not benefit from an international body that cares about their fate, as is the case with workers (ILO, 1919) and now intellectuals themselves (ICIC, 1922)? Does one not agree in affirming that the combative spirit at the origin of wars can be channeled, objectified, and sublimated, and be supplanted by the instinct of solidarity, a superior form of sociality that requires thought (Bovet, 1917)?

Noting that the young League of Nations did not accept the many proposals inviting it to fund an office dedicated to education, intellectuals and educational psychologists, steeped in pacifism, who revolve around the Rousseau Institute are mobilized at the end of the Great War to create, in 1925 in Geneva, an International Bureau of Education (BIE) in the form of a corporate association. To enhance States' cooperation, the Bureau was transformed in 1929 into an intergovernmental organization – the first one entirely dedicated to educational stakes and to improve educational system - and approached Unesco immediately after World War II, before officially joining it in 1969.

Building on collective research, which presents the IBE as a matrix of "educational internationalism", we focus on the way in which this intergovernmental technical agency positioned itself with regard to the League of Nations and its bodies during the interwar period, then the nascent Unesco in 1944, in an attempt to gain legitimacy: "a very exciting sport" Piaget declared retrospectively (1959)⁵¹, "to work in competition with powerful rivals". We examine how the spokespersons of the IBE negotiated the contours of the institution, the causes embraced, and the activities implemented to have their institution recognized as a platform of educational internationalism.

Its modus operandi plays a central role for this. Under the joint direction of Jean Piaget and Pedro Rosselló (1929-1968), the BIE institutionalized International Conferences on Public Education (ICPEs), supposed to respect "unity in diversity". We analyse the different facets and possible contradictions: aiming, through science, the documentation of educational problems identified at regional and national levels to guide "the global march of education"; advocating apoliticism in order to be able to intervene at the governmental level; conversely, acting on public schools, the preserve of nations, to build international intergovernmental cooperation. The argument of scientific objectivity to thwart political interference was also used to counter the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) when the latter expanded its educational activities, without fully involving the IBE. Considering that the IIIC was walking "on its steps", the director

⁵¹ A-BIE, B45. 25^e Réunion du Conseil, 11.7.1959, Palais Wilson, p. 6.

Piaget using his voice and pen alerted his interlocutors - Belgium, Great Britain, but also Germany, Italy ... - of the danger that France made education its field of experimentation and thus imposed its cultural supremacy. The solution? Join the IBE which, for its part, would not seek "to standardize education by means of conventions, but on the contrary to strengthen the characteristics of the educational systems of each country by disclosing them"⁵².

Its quest for universality placed the IBE in a marginal, even contradictory, situation, of which we try to define the logic, by also placing ourselves behind the scenes of major official assemblies, to capture the positions of the actors at work on the spot, right at their worktable. Taking advantage of prosopography and network analysis methods, we also highlight the profile of delegates involved as well as the strategies used by States at the CIIPs to make the latter a platform for claims and to experiment with a form of international collaboration that would stand out from the practices of the IIC, and which will later be supported by Unesco.

To do this, we benefit from voluminous archives deposited at the Foundation of the Archives of the J.-J. Rousseau Institute, the Jean Piaget Archives, the archives of League of Nations (LoN) and above all at the IBE documentation and archives centre. We try to interpret positions that are less laudatory, even downright suspicious, but also silences of certain archives, in order to weigh the place of the IBE in this relational network and the role played, in these decades, by educational internationalism marked by the hope and ambition to deal and regulate the affairs of the world on a planetary scale.

Archives

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Geneva/Bureau international d'éducation (A-
BIE), BIE, Genève.

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FPSE, Université de Genève.

Archives Jean Piaget (AJP), FPSE, Université
Genève.

League of the Nations Archives, United Nations,
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⁵² A-BIE, B30, note sur le BIE et la SDN, p. 2. Letter from Piaget to Castelli, director of the Montessori Opera, 20 may 1932.

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