

Alice Salomon Award 2022, Speech

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We Need Alice Salomon Today

Today I wish to share some thoughts that celebrate Alice Salomon as a reclaimed historical figure and as a source of inspiration in these troubled times. I will focus on some aspects of her approach that I find particularly relevant. My thesis is that Alice Salomon (what she stands for) is very much needed today. Another way to say it: If Only Alice Salomon Were Here!

Kleio the Muse of History is Agitating

History is not a continuous ribbon that we unfurl and spool back. There are peaks and valleys, calm moments and moments of turmoil and transformation. As historian Carl Schorske argues, there are times in history when history becomes appealing, even urgent, when it resonates with present circumstances (Schorske, *Thinking with history*, 1998). In classical Greek times, Kleio (the Muse of history) was represented seated beside an open chest and holding in her hands an open scroll. History is not a closed book. It makes itself known and can be accessed and interpreted many, many times. After Alice Salomon's lengthy disappearance from the record of stories told, what she pursued and achieved in her context of uncertainty and turmoil, including war, speaks to us more than in earlier periods of certainty and optimism.

Before I continue, I wish to acknowledge a number of people whose influence is present in this lecture: Susanne Maurer, Stefan Köngeter, Julia Winckler, Adriane Feustel (her immense work assembling documents and creating the Alice Salomon Archive), followed by the attentiveness and commitment of Dayana Lau and Friederike Mehl; also Joachim Wieler and the artist, Dessa.

The political-cultural feelings of nostalgia

As I came to know of Alice Salomon through reading about her work, through some of her writings, through conversations, she moved into my present, and was no longer a figure of the past. With that shift, a broader range of emotions grew in me. Next to the sense of admiration and respect emerged a feeling of longing and nostalgia. Can we feel nostalgic about a time and a place that existed earlier, even prior to our birth, that we did not experience directly? In the transmission of stories about such times, about actions and images that attach to certain ideas and ideals – even bursts of utopia -- we can experience nostalgia as a political feeling, that of missing something that is uncannily familiar, to quote Freud. Alongside the general contemporary mood of depression that cultural theorist, Ann Cvetkovich (2012), has described as a pervasive public feeling, we look for and yearn for alternative political emotions based on desire, feelings of elation, happiness, and involvement. Certain figures, past and present, evoke such a possibility. Alice Salomon is one such figure.

Feelings tied to the creation of settings

Troubled and turbulent times are open to the transformation of ideas, of practices and of organizations. Existing fields are being reconsidered and new fields are being created. Alice Salomon was a creator, an instigator, a doer and activist. With the creation of new ways of living are associated particular feelings. In *The Creation of Settings and the Future Societies*, (which referred to the 60s-early 70s), the social psychologist Seymour Sarasin (1972) describes the joy and excitement that accompany new ways of working together, and the shaping of new practices and new relationships. It is thrilling to take up the space to initiate, to mould a different reality from a need and a vision. It also requires determination. Alice Salomon set to rethink what existed in her time and circumstances and mould a different reality without a blueprint to guide her. She chose to proceed step by step. These qualities and posture are much needed today when we no longer imagine forging a glowing future ahead of us.

Salomon wasn't alone. She was part of a generation of women who became leaders in society and *created entire fields* where they could be leaders. These women contributed to a new world, as Sheila Rowbotham argued, for the UK and the U.S., in *Dreamers of a New Day: Women who Invented the Twentieth Century*.

Among them, I thought of the artist, Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945), born 5 years before Salomon, the first woman to study art at the academy in Berlin. Kollwitz shared comparable interests with Alice Salomon. Her powerful engravings of the immense energy in peasant revolts showed the need for a collective response to social injustice. Yet, after her son died in WWI, she made prints and sculptures of a mother and child, showing the limitless tenderness and the unbearable pain of a mother losing her child to war. I am somewhat familiar with the work of Kollwitz. The Art Gallery of Ontario, in Toronto, owns several of her prints and has organized several exhibits of her work.

It was a time when women were gaining rights in Germany, the right to education for instance, followed by the right to vote. Salomon (1872-1948) further benefited from the legal and social emancipation of Jews who, gaining access to education and to a range of careers, could contribute as full citizens. All these advances came to an abrupt end with the National Socialist regime.

Alice Salomon, an intellectual in social work

I think of Alice Salomon as a humanist. She spoke many "languages" besides German and English. What I have in mind are the language of an economist, feminist writing, the language of caring, the language of friendship. She was curious, always questioning. She started from something that she felt wasn't quite right or made no sense, such as doing nothing about the divided state of society. This sense of discrepancy as motivation reminds me of the sociologist, Dorothy Smith, for whom incongruence between institutional discourse and the everyday realities of women is the trigger, the spark for new research. More recently, Barbara Cassin, a French philosopher, stated in an interview (2015) that feminist research often shows a

particular sensitivity to discrepancy. Alice Salomon was smart, she was restless. One could say that Salomon's focus on social justice was fostered through her *restless curiosity*.

Alice Salomon was a prolific author and speaker. I was particularly struck by Salomon's breadth of interests within the emergent field of social work. On the one hand, she translated the writings of Mary Richmond, whose orientation to practice was influenced by the medical approach to individual cases -- this is where this notion of the *case* originates from. Yet it is worth noting that Richmond gave a lot of consideration to *economics* as part of the context of 'social cases,' which is something that has been forgotten in the simplified mythical account of social work. Simultaneously, Alice Salomon was known for her close friendship with Jane Addams and the Settlement House movement and came to be seen as the 'Jane Addams of Germany.'

While Salomon insists in her writings (I base myself here on her autobiography), on the value of the individual, in the very same sentence (we could say 'in the very same breath'), she is arguing for collective rights. She did not want to lose sight of the individual in her community-centred and policy perspective. It is this balancing principle between the individual and the collective that intrigued me, and that interrogates social work.

Today, these two paths of social work have drifted apart, more than different emphases. In our times of specialization, they have become distinct fields, embodied by distinct groups of practitioners and shaped by different educational paths. Disciplinary splits and combinations are something to consider anew in the present moment when new professional arenas and new educational frameworks are being carved out. New configurations are emerging. What is it that we want in this respect?

Consider another fundamental debate in social work, the squabble between theory and practice. Is social work a field of practice, a profession, or an academic endeavour, or all of these at once? If all, how do we integrate these facets? The tension over theory and practice is an old one. It has not been resolved over time. We can see it reflected in social curricula, classroom and field placements, with a recurring suspicion about the place of theory within social work. This was not an issue for Alice Salomon. For her, theory and practice worked together and influenced each other in a continuous loop.

In her autobiography, Solomon writes *of her thirst* for studies and of the pleasure of working through ideas when she attended courses at the university. She studied economics and loved it. Her work, which turned into her thesis, questioned the wage difference between men and women, a topic that hasn't gone away. She discovered philosophy and she loved it. Although she did not lose sight of complex policy strands, and had great analytical acumen, Salomon saw broader scholarship, particularly new questions being addressed, as a means of transforming society. She brought contemporary philosophical debates to the School of Social Work that she established. "We had lectures from the great scholars of our time: lectures by [Albert] Einstein, Carl Jung, Ernst Cassirer, Romano Guardini." For her, this was to be a two-way exchange in which both sides benefited; their exchange contributing knowledge, open thinking, and debate to social workers, while bringing knowledge about society and new practices to the philosophers, all with a view to changing society. This outlook, devoid of hierarchies among types of knowledge, is quite extraordinary!

Salomon created frameworks for social work education and frames for thinking. As an educator and teacher, she encouraged debate, self-learning and self-reflection in the classroom. Her stand on reflectivity was rather unusual for the period. In that sense, she was ahead of her time. As Adriane Feustel wrote, Alice Salomon was not dogmatic. Understanding was to be open-ended. Railing against the Prussian educational reforms of 1906 that were presented as progressive, Salomon judged them as not better than a finishing school for women. In response, she wrote "...I prepared an alternative to the government plan, stressing education for citizenship and a really systematic foundation for professional social work" (p.70). These notions are still relevant today, but seemingly fragile, when teaching is often compressed, and spaces of freedom are limited by the standardisation of educational programs. Alternative ways of thinking about education can be developed against the grain.

Salomon's statement of "education for citizenship" reminds me of the distinction that Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1998) made between an academic scholar who specializes in a certain knowledge field, but at the same time is circumscribed by it and an intellectual who has a broader vision. Salomon's stance is similarly compatible with Michel Foucault's call, in his text on *Parrhesia* (2001), for the obligation to speak the truth and the courage and commitment to

challenge accepted ideas. Equally convergent is Edward Said's notion of a *public intellectual* which he developed in his (1994) *Representations of the Intellectual* lecture series.

A different aspect of Alice Salomon's broader outlook was Salomon's interest for the arts. As an illustration, about the acting of Eleonora Duse she wrote: "She [Duse] not only acted: it was life itself, sorrow, suffering, agony, and despair. She stirred me as only reality ever had "(p.99.) Here we have yet again the sense of a multi-layered worldview and a way of living with great sensitivity – which Dessa captures in her fine artistic works.

I quote here Adriane Feustel (2019) in her introduction to Dessa's book: "Salomon believed in the power of art to serve as a bridge linking social interventions to the broader philosophy and spirituality of living."

Local knowledge and transnational understandings

A last theme I wish to dwell on is Salomon's position on transnationalism. As transnational communication has become the object of much research today, many of Salomon's stances seem highly relevant. Salomon espoused neither nation-based perspectives nor the principle of universality. Besides playing a leading role in local and national organizations of women, she was very active in international women's organizations, in feminist networks that sustained long-lasting friendships. A regular correspondent with the International Labor Organization in Geneva during the Weimar Republic (that became the ILO), she represented Germany in international meetings and was a regular conduit for the exchange of ideas and practices across national borders. Thus, it is not surprising that she was chosen as the first director of International Schools of Social Work.

Existentially, Alice Salomon loved to travel and felt most herself when she did. Travel could satisfy her curiosity to see for herself what exists elsewhere and to assess the grounding of social alternatives.

In his recent memoir, entitled *Home in the World* (2021), the economist Amartya Sen insists on the value of being beyond a single *confined identity*. In the chapter, 'The Presence of the Past', he turns to early plays in Sanskrit that make the same point. "The perception that

human identity does not demand a singular confinement came to me quite powerfully from the ancient classics. Think of Vasantasena, the heroine of Shudraka's play, known in English as *The Little Clay Cart* (or *Mricchakatika*) from around the fourth century, a radical and subversive play that offers several important themes. One of them was the need to see a person as having many identities. This was an idea that helped me to resist the imposition of a single, overwhelming identity based on religion or community." Of Alice Salomon we can say with certainty that *she was at home in the world* and actively resisted the 'confinement of a single identity.'

Yet, the late 19th - beginning 20th centuries saw the growth of nationalism in all spheres of life. Alice Salomon did not share such feelings. The cause of nationalism wasn't hers. She wrote: "There was not a grain of nationalistic enthusiasm in me" (p. 112). At the start of WWI, she made the comment, "I had worked for world relations and they were gone" (p.105), replaced by the 'war machine' and all the destruction it entails.

Her stance reminded me of the beautiful text by Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort* (1997) (Cosmopolitans of all countries, yet one more effort). This was a text Derrida prepared for an international meeting of writers on the right of asylum, proposing to remove the decision-making authority from the state, which had become increasingly diluted by various interests, and to rely instead on cities to preserve the full principle of asylum for strangers. Cities of asylum. Today, a number of cities are part of such a network. Derrida added: « Plutôt que 'cultiver l'éthique de l'hospitalité', l'éthique est hospitalité ; l'hospitalité c'est la culture. » Which I translates as: "Rather than foster an ethics of hospitality, ethics itself is hospitality; hospitality is culture." Had she been alive, Alice Salomon would have taken part in such a meeting, even possibly a leadership role.

Interestingly for the period, Salomon espoused notions of diversity, plurality and difference rather than universality. She recognized the profound differences among countries due to their respective historical paths, economic, political, cultural and social factors, which in turn led to different approaches to social work. Asked to lead the first international survey of social work, Salomon stated:

It is extremely difficult to find a common ground for international work of a specialized kind, but equally stimulating to observe people who have no such experience being initiated. There is no doubt that such meetings have [un]limited possibilities. Delegates can learn in what manner the work they do is being done in other countries, why it is done differently under different economic conditions and in countries with varied social, legal, and educational institutions—that social work and education for it depend, like industry, on location (p. 155).

She argued: “We all have to learn not to be naively provincial in taking for granted that the systems of our own country can be made the yardstick for all continents” (p.155).

She recognized what the French philosopher, Barbara Cassin, calls the ‘untranslatables’ (2015) (cf. Cassin’s Dictionary of Untranslatables, regarding concepts from philosophy and literature).

A number of initiatives made in recent years would have been incompatible with Salomon’s worldview. She wouldn’t have tried to replicate or impose a model of social work from one powerful nation onto others. Unfortunately, that has been the perspective of so many funded and unfunded transnational projects. Salomon would have assessed with greater diffidence the nature of local power relations and encouraged a *work of reinvention* at the local level, to cite a phrase used by Cassel.

It struck me that Alice Salomon’s perspective on plurality and reflectivity (which I discussed earlier) finds an echo in the work of Norbert Elias, himself a first-generation sociologist, with the distinction he made between *the established and the outsider*, starting from his early article in 1956 to the coauthored book on the same topic. The dilemma being: How to experience a social situation from the inside (as an insider) and at the same time maintain a certain distance to be able to observe it. This idea takes up a whole section in Elias’ autobiography, *Notes on a Lifetime* in English; in German, *Norbert Elias über sich selbst*. This is one of the aims of sociology, he argued. He also thought that being Jewish (secular) positioned him to take up such a stance. About Alice Salomon we can perhaps say the same.

Concluding comments

There are similarities between Alice Salomon's context and our own. And yet, we pose societal questions differently, no longer as *the social question* but the *anthropocene*, and our perspectives trace different horizons. Although in the last few years we have made parallels between our epoch and the 1930s resulting in generalized social division, and now a war in Ukraine. Importantly, we no longer live in a time of exultation. Broad ideals of society no longer hold sway. In the present state of confusion and divisions, we can perhaps insert some alternative thoughts and alternative feelings in a more tentative yet consistent way, a position argued by a generation of young social work scholars. Here I am thinking of Tina Wilson (e.g. 2016) of the University of British Columbia, in Canada, who writes eloquently in favour of such a position.

To close, we turn our gaze back to Kleio the Muse, whose name from the Greek verb *kleô* means 'to recount' 'to make famous' or 'to celebrate.' Today we are celebrating. We commemorate and praise, proclaim and rejoice.

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