



**HAL**  
open science

# From Sport to Therapy. The Social Stakes in the Rise of Equine-Assisted Activities

Jérôme Michalon

► **To cite this version:**

Jérôme Michalon. From Sport to Therapy. The Social Stakes in the Rise of Equine-Assisted Activities. Gillett, James; Gilbert, Michelle. Sport, Animals and Society, Routledge, pp.85-100, 2013. halshs-01095451

**HAL Id: halshs-01095451**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01095451>**

Submitted on 12 Nov 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Michalon, J. (2013). From Sport to Therapy. The Social Stakes in the Rise of Equine Assisted Activities. *Sport, Animals and Society*. J. Gillett and M. Gilbert, Routledge: 85-100.

## **From Sport to Therapy. The Social Stakes in the Rise of Equine-Assisted Activities**

### Abstract:

In this paper, we will consider how equine-assisted activities (EAAs) have emerged both in North America and in France. We will show that these practices tend to make social representations of horses evolve, emancipating them from the frame of horseback riding, as sport or leisure. At the end of the 1960s, adapted riding for people with mobility disabilities develops, and evolves towards “rehabilitation riding” in the years 1970-80. Then, new practices appear, claiming a more therapeutic approach (physical therapy, psychomotricity), and taking their distance from the equestrian social world: it is not the equestrian technique that can heal, but the contact with the horse, if supervised by a therapist. At the same time, these practices aim more and more at persons with psychic disorders (development disorders, behavior disorders, autism) and turn to a more “psychological” approach. We will so see that the more these practices involve taking care of people with mental handicap, the more they get loose from frames of the academic horse riding, and consider the horse as a being having interiority and individuality, and not only as something that you ride on. From “sport” to “therapy”, the social status of horses has become closer and closer of that of companion animals.

### **Introduction**

Since the 1960s, there has been a strong development of practices involving equidae and people with physical and/or mental troubles in the Western world. First used as an adapted version of horseback riding for people with mobility disabilities, such practices have progressively integrated rehabilitation purposes, then clearly therapeutic purposes. In the process, such practices have gradually taken their distance from horseback riding as a sport or a leisure activity to the benefit of a new relationship with the horse – one that was relatively emancipated from the frame of the equestrian social world. In this paper, we will introduce the history of the transition from ‘sport’ to ‘therapy’, and analyze the sociological stakes of such a transition. Our aim will be to show to what extent this transition reflects and participates to a global change in the relationship with horses, regarded more and more as companion animals. We will first recall the fundamental changes that recently occurred in the relationship between humans and horses in the Western world. Then, we will study the history

of equine-assisted activities (EAAs),<sup>1</sup> essentially in the US and in France, with a particular focus on how such activities reached the status of therapy. We will eventually draw the conclusions of these interconnected histories in terms of sociological development in the relationship between humans and horses.

## Fundamental changes in the relationship between humans and horses

To get a complete notion of what is at stake in the development of EAAs; one needs to understand the recent changes in the relationship between humans and horses in the Western world, especially within what is called the equestrian culture.<sup>2</sup>

Even though social and historical works on the equestrian culture are still scarce,<sup>3</sup> all the existing ones lead to the same conclusion – in the Western world, the relationship to horses has changed fundamentally in the second half of the nineteenth century due to economic, social and cultural factors. Because of the mechanization of the means of transportation and work, draft horses lost the function that made them the largest part of the global horse population in the early twentieth century, in France.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the sharp demographic decline of draft horses,<sup>5</sup> statistically speaking there were more saddle horses:

*“The absolute number of saddle horses was reduced by nearly half between 1930 and 1970. But as the number of draft horses decreased dramatically, the part of saddle horses was higher and higher: 17% in 1935, 38% in 1970, 64% in 1978, and 91% in 1995.”<sup>6</sup>*

In other words, in the twentieth century saddle horses represented the most widespread experience of the relationship between humans and horses in France, and most probably in the

---

<sup>1</sup> In the social worlds we are about to explore, we will observe that the words used to define the practices are always significant; they reveal aspects of the relationship to horses that are promoted by the actors and collectives that established them. We will therefore be using neutral words, as much as possible: Equine-Assisted Activities, defining at the same time the practices of adapted horse riding, rehabilitation through riding, and therapy with horses.

<sup>2</sup> Note: the adjectives “equestrian” and “equine” should be differentiated. The word “equestrian” means ‘about horse riding’, and more globally horse mounting; whereas “equine” means all that is related to horses, and equidae in general.

<sup>3</sup> For a synthesis of these works, see Digard, J.-P. (2009). “Qu’ont à voir les sciences sociales avec le cheval ?” *Le Mouvement social* (229): 3-11.

<sup>4</sup> Draft horses were long used in agricultural tasks. During the industrial revolution, their function was widely used as well.

<sup>5</sup> “There were 2.5 million before the war, and approximately thirty thousand in the late twentieth century”, Digard, J.-P. (2004). “Des manèges aux tipis. « Équitation éthologique » et mythes indiens.” *Techniques & Culture*, from <http://tc.revues.org/1139>. Note: the figures are in the French context, but one may interpret them on the wider scale of all countries that went through the industrial revolution.

<sup>6</sup> Digard, J.-P. (2004). *Op. cit.*

Western world. To be even more precise, since the army had renounced the use of equidae in their operations, saddle horses were somehow acknowledged as the major equine figure in the Western world through horseback riding as a sport or a leisure activity. Even though the horse population decreased in the transition from a utilitarian use (draft horses and/or cavalry horses) to leisure, the number of riders increased, as did the spectrum of their social origins.<sup>7</sup> From the 1960s, horse riding became an extensive, if not mass practice. Once only present in the aristocracy, nobility and cavalry, horseback riding became a widespread middle-class activity from then on. Currently, most riders are under 25 and female (70% of the French license holders are women).<sup>8</sup> Because of this mass phenomenon, a new equestrian culture was born. Digard describes it through three aspects: (1) one may call it a 'baroque' culture in that it promotes diversified and less orthodox equestrian practices compared to 'classic' horse riding. The new culture of horse riding consists in mixing traditional practices (dressage, show jumping, and cross-country race) with more playful (horse-ball, pony games) or exotic activities (Western or Spanish equestrian techniques). (2) This new culture is 'hedonistic' in that horse riders of the new generation are less interested in competition and effort. (3) There is also a 'sentimental' aspect to this new culture in the attachment to the animal as an individual, and a respectful attitude motivated by considerations that are no longer exclusively utilitarian as in the former version of the equestrian culture. Therefore, there were developments in the relation with horse riding, and more generally the relationship with horses. From then on, horses were taken into consideration outside the frame of equestrian practices. Horse riding as a leisure activity would only be part of the relationship between humans and horses. Horses would reach the status of companion animals, according to Digard. To what extent did the development of EAAs influence this progressive evolution outside horse riding? An analysis of the history of such practices helps understand this phenomenon.

### **A flexible founding myth: Lis Hartel**

One could not understand the ambiguous links between EAAs and horse riding as a sport without evoking the tutelary figure of such practices, Lis Hartel. In 1944, 23-year-old Danish rider Hartel had poliomyelitis and was paralyzed.<sup>9</sup> Thanks to a rehabilitation program that

---

<sup>7</sup> Digard, J.-P. (2004). *Op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> See: Tourre-Malen, C. (2006). Femmes à cheval, la féminisation des sports et des loisirs équestres : une avancée ? Paris, Belin.

<sup>9</sup> See: Beijing Olympic Games' page dedicated to Lis Hartel : <http://fr.beijing2008.cn/spirit/pastgames/halloffame/h/n214047429.shtml> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

apparently mixed traditional techniques and the regular practice of horse riding, Hartel progressively recovered the use of some of her muscles. She won the silver medal in dressage at the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games.<sup>10</sup> What is usually remembered in Hartel's unusual history is that "*her accomplishment played a considerable role in the sustainable development of adapted equestrian practices involving medical staff.*"<sup>11</sup> Hartel's accomplishment represented the opportunity of trying horseback riding with the disabled. Interestingly, such a restricted view of her story, clearly making the EAAs part of an equestrian filiation, is used today both by people and/or institutions simply promoting the practice of adapted horse riding, and by those who are rather interested in the therapeutic aspect of horse riding. The lack of precise information concerning Hartel's remission probably made it easier for various collective groups to appropriate her story as a founding myth. They insist, however, on being regarded as distinct groups. Besides short stories with elements restricted to "poliomyelitis-horse-medal", nothing documented in depth what was at stake between the moment when she became ill and her medal at the Olympics.<sup>12</sup> What was Lis Hartel's recovery based on? The frustration of not being able to ride her horse Jubilee? The motivation of being able to participate to equestrian competitions? The love of horse riding, or that of direct contact with horses? Particularly with her own horse? Did she really recover, or did she manage to make her illness 'compatible' to horse riding? Did the pace of the horse improve her poliomyelitis? Or was it the fact of performing horse riding movements? All these questions are still unanswered. They are reminiscent of the current debate between the various actors in the world of EAAs and strongly structure the morphology of the practices involving horses and the disabled. Such practices, including 'leisure adapted to the disabled', 'equine-assisted therapy' and 'rehabilitation through horse riding' are very close to one another without resulting in a way to obtain biomechanical, psychic and psychomotor benefits through the use of horses. Likewise, the link between such practices and the use of equestrian techniques varies a lot. Some take over the learning techniques of traditional horse riding learning while others clearly promote a separation from equestrian orthodoxy. The lack of details in Lis Hartel's history leaves room for different interpretations of her legacy. Some groups see her as the pioneer of 'adapted sports' who practiced her passion *in spite of her disability*, while other perceive her as a 'patient' who recovered from her illness *thanks to horses*.

---

<sup>10</sup> It should be reminded that there were no Paralympic Games at the time, so Hartel competed with non-disabled people.

<sup>11</sup> From the website of Société Française d'Equithérapie (French Society for Equitherapy) : <http://sfequitherapie.free.fr> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>12</sup> Despite doing bibliographic research on the subject, we have found no evidence of this.

## **The development of EAAs in the US – from the horse ‘as a leisure activity’ to the horse ‘as psyche’**

Lis Hartel’s physiotherapist Elisabeth Bodiker was the first to introduce EAA in Norway. The first EAA centers opened in the late 1950s in Great Britain, where the discipline was very successful. The Community Association for Riding for the Disabled helped develop the practice in Canada and the US in 1965.<sup>13</sup> The two major American EAA organizations were founded at the time. The North American Riding For the Handicapped (NARHA) and National Foundation for Happy Horsemanship for the Handicapped (HHFTH) dealt with the licensing of EAA instructor licensing and centers. There is no trace left of the latter, but the NARHA is still active and well known nowadays. Founded in 1969 in Chicago, the NARHA describes itself as the “global authority” of EAA/T (Equine Assisted-Activity/Therapy) in the US.<sup>14</sup> The NARHA and other associations founded at the time worked in a domain that they inherited – that of horse riding as a sport and a leisure activity, as shown in the use of the words “riding” and “horsemanship”.<sup>15</sup> Indeed the association granted licenses to traditional equestrian centers and instructors who wished to work with the disabled.<sup>16</sup> The objective was to train professionals and volunteers so they could teach horse riding to people with disabilities. In other words, the attendees of sessions held at the NARHA centers were mostly considered as horse riding participants, more than ‘patients’. They were taught to ride, improve their skills and even enter competitions. Even though therapists can be certified by the NARHA as instructors, no training to personal care is intended: the training consists in knowing and learning equestrian techniques. However, the NARHA does consider that the equestrian techniques conveyed are a prerequisite to any kind of work with horses.

The NARHA does claim some sort of authority over the EAAs, but within the association, a group of professionals are willing to be completely legitimate in the domain of therapeutic use of horses. Hippotherapy is a European practice developed by physical therapists using “*the*

---

<sup>13</sup> Griffith, J. C. (1992). "Chronicle of therapeutic horseback riding in the United States, resources and references." Journal of the American Kinesiotherapy Association **46**: 2-7.

<sup>14</sup> Today, the association numbers more than 6,300 members, including a slight majority of licensed horse riding instructors and around 500 therapists (mental and physical health). This strong activity allowed more than 40,000 disabled people (children and adults) to ride horses. See: NARHA, "NARHA 2009 Facts Sheet". Retrieved from : <http://www.pathintl.org/images/pdf/about-narha/documents/2009-NARHA-Fact-Sheet.pdf> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>15</sup> In 2011, the NARHA changed its name into “Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International” (PATH Intl.). See: <http://www.pathintl.org/>

<sup>16</sup> The type of carrier one may have with the NARHA trainings is based on and mixed with that of a ‘traditional’ instructor. For a description of carriers in the world of horse riding in France, see: Chevalier, V. and B. Dussart (2002). "De l'amateur au professionnel : le cas des pratiquants de l'équitation." L'Année Sociologique **52**(2): 459-476.

*movement of the horse as a treatment strategy to improve neuromuscular function.*"<sup>17</sup> The practice and the word were imported to the US in the early 1980s through the NARHA and some of its physical therapists who had already been using horses as part of their activities for several years, sometimes calling the practice "Riding for Rehabilitation".<sup>18</sup> In 1986, at a NARHA conference, the idea of a therapeutic riding course with the association emerged. The concept was indeed to leave the world of adapted sport, and create a specialization in therapeutic riding, not dedicated to the training of instructors to adapted and/or therapeutic equine activities, but the training of therapists to how they could use horses. The American Hippotherapy Association (AHA) was thus created, and integrated in 1993 to the NARHA as a "first interest" section. But the certification and course of training was not created until 1999. The first Hippotherapy Clinical Specialist (HPCS) diploma was delivered that same year. The autonomous movement of hippotherapy went on until 2004, when the AHA became an organization that was completely independent from the NARHA. The separation was to be analyzed as a will to turn the discipline into a therapy:

*"The impetuses for the separation were the inability of Narha to give accurate accountings of AHA monies, inability of Narha and AHA to reach a consensus on accepted terminology and the need for therapists to establish an identity that was more medical than educational/recreational."*<sup>19</sup>

Creating the identity of hippotherapists: with the AHA and its certification system, a new discipline and a new profession were somehow created. Indeed, hippotherapy claimed its autonomy both toward equestrian organisms (NARHA) and the professional organisms to which the hippotherapists belonged (American Physical Therapists Association, American Occupational Therapists Association...). The AHA's offer was to develop and spread its own 'conceptual framework', one that could not be reduced to the combination or addition of equestrian skills and therapeutic knowledge. The objective was to implement a new 'jurisdiction', in sociologist Andrew Abbott's sense of the word.<sup>20</sup> By defining the constitutive specificity of their practice through the "movement of the horse as a treatment strategy", the supporters of hippotherapy developed EAAs toward a representation of the

---

<sup>17</sup> See: American Hippotherapy Association, "Hippotherapy as a treatment strategy" Retrieved from : <http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/hippotherapy/hippotherapy-as-a-treatment-strategy/> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>18</sup> In particular Barbara Glasow, Jean Tebay and Jane Copeland (Fitzpatrick). See Barbara Glasow's story of how hippotherapy was created in the US: Glasow, B. "A Walk Down Memory Lane. Reminiscences of a Early Pioneer", Retrieved from <http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/hippotherapy/memory-lane/> html [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>19</sup> See: American Hippotherapy Association, "AHA Strategic Plan 2008-2011". Retrieved from [http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/downloads/AHA\\_StrategicPlan.pdf](http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/downloads/AHA_StrategicPlan.pdf) [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>20</sup> Abbott, A. (1988). The system of professions. An essay on the division of expert labor. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.

horse as a 'body in movement', no longer as the support of equestrian activity. However, by doing so, they also restricted their jurisdiction to treating the physical and motor troubles of patients. The patients' psyche is not the core objective of hippotherapy; which contributed to the parallel development of a range of practices based on mental health and the learning capacities of certain populations. In 1996, a NARHA dedicated session was created: the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA). The section was responsible for managing, promoting and developing Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) and Equine-Facilitated Learning (EFL):

*"EFP is experiential psychotherapy that includes equines. It may include, but is not limited to, a number of mutually respectful equine activities such as handling, grooming, longeing, riding, driving and vaulting. EFL is an educational approach that includes equine facilitated activities incorporating the experience of equine/human interaction in an environment of learning or self-discovery. EFL encourages personal explorations of feelings and behaviors to help promote human growth and development."*<sup>21</sup>

Like hippotherapy, those practices were no longer based exclusively on horse riding and the learning of horse riding, which were far less central an element as the contact and interaction with horses. The ruling principles of this section confirmed the orientation on horses as a psychological and emotional catalyst:

*"Horses are sentient beings with feelings, thoughts, emotions, memories, and empathetic abilities. Horses can be active facilitators, evoking emotions in those who work with and around them."*<sup>22</sup>

This reveals that the benefits of animals on the patients' psyche are 'passed on' through their presence, spontaneous behaviors, hence the optional aspect of riding. The 'extra' aspects of horse riding (grooming, preparation, feeding)<sup>23</sup> are therefore used as pretexts for meeting, if not exchanging with horses.

Through the analysis of this historical presentation of North-American EAAs, one may see several evident evolutions. The first one is how the practices 'acquired the status of therapy'. 'Directional therapies', *i.e.* therapies with potential but not necessarily planned or anticipated benefits, were progressively transformed into 'vocational therapies' strongly implying therapeutic objectives. The second evolution is the gradual emancipation of horse-riding learning and withdrawal of equestrian references: the words "hippo" and "equine"

---

<sup>21</sup> See: EFMHA Newsletter, Volume 14, # 1, 2010. Retrieved from : <http://www.pathintl.org/images/publications/efmha-news/efmha-news-spring-2010.pdf> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://www.pathintl.org/resources-education/resources/eaat/201-what-is-efpl>

<sup>23</sup> See: Tourre-Malen, C. (2003). "Les à-côtés de l'équitation. Rapport à l'animal et pratique sportive." *Etudes Rurales* 1-2(165-166): 133-146.

progressively replaced “riding”. What lied at the heart of the activity was no longer horse riding but the horse. Precisely, how the status of the horse changed through such practices is the third notable evolution: with the NARHA, the horse seemed to be mainly an activity. In hippotherapy, the horse is mostly a body in movement, whereas the EFP/L considers the horse as a presence, a psyche and an individual. In other words, the transition from adapted sport to therapy corresponds to the progressive advent of a representation of the horse that was gradually separated from the practice of horse riding, and focused on the individual existence of the horse, beyond its function as a mount. Therefore, while EAAs acceded to the status of therapy, horses acceded to personality.

U.S.	France		
"Riding for the disabled"	"Équitation adaptée" (Adapted horse riding)	<i>Traditional horse riding adapted to the physically disabled</i>	Sport
"Riding For Rehabilitation"	"Rééducation par l'Équitation" (Rehabilitation through horse riding)	<i>Traditional horse riding with therapeutic use for motor troubles</i>	
"Hippotherapy"	"Thérapie Avec le Cheval" (Therapy With Horses)	<i>Therapeutic practice for psychomotor troubles</i>	Vocational therapy
"Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy"	"Equithérapie" (Equitherapy)	<i>Therapeutic practice for psychic troubles</i>	

**Figure 1: Chronological evolution of EAAs in the US and in France**

## The French context: oppositions and legacies

In many aspects, the history of the development of EAAs in France is reminiscent of the evolutions described about the US, which reinforces what we have already observed in this paper but also makes our analysis more accurate. In particular, we will show that such evolutions were not mere points of discontinuity; on the contrary, there is a sense of continuity in them. Besides, we will show to what extent the institutions of the horse-riding world played an important part in such an evolution.

We should first recall that the similarities between the North-American and French histories of therapeutic horse riding are no accident. Somehow, they are part of the same history. Two French therapists, Renée de Lubersac and Hubert Lallery, are indeed acknowledged as internationally renowned pioneers of the link between disability, care, and horses. Danish rider Lis Hartel's story does function as a founding myth, but de Lubersac and Lallery

conceptualized the contribution of horses and completely integrated it into existing care practices. Besides, their conceptualization widely spread through a movement of internationalization of EAAs in which French actors played a prevailing part.<sup>24</sup>

Hubert Lallery, a physiotherapist masseur, had been using horses in his practice since 1962. He rehabilitated a girl suffering from Little's disease (spastic paraplegia).<sup>25</sup> Renée de Lubersac, an amateur rider for several years, followed one of the first psychomotricity academic courses in Paris in a professionalizing process. She presented a dissertation in 1969, entitled *Rééducation psychomotrice et équitation classique* (psychomotor re-education and traditional horse riding). In 1971, Hubert Lallery and Renée de Lubersac created the ANDRÉ (Association Nationale de Rééducation par l'Équitation). In 1973, they published *La Rééducation par l'Équitation*,<sup>26</sup> a reference work for Francophone EAAs. As the ANDRÉ was mostly funded by Haras Nationaux (national stud farms), the people involved in Rééducation Par l'Équitation (RPE - *Rehabilitation Through Horse Back Riding*) were committed to the practice of horse riding. But very soon, R. de Lubersac took a dissenting position, stating that horse riding was not a therapy in itself.<sup>27</sup> As an RPE teacher in the Psychomotricity curriculum at the Paris VI Faculty of Medicine, de Lubersac distanced herself from the equestrian world. In 1978, within the ANDRÉ, the equestrian branch seemed to be dominant. The association officially became the Association Nationale Handi-Cheval, aiming at developing the practice of equestrian activities to the benefit of the disabled or people with social maladjustments.<sup>28</sup> Rééducation Par l'Équitation became adapted sport, without considering the therapeutic aspect. A few years later, a group of psychomotor therapists and other professional care workers gathered around Renée de Lubersac claimed a jurisdiction on equine-assisted therapies. In 1986, they wrote the manifesto of a new practice, *Thérapie Avec le Cheval* (TAC - *therapy with horses*):

1. *We are therapists.*
2. *We are medical or paramedical workers and horse riders.*
3. *We have the indispensable knowledge and practices.*

---

<sup>24</sup> Particularly their part in the Federation of Riding for the Disabled International (FRDI). See: Kluwer, C. (2003). "FRDI History." Retrieved 04/09/2010, from <http://www.frdi.net/history.html> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>25</sup> See: Lerevend, A. (2003). *Le cheval, un thérapeute ?* UFR Sciences Humaines et Cliniques. Paris, Université Paris VII « Denis Diderot ». **Master**.

<sup>26</sup> de Lubersac, R. & H. Lallery (1973). *La Rééducation par l'équitation*. Paris, Crépin-Leblond.

<sup>27</sup> See: Aubard, I. "Comment est née en France la Thérapie Avec le Cheval." Retrieved 01/09/2010, 2010, from [http://www.serpsy.org/piste\\_recherche/mediations/tac.html](http://www.serpsy.org/piste_recherche/mediations/tac.html) [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>28</sup> See: Bougard, P.-M. (2003). "Equithérapie ou Thérapie psycho-motrice, sport et loisir." *Ethnozootechnie* (73): p. 31.

**Which brings us to a new definition of our activities. We stop doing “Rééducation par l’Équitation” and introduce a new formulation: “Thérapie avec le Cheval” (TAC):**

**“THERAPIE” (therapy)** – it necessarily concerns therapists only, and constitutes a ‘new opening’ taking on to a range of options chiefly aimed at improving, or curing.

**“AVEC” (with)** – and not BY. By using the word WITH, we highlight a relationship between the person and the horse that is much narrower and based on complicity, through riding or walking with horses, as well as caring for them and other related activities. Knowing the ethology of horses is indispensable.

**“CHEVAL” (horses)** – not horse riding. “Horse riding firstly implies riding. In TAC, the word horse represents all we receive from the horse as an animal, a living being, through the horse’s presence, contact and meaningful and unique relationship.”<sup>29</sup>

With such a claim, the TAC broke away from the RPE in various ways. First, it was an attempt to break away from the horse-riding world, and highlight the fact that there were other practices than horse riding and its rigid codes. The text was incidentally sent to Haras Nationaux, who funded Handi-Cheval, as if to clearly establish the reasons of a divorce to the relevant authority. Moreover, what was at stake was to bring EEAs closer to ‘vocational therapies’ and away from ‘directional therapies’. The emergence of the beneficial effects of the contact with the animal needed to be intended, and one had to be able to reuse such effects in a therapeutic process *per se*. In this ‘shifting’ operation, an ontology of the horse appeared: a horse is more than a ‘mount’; it is a “living being” with a “presence”, and a human being can initiate a “relationship” with a horse. Such a perspective means to break away from seeing horses as only utilitarian beings. Thus, ethology is focused on as knowledge with a capacity to reach the reality of the “horse” being, unlike in dressage and horse riding manuals. The cognitive framework changes simultaneously to the ontology it is dealing with. Such a commitment to defend the “horse being” had its counterpart in the rather psychotherapeutic standpoint taken by the TAC in comparison to the RPE. Psychomotricity took the patient’s mental state into account, in a work on motor functions that was already tackled at the time in physiotherapy. Likewise, shifting from RPE to TAC was a step towards the treatment of people’s mental disorders. Therefore, there also was an ontological position on whom the TAC “users” were: relational beings, with whom one could work through the relationship they established with other relational beings, namely horses. This change in the ontological status of the horse was observed earlier in the North American history; but we now have

---

<sup>29</sup> Martin, B. (2009). "Interview avec Renée de Lubersac." Retrieved 01/09/2010, from <http://www.mediation-animale.org/rencontre-avec-madame-de-lubersac-et-historique-de-la-fentac/> [Accessed 26/11/2012]  
This text is very often used in the FENTAC presentation leaflets.

additional data: the conceptual framework changes implied by how EAAs ‘acquired the status of therapy’ also had an impact on the humans who were to interact with equidae (EAA users). How such people and their issues were perceived (either a damaged body to rehabilitate or a psyche to cure) reflects the perception on the horses used while treating such issues. Therefore, the ontological status of EAA users evolved in conjunction with that of horses. This is an important fact, leading to believe that the extent to which EAAs acquired the status of therapy is not only a reflection of the global evolution of the relationship to horses; it acted as a strong operator in this process.

Up to the mid-2000s, the FENTAC (Fédération Nationale des Thérapies Avec le Cheval, National Federation of Therapies with Horses) and Handi’Cheval were the only two organizations that shared, in a complementary way, the market of EAAs in France. But in 2005 the situation changed, with the creation of the Société Française d’Equithérapie (SFE, French Society of Equithérapie). There were many common points between the SFE and the FENTAC. Both strongly focused on adopting a therapeutic standpoint rather than learning horse riding. The SFE clearly claimed affinity with the TAC.<sup>30</sup> But the difference between both approaches lied in their respective objectives:

***In equithérapie, the objective is to act on the patient’s psychological functioning, using psychological means (speaking, feeling, desire, impressions, the meaning given to experiences, etc.) as well as corporal means (sensoriality, movement, infra-verbal communication, corporal expression, etc.).***<sup>31</sup>

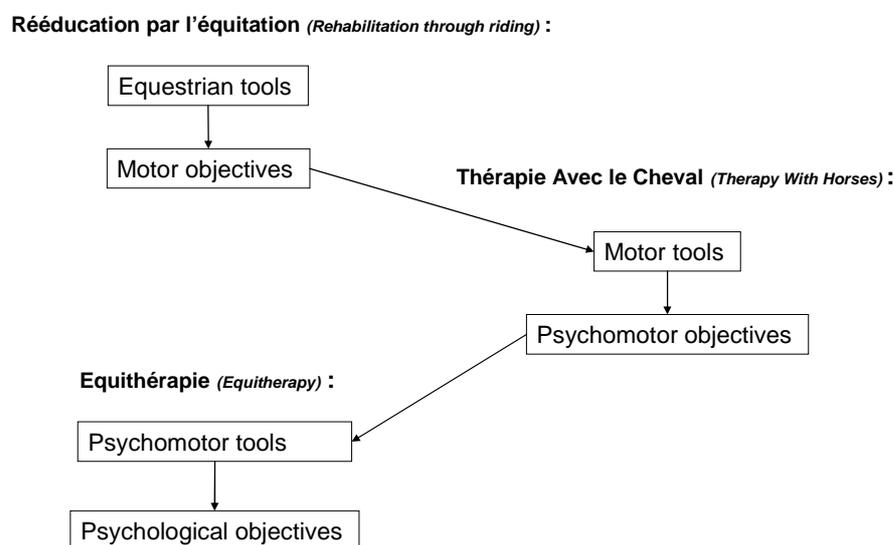
The objective was therefore to act towards psyche, and no longer towards psychomotor development, as in TAC. The SFE considered the psychomotor element in its instrumental dimension, helping to reach the individual’s psyche, regardless of psychomotor improvements. The SFE’s standpoint was based on the initial professions of its founders (psychologists and psychotherapists) and their theoretical connections, involving psychoanalysis, psychodynamics, and humanistic therapies. It is easy to understand that, despite their differences, the FENTAC considered the SFE as a competitor: the use of the word “therapeutic” had once been dedicated to “therapies with horses”. The creation of the SFE shows once again the professional segmentation dynamics at stake in the world of EAAs. The history of the therapeutic use of horses in a professional context is indeed that of a series of secessions and alliances vis-à-vis established professions (in the medical and the equestrian

---

<sup>30</sup> “TAC is the closest word of all to equithérapie, in the meaning we intend to give it.” See: Société Française d’Equithérapie (French Society for Equithérapie) : <http://sfequithérapie.free.fr> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

<sup>31</sup> See: Société Française d’Equithérapie (French Society for Equithérapie) : <http://sfequithérapie.free.fr> [Accessed 26/11/2012]. Bold characters included on the website.

world). Sociologist Anselm Strauss’s suggestion to analyze the segments of a profession as social (political, religious, reformist) movements is very relevant here.<sup>32</sup> Professional segments carry an ideology; their development is the affirmation of how such an ideology can represent professional identity, and set up the tasks to perform. Clearly, every evolution of EAAs, every new denomination, every new professional organization establishes a particular identity, both about the objectives of the activity (therapy, recreation, sport), the perception of horses (mount, body, psyche) or the type of issue aimed in the activity (physical, mental, psychomotor). We have shown how EAAs evolved exclusively through secessions in the US; now, the example of the French context enables us to perceive the legacy of former practices on every new one.



**Figure 2: Legacies and secessions in EAAs in the French context**

The above figure shows how such legacies work together. One can identify what each practice borrowed from the previous one, chronologically. The word “tools” means the techniques used to reach therapeutic “objectives”. As one observes the nature of such tools and objectives in each practice, several common dimensions appear. What’s more, one notices how the “objectives” turn into “tools” when shifting from one practice to the next. RPE thus used the

<sup>32</sup> See: Strauss, A. L. (1992). *La trame de la négociation. Sociologie qualitative et interactionnisme*. [The Web of Negotiation: Qualitative Sociology and Interactionism] Paris, L'Harmattan. See in particular “La dynamique des professions” in this volume (pp. 67-86).

‘traditional’ techniques of horse riding to reach the objective of motor rehabilitation. Therapy with horses borrowed some techniques from motor rehabilitation in a treatment in which psychological and motor aspects were mixed together, and where the aim was to improve both. Finally Equitherapy borrowed the conceptual framework of TAC, in particular the issue of the psychic ‘presence’ of horses and the use of psychomotricity techniques, essentially aimed at curing the patient’s psyche.

U.S.	France	
"Riding for the disabled"	"Équitation adaptée" (Adapted horse riding)	<i>Horse = activity</i>
"Riding For Rehabilitation"	"Rééducation par l'Équitation" (Rehabilitation through horse riding)	<i>Horse = activity + body</i>
"Hippotherapy"	"Thérapie Avec le Cheval" (Therapy With Horses)	<i>Horse = body + psyche</i>
"Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy"	"Equithérapie" (Equitherapy)	<i>Horse = psyche</i>

**Figure 3: Chronological evolution of EAAs and representations of the horse**

One can notice that each of these conversion operations conveys a different ‘image’ of the horse. In RPE, the body of the horse does cure, but it does as long as the contact between the patient and the horse occurs in the framework of horse riding – ‘academic’ riding is the core of the activity. Although the TAC ‘frees’ the horse from such frameworks, corporal contact is important. All the secondary aspects of riding (preparation, grooming, etc.) imply physical contact between the patient and the horse, which is potentially as beneficial as riding it. This is how psychotherapy is introduced: corporal contact may be important as long as it is meaningful to the patient – whatever the nature of such a contact, after all. More importantly, the patient enjoys the fact of being ‘with’ the animal and ‘projects’ him/herself on it. Likewise, there is a focus on the fact that the animal has interesting behaviors outside the framework of horse riding. Such behaviors reveal its individuality more, and allow the animal and the patient to ‘meet’. This notion of ‘mediation’ was taken over in Equitherapy as a conceptual basis. A horse has an individuality and a presence, which makes it a mediator between the patients and the medical staff. Therefore, the history of the French context of EAAs mirrors the American history. The representation of horses evolved when adapted horse riding as a sport became a therapy – “body” with RPE, “body and psyche” with TAC, “psyche” with Equitherapy. However, as we observed the continuity between these practices,

we have noticed that the transition to the status of therapy merely was a segment of more global transformations in the relationship to horses: the import of equestrian practices (and later, more simply, practices with horses) into the world of therapy supported the emergence of new representations of horses in a very active way.

## Conclusion

Clearly, the transition from sport to therapy led to radical changes in the representations and the practices of human/equidae relationships. Such changes thus echo the inner developments of the equestrian culture, or rather cultures. As we saw, anthropologist Jean-Pierre Digard thinks that the advent of the new equestrian culture reveals the progressive assimilation of horses into companion animals. Digard believes that the status of horses is closer and closer to the status of dogs, mostly perceived as companion animals since 1950.<sup>33</sup> In particular, Digard point out the imperialist ambitions of the canine model of companion animals, in the process of overshadowing other modes of relationships with animals. Digard observes the phenomenon from the standpoint of the equestrian world, and notices that, on the one hand, “new horse riders”<sup>34</sup> have a similar relationship with horses as companion animal owners (focusing on emotional development, individuality, “idleness and uselessness”).<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the new practices of horse riding (riding for ‘pleasure’, ethological equitation, ‘whisperers’) included elements that brought the horse closer to the dog : leading horses, walking next to them, at a distance, etc.<sup>36</sup> All these elements echo canine sports like *agility* or *cani-cross*, or dog training. Digard concludes that the relationship to the horse has been “caninized” and will end up applying the companion animal model to the horse. The progressive evolution of the relationship between the human and the horse outside the framework of sport horse riding would be one of the signs of this phenomenon. After being a draft horse, a consumption animal, the horse found in sport horse riding a renewing of its social utility. But if it did become a companion animal, such utility would be over: what make the companion animal special, Digard writes, is its uselessness, *i.e.* the fact of not having any other utility than the happiness and satisfaction of its owner.

---

<sup>33</sup> Digard, J.-P. (1999). Les français et leurs animaux. Ethnologie d'un phénomène de société. Paris, Hachette Littératures.

Digard, J.-P. (2009). *Op. Cit.*

<sup>34</sup> People practicing horse mounting for pleasure.

<sup>35</sup> Digard uses the example of a “garden horse”; a horse left in a meadow, not necessarily ridden, owned for the “pleasure of having a horse” and taking care of it. Digard believes that this practice brings the horse closer to idleness to which companion horses are condemned.

<sup>36</sup> Digard, J.-P. (2004). *Op. Cit.*

One recent French draft bill seems to justify Digard's views, as it aims at "*modifying the legal status of the horse from livestock to companion animal.*"<sup>37</sup> The justification of this law is in keeping with a legal assimilation of dogs and horses: the text insists on the fact that "*nothing differentiates dogs (companion animals) from horses (livestock) any longer.*" Dogs and horses are work tools, commercial assets, human support for pleasure, and leisure companion, as the draft bill says. However, among such justifications, the therapeutic argument has a central part: more than all other motivations, the therapeutic qualities of the relationship with horses represent an entire paragraph and are used to illustrate the new "*nature*" of the relationship between humans and horses. According to the authors, horses are "*far more than horses*" when part of a therapeutic work; they are "*physical and psychological support*". Once again, we can observe that the upward transition of the relationship to horses to the status of therapy corresponds to their upward transition to the status of personalities, their progressive integration in a widened anthropological community. We can also observe that the shifting from livestock to companion animal is supported in reference to the new work of "horse therapists". Therefore, what stimulates the evolution of the status of the horse is not so much whether it is recognized as a 'working animal'; it is rather the *nature* of such work that makes it reach or not reach the category of companion animal. This questions Digard's theory of useless companion animals: the shift to the status of companion animal does not mean that horses are no longer useful to society, it is a redefinition of how useful they are. Should they become companion animals, they would not become useless – they would be useful *in different manner*. Therefore, removing the status of horses as livestock is legitimate based on this new form of social usefulness. Many sociologists highlighted the theme of human health as a major operator of social change, as a "good in itself".<sup>38</sup> This is a relevant example.

The history of EAAs illustrates this phenomenon. From adapted horse riding to Equitherapy, through to rehabilitation with horse riding and TAC, there was a progressive liberation from the need to submit the body of the horse to equestrian activities. In this movement, which questions the monopoly of horse riding over the relationship, the argument of health is essential. Besides the great legitimacy of the humanist objective to serve the cause of human health, the various conceptualizations implemented to meet such an objective also play an essential part. Indeed, if we analyze how EAAs acceded to the status of therapy, we can

---

<sup>37</sup> Luca, L., J.-M. Ferrand, et al. (2010). "Proposition de loi n° 2361, visant à modifier le statut juridique du cheval en le faisant passer d'animal de rente à animal de compagnie."

<sup>38</sup> Dodier, N. (2003). *Leçons politiques de l'épidémie de sida*. Paris, Editions de l'EHESS.

Dodier, N. (2005). "L'espace et le mouvement du sens critique." *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales*. **60**(1): 7-31.

observe that the status of the horse was redefined on behalf of precise therapeutic objectives that belonged to the “parent disciplines” of each of these practices (physiotherapy in RPE or hippotherapy, psychomotricity in TAC, psychotherapy in Equitherapy or EFP/EFL). Without the inflection of horse riding through the conceptual frameworks of these paramedical disciplines and their inner objectives, claiming another type of relationship with horses would precisely have been considered as claiming, with no further justification than meeting the expectations of people who wished to emancipate horses from academic horse riding. The use of the therapeutic argument is an opportunity to objectify the promotion of a new relational modality with the animal, on the one hand, and to federate a large number of people in the defense of how important such a relational modality is, including EAA ‘users’. The users, convinced or ‘cured’ by the model of human/horse relationship as it is presented in its most therapeutic versions of EAAs, become its best ambassadors. Thus, we believe that the evolution of therapies with horses is far more than a mere ‘expression’ or echo of more global changes in the relationship between humans and horses – these therapies are one of the major engines of such changes.

Jérôme Michalon  
Department of Sociology / Centre Max Weber - Jean Monnet University - Saint Etienne  
(France)  
[jerome.michalon@gmail.com](mailto:jerome.michalon@gmail.com)

## References

- Abbott, A. (1988). The system of professions. An essay on the division of expert labor. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.
- Bougard, P.-M. (2003). "Equithérapie ou Thérapie psycho-motrice, sport et loisir." Ethnozootecnie(73): 29-32.
- Chevalier, V. and B. Dussart (2002). "De l'amateur au professionnel : le cas des pratiquants de l'équitation." L'Année Sociologique 52(2): 459-476.
- Digard, J.-P. (1999). Les français et leurs animaux. Ethnologie d'un phénomène de société. Paris, Hachette Littératures.
- Digard, J.-P. (2004). "Des manèges aux tipis. « Équitation éthologique » et mythes indiens." Techniques & Culture, from <http://tc.revues.org/1139>.

Digard, J.-P. (2009). "Qu'ont à voir les sciences sociales avec le cheval ?" Le Mouvement social(229): 3-11.

Dodier, N. (2003). Leçons politiques de l'épidémie de sida. Paris, Editions de l'EHESS.

Dodier, N. (2005). "L'espace et le mouvement du sens critique." Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales. **60**(1): 7-31.

Griffith, J. C. (1992). "Chronicle of therapeutic horseback riding in the United States, resources and references." Journal of the American Kinesiotherapy Association **46**: 2-7.

Lerevend, A. (2003). Le cheval, un thérapeute ? UFR Sciences Humaines et Cliniques. Paris, Université Paris VII « Denis Diderot ». Master's Degree Work.

de Lubersac, R. and H. Lallery (1973). La Rééducation par l'équitation. Paris, Crépin-Leblond.

Luca, L., J.-M. Ferrand, et al. (2010). Proposition de loi n° 2361, visant à modifier le statut juridique du cheval en le faisant passer d'animal de rente à animal de compagnie.

Strauss, A. L. (1992). La trame de la négociation. Sociologie qualitative et interactionnisme. [The Web of Negotiation: Qualitative Sociology and Interactionism.] Paris, L'Harmattan.

Tourre-Malen, C. (2003). "Les à-côtés de l'équitation. Rapport à l'animal et pratique sportive." Études Rurales **1-2**(165-166): 133-146.

Tourre-Malen, C. (2006). Femmes à cheval, la féminisation des sports et des loisirs équestres : une avancée ? Paris, Belin.

## **Electronic references**

American Hippotherapy Association, "Hippotherapy as a treatment strategy" Retrieved from : <http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/hippotherapy/hippotherapy-as-a-treatment-strategy/> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

American Hippotherapy Association, "AHA Strategic Plan 2008-2011". Retrieved from [http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/downloads/AHA\\_StrategicPlan.pdf](http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/downloads/AHA_StrategicPlan.pdf) [Accessed 26/11/2012]

Aubard, I. "Comment est née en France la Thérapie Avec le Cheval." Retrieved 01/09/2010, 2010, from [http://www.serpsy.org/piste\\_recherche/mediations/tac.html](http://www.serpsy.org/piste_recherche/mediations/tac.html) [Accessed 26/11/2012]

EFMHA Newsletter, Volume 14, # 1, 2010. Retrieved from : <http://www.pathintl.org/images/publications/efmha-news/efmha-news-spring-2010.pdf> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

Glasow, B. "A Walk Down Memory Lane. Reminiscences of a Early Pioneer", Retrieved from <http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/hippotherapy/memory-lane/html> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

Kluwer, C. (2003). "FRDI History." Retrieved 04/09/2010, from <http://www.frdi.net/history.html> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

Martin, B. (2009). "Interview avec Renée de Lubersac." Retrieved 01/09/2010, from <http://www.mediation-animale.org/rencontre-avec-madame-de-lubersac-et-historique-de-la-fentac/> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

NARHA, "NARHA 2009 Facts Sheet". Retrieved from : <http://www.pathintl.org/images/pdf/about-narha/documents/2009-NARHA-Fact-Sheet.pdf> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

## **Websites**

Beijing Olympic Games' page dedicated to Lis Hartel : <http://fr.beijing2008.cn/spirit/pastgames/halloffame/h/n214047429.shtml> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

PATH International (formerly NARHA) : <http://www.pathintl.org/> [Accessed 26/11/2012]

Société Française d'Equithérapie (French Society for Equitherapy) : <http://sfequitherapie.free.fr> [Accessed 26/11/2012]