ON HISTORY AND ON THE CREATION OF COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

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Max Eckstein and Harold Noah do not know this but I have for years liked both of them very much. At the personal level, I was most touched when they were the first in the comparative education community to warmly welcome me to the USA where, rather to my surprise, I found myself teaching sociology and comparative education in a good university at graduate school level. Professionally, they had also, earlier, solved one of my problems as a student: where is there a history of comparative education? It was there in their classic text (Noah & Eckstein, 1969). Here the origins of the field were set out with exemplary clarity. The footnoting was scholarly and clearly a flurry of research had been done. As someone who was thinking about specialising in comparative education I was most relieved that there was a history – and there was also that marvellous account in Bereday’s book (1964) about scholars in other countries and their universities and departments. Comparative education existed and it had a history as well. There were more jobs in sociology, but clearly comparative education was more fun. I could take up a career. The history legitimated me.

And now – a few decades later? Now that we are all legitimate, in what senses do we exist historically?

The first difficulty is we have a lot of unseen history and not enough labour to make it visible. We have archives in major universities, but not enough obvious reward for young scholars to undertake research on them. We have marvellous bits of private writing on the history of the field – Peter Hackett and Richard Rapacz come to mind – but we have no one who has brought these correspondences (in both senses) together. At least a start has made by Gita Steiner-Khamsi and others on oral history (clearly something which the Comparative Education Society in Europe ought to undertake also as rapidly as possible). But – again – the initial problem is the career difficulty of being labelled as a specialist in the history of comparative education.

The second difficulty is the massive amount of effort required to get one of these serious historical projects going – a point made with great clarity in the Acknowledgements at the beginning of the book Common Interests, Uncommon Goals (Masemann et al., 2007). There are very practical problems in writing histories – in the ways that these must be done if you work seriously on researching history. Miguel Pereyra for example has been working hard and long on analysing Kandel as a scholar in the history of comparative education – but to chase down material on Kandel has meant major travel and expense which can just about be
handled by a scholar in mid-career with major effort – but there are few structural supports for such historical scholarship.

The third difficulty is that, given the invisibility of a large amount of information, we simply do not have the density of information which makes for good history. The amount of material that goes into a first-rate historical account of something is astonishing. Dalrymple’s work on *The Last Mughal* (2007) – so brilliantly contextualised – is dependent upon a complete new bit of the national archive becoming visible. Herman’s work on *The Scottish Enlightenment* (2006) is dependent upon a massive bibliography of earlier specialist and detailed texts. Major histories – whether these are by Norman Davies (1997) or by Tony Judt (2007) – draw on bibliographies which take a chapter-length essay merely to list. An obvious counter-argument may be offered – such work is ‘mainstream’ history (though that is an odd expression given what historians now study) – and, the counter-argument might continue, the comparison is unfair: all we are talking about here are histories of fields of study. But that last proposition, in turn, is not convincing in the face of texts such as Randall Collins’ book on *The Sociology of Philosophies* (1998), Friedrichs’ book (1970) on sociology or even a monograph on a field of study such as Bartholomew (1989) on the formation of science in Japan.

Right now, we simply do not have enough material to move on from the huge amount of work which is already involved in putting together the essays in this section of the handbook. The scholarly apparatus of all of the chapters in the section is impressive and the scholarly apparatus of some of the chapters is amazing. But we are still short of material.

The problem is also worse than that because a history of comparative education ought – sooner or later – to become a comparative history of comparative education. We are still a little bit away from that – although it is worth remembering that the ‘history’ of comparative education in these volumes is not limited to this first section. Reading the chapters in the other sections of the volumes – Larsen on history, Steiner-Khamisi and her conceptualisation of the development of comparative education, the exploration of comparative education in East Asia outlined by Wang and Dong and Shibata, the concept of voices which Mehta raises, the mappings of Paulston, the analysis of Popkewitz – reminds us of possibilities and thematics in a potential comparative history of comparative education.

There is also the shiver of the shock which comes later, as a reading of these volumes is complete, and it is recalled that we have no serious history of comparative education in Brazil or in Argentina in print – and this despite the significance of Sarmiento in Argentina and his political views and his astonishing practical ‘comparative education’ or the significance of Anisio Teixeira and his international connections in Brazilian educational history. (Of course articles in our specialist journals exist on both people with good hints about where a ‘history’ might go, but that is just my point. We have articles and hints; and we do not have histories.)

We have not even brought together seriously the ‘individual’ histories of comparative education in France, Germany, Italy and so on – though again in at least three book chapters or articles by Wolfgang Mitter (one appearing in Volume 1) you can find ways into a fuller comparative history.
So, let us be optimistic like a cheerful and happy child. Let us assume that a major foundation such as the Gulbenkian or Hoover decides that a comparative history of comparative education would be well worth funding. Apart from establishing an Advisory Board with such senior scholars on it as Eckstein, Noah, Kazamias, Mitter and Rust, what would we wish our team of actual researchers to make visible as evidence for this putative history so that our material for writing that history became denser and denser?

Almost certainly it would be necessary to review the history of other fields of study including comparative study (Schriewer, 2006). It would be necessary to make women visible – they are there in history but they (e.g., Ann Dryland, Madame Hattinguais) are not there in our histories. I suspect it will also be necessary to make fuller sense of the meta-epistemic assumptions of a range of comparative educations in a range of countries: for example the effect of structural-functionalist sociology in the USA on American comparative education but the relative lack of effect by the Frankfurt School; the fear of sociology which so characterises the ‘culturalist’ school – though not Lauwerys – in the Institute of Education and Kings College in London in the late 1950s and early 1960s; the sudden lurch in vocabulary which inserts ‘international’ as a qualifier of, or as a juxtaposition to, ‘comparative’; and the reasons for ‘a linguistic turn’ or a ‘post-modern turn’ or even the new vocabulary that implies a ‘geographic’ turn in a number of social sciences, including a hint of it within comparative education.

Also – amazingly – we do not have a really sharp, historian’s sort of account of the life of George Bereday, or Joseph Lauwerys and his work for UNESCO, his links with Piaget, the IBE, with Teixeira and with Hiratsuka in Japan. Both Bereday and Lauwerys linked persons and ideas across cultures and continents and for quite justifiable reasons – including their impact on their own institutions, and on the societies of comparative education and on generations of graduate students as well as their astonishing lecturing skills – Bereday and Lauwerys are well known in the field of study; but they indirectly raise a broader question.

We do not understand our own iconographies. For example, Sir Michael Sadler was clearly a fine public servant and an educational leader and, one suspects, a rather pleasant human being. Fine – but we give him an astounding importance in comparative education even though that famous essay of his (Sadler, 1964) has caused far more confusion than it has ever solved. But he is always in ‘the histories’, which itself becomes a historical problem of the social construction of our iconographies. No doubt a comparative history of comparative education would explore whether such iconographies also have been inserted into the invention of the tradition of comparative education in Japan or Germany or France.

The final paradox of course is that while ‘the evidence’ can be made available, prepared as it were by stabilising and strengthening archives and by making hidden ‘facts’ more visible, the questions cannot.

Somewhere in this first section on the creation and recreation of the field of study, Andreas Kazamias – who is and always has been deeply committed as a historian to doing an immense amount of work on the history of the field of study – has a quotation
from T.S. Eliot. The quotation confirms in a subtle and elegant way one of Andreas’ own convictions – that each generation must rewrite its history.

That almost leaves us with a paradox. The propositions of Eliot and Kazamias create the thought that it is the future which determines the past. Yes, I know neither of them said that. But the possibilities are exciting. The quotation from Eliot reverberates. Our contemporary histories of ourselves need revisiting now and will need revisiting again frequently in the future.

References


