

Part 1

Comparative and International Education & History of Education

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Modern as Contested Concept in Comparative and International Education

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to clarify the concept and to recapture and to reassess its value to the field of Comparative and International Education at the present point in time. Despite the vision of founding father Jullien, from the interwar “factors and forces stage”, the field of Comparative and International Education got a strong tradition of focusing on the past. In the social science phase of the 1960s, Modernisation Theory made a forceful appearance in the field, and became the principal theoretical framework in the field. However, this trend was reversed during the next phase in the historical evolution of the field, the phase of heterodoxy in the 1970s. In this decade and subsequent times, Modernisation Theory fell out of fashion and even became discredited, as rival paradigms such as Dependency Theory, World Systems Analysis, and Neo-Colonialism, and finally Postmodernism became vogue. In view of the momentous societal changes taking currently place globally, calling for a reconceptualization of education, a future-orientation for the field Comparative and International Education is argued for. In this scheme of things, a re-appraisal of Modernisation Theory is called for. Rather than summarily discarding this theory, or on the other hand embracing it uncritically, a more nuanced place for Modernisation Theory in a Comparative and International Education relevant to and valuable for the twenty-first century world seems to be apt.

Keywords: Capability Theory, Comparative and International Education, modern, Modernisation Theory, twenty-first century society

Introduction

The term *modern*, as it appears in the conference theme *Education in Modern Society* is simultaneously a vague and a loaded (with strong ideological undertones) concept in the field of Comparative and International Education, while it is also a controversial term, and has played a forceful role in the evolution of the field, especially (but not limited to) the 1960s (and to a lesser extent the 1970s). The aim of this paper is to clarify the concept and to recapture and to reassess its value to the field of Comparative and International Education at the present point in time. The paper commences with a brief reconstruction of the field before 1960s, and its overly historical orientation. The sudden surge of Modernisation Theory to the

centre stage in the 1960s is then explained, followed by the discreditation of the theory since the 1970s. The need for a re-appreciation of Modernisation Theory at the present point in time is then argued.

A strong history with an overly historical orientation

In the historical evolution of the field of Comparative and International Education, seven phases could be distinguished: a phase of travelers' tales, a phase of the study of foreign systems of education with the intention to borrow, a phase of international cooperation, a "factors and forces" phase, a social science phase, a phase of heterodoxy and a phase of heterogeneity (Wolhuter, 2015). These phases should be seen as a progressive broadening or expansion of the field, rather than as a series of mutually exclusive phases, one replacing the previous (Ibid.). The first two phases, travelers' tales and the phase of the study of foreign systems of education with the intention to borrow, were pre-scientific phases, and cover much of the history up to beginnings of the twentieth-century. The third phase, the phase of International Cooperation, had its precursor in the publication of Marc-Antoine Jullien in 1816/17, in which he coined the term "Comparative Education", but in all seriousness this phase got into action with the establishment of the International Bureau of Education in 1925.

But Comparative Education as a field with a strong presence at universities really commenced only with the "factors and forces" stage. In an epoch making lecture in 1900 at Guilford College, Oxford University, Michael Sadler (1875-1943) cautioned against the practice of indiscriminate borrowing of education practices from foreign systems of education. He explained that national education systems are the outcome of (national) contextual forces, such as geography, demography, social system, economy, political system and religious and philosophical structures. National education systems are embedded in these societal structures, which makes it impossible to transplant one element of an education system from one country to another. Sadler laid the basis for the "factors and forces" stage of Comparative Education, when comparativists devised schemes to analyse contextual forces shaping (national) education systems. This kind of Comparative Education was much in the vogue in interwar Europe and North America (i.e. between 1919 and 1939) but is still very dominant in Comparative Education (Wolhuter, 2008, pp. 334-336). The publications and scholarship of the triumvirate ("big three") in Comparative Education: Isaac Kandel (1881-1965), Nicholas Hans (1888-1969) and Friedrich Schneider (1881-1969) as well as many others (such as Idenburg, Moehlman, Mallinson, and Steyn) were all in this "factors and forces" mold. In these scheme of things, the historical was always very strongly present, either explicitly, as in the scheme of Schneider, or implicitly. An example of the latter is Kandel's notion of "national character" as (sole) shaping force of national education systems – this "national character" was understood to have been the outcome of a long history. The highlighting of the role of the historical in shaping education systems is perhaps most forcefully expressed in the title of the book of Robert Ulich: *The education of nations: a comparison in historical perspective* (1961).

The rise of Modernisation Theory

During the 1960s Modernisation Theory made a forceful entry into the field of Comparative and International Education. This was part of what is known as the social science phase of Comparative Education. The post-Second World War decades ushered in a dynamic period for comparative education, with the development of UNESCO (founded in 1945) and the slow inclusion of educational issues within institutions such as the World Bank and USAID. This post-war era, also a time of decolonisation worldwide, focused considerable attention on the relationship of education to national development, and the continued drive to make comparative education a more scientific and respected field through the inclusion of reliable computer generated data. Another feature of Comparative Education at this stage was the affinity for the methods, theories, concepts and paradigms of the social sciences (such as Sociology, Economics, Anthropology and Political Science).

The dominating paradigm of the phase was that of structural-functionalism and its derivative Modernisation Theory.

The sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) could be regarded as the founder of structural-functionalism. Structural-functionalism views society as a harmoniously functioning whole. Every system (such as the economic system, political system, education etc.) performs a function and contributes to the smooth, successful functioning of society as a whole. Similarly, every institution (every school, family, church, enterprise, cultural organization, etc.) contributes to the successful functioning of society as a whole. Changes in one system or institution will inevitably lead to changes in all the others; indeed change could deliberately be planned in one system to effect desired changes in other. From there the ceilingless belief in the potential of education to induce any kind of change desired by society – economic growth, social mobility, eradication of unemployment, combat of crime or whatever, could be effected by just providing more education.

Modernisation Theory held that the developing countries needed economic, social and political development; and the fastest and cheapest way to effect these developments, would be to just supply the people in these countries with more education (Fägerlind & Saha, 1984, p. 49). Modernisation became the most important theoretical framework in Comparative Education during the 1960s and early 1970s (Kelly et al., 1982, p. 516).

The limitless belief in education, held not only by educationists, but also by politicians, financial, industrial and business leaders, developmental experts, newspaper editors and the public at large, explained above paved the way for a massive expansion of education worldwide during the decades following the Second World War (Coombs, 1985).

The discreditation of Modernisation Theory

The education expansion drive which gained, in all seriousness momentum since the 1960s did not produce the predicted societal benefits. For example, instead of eradicating unemployment, the spectre of schooled unemployment raised its head, especially after the worldwide economic slowdown which set in after the first oil crisis in 1973. The 1970s was a decade of increasing pessimism amongst comparativists, as to the societal dividends of education. Rival paradigms to Modernisation Theory and structural-functionalism set in, particularly theories of world-system analysis and reproduction theories. These theories (which can roughly

be subsumed under the collective name of conflict theories) saw education as a powerful tool in the hands of the powerful in society, to reinforce existing inequalities in society.

By the early 1990s protagonists of various paradigms no longer spent all their energy criticising each other, but, in the time spirit of Postmodernism, a tolerance, even an appreciation of different paradigms developed in Comparative Education (Rust, 1996, p. 32). Postmodernism rejects the notion of one perspective/paradigm containing the entire truth, but advocates an awareness and acknowledgement of a multiplicity of knowledge perspectives. This new phase in the evolution of Comparative Education, called the phase of heterogeneity, saw a proliferation of the number of paradigms emerging in Comparative Education. Especially progressive scholars in the field associated Modernisation Theory with Eurocentricism or neo-colonialism, as an attempt to enforce Western models on the rest of the world (e.g., Terreblanche, 2014, pp. 10-11). The result was that modernisation could never regain its prime position in Comparative Education scholars' sense of self-identity, i.e. in their view of the paradigms forming the theoretical framework(s) of scholarly activities in the field. Thus today there is a schizophrenia visible in the field: whilst much research is clearly done within the (implicit) theoretical framework of Modernisation Theory (the prolific publication stream emanating from the World Bank, for example, are mostly of this kind) (for the prominence of Modernisation Theory informing research in the field, cf. Wolhuter, 2008, pp. 335), theoreticians in the field eschew Modernisation Theory (for example, Arnove et al., 2013), or deny that it has any value.

The need for a future orientation and re-appraisal of Modernisation Theory in Comparative Education

Modernisation Theory constructs the transition of society from a traditional to a modern society, and portray this process as both inevitable and desirable (Reyes, 2001). Protagonists of Modernisation Theory also see modernisation of all societies as progressing towards the Western or European model (Ibid.). Modernisation is conceptualised as a state in which societies maximilise economic and social rationality (Kelly et al., 1982, 51-55). According to this theory modern humans have a number of traits, such as being open to new experience and being ready for social change, awareness of a diversity of attitudes and views, being optimistic (rather than having a feeling of fatalism), respect for the Human Rights of others, a temporal orientation towards the future rather than towards the past, an understanding of the logic underlying industry and production, a philosophy that human beings can control and influence their environment (rather than the other way around), and a universalism: a belief in the equality of all humans regardless of gender, age, etc. (Fägerlind & Saha, 1984, p. 95). Advocates of Modernisation Theory regard education as the most important agent in transforming traditional societies to modern societies.

The arguments of scholars of decolonisation in education (today much in vogue in large parts of the Global South), cultural relativism, cultural revitalization, and others, are not without merit. However, two counter points need to be raised. In the first place a number of societal forces are creating a world at present and in the near future, which will look totally different from even the world known at the end of the

twentieth century. These momentous societal trends include the ecological crisis and the imperative for sustainable development, the population explosion (in the Global South), an ageing population, a more mobile population, globalization, the technological revolution (especially the information and communication technology revolution), economic growth, the neo-liberal economic revolution, economic internationalism, the rise of knowledge economies, the growing informal economic sector in the countries of the Global South, the rise of increasingly multicultural and more diverse societies, the diminishing importance of the primary social grouping (the family) and of the secondary social grouping (the workplace) in society, on the other hand the rise in importance of tertiary (voluntary functional) social groupings, the demise of the once omnipotent nation state, the growing prominence of supra-national and international political structures, democratization, individualization, the rise of the Creed of Human Rights, and the persistent (albeit in a different form) presence of religion as force in society. These forces ask for a reconsideration of the kind of education needed, and for a new agenda for Comparative and International Education; above all for a stronger future orientation in the field.

Secondly, a wide latitude could be granted for divergent views and models of societal dynamics, but on the other hand, surely it would be difficult to differ from Torres' (2015) notion of the three Global Commons:

- we all have only one planet;
- we all desire peace;
- we all should enjoy the right to pursue life, prosperity and happiness.

These have much in common with the notion of modernisation (as used by modernisation theorists). In as far as modernisation, at least in the form in which is manifested in the world, may work against these ideals, the concept and its manifestation in the world should be interrogated and criticized, but in as far as it makes possible the realization of the three Global Commons, modernisation should be embraced. The rather mechanical, clinical, macro theory of modernisation may be supplemented (and humanized) with Capability Theory. Capability Theory, as developed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum and others, is a philosophy emphasizing individual emancipation in the shape of personal choice and freedom (Steyn et al., 2016, p. 143). The concept of emancipation in this philosophy is not the narrow understanding associated with skills such as numeracy or literacy (Ibid.). Capabilities are defined as the functions, opportunities and freedoms people possess to pursue goals they value and that are meaningful to them (Ibid.). In his mapping of the field of Comparative Education, Paulston (1999) mentions the two paradigms of reflexive modernity and critical modernists. Reflexive modernity, while retaining modernists' notions of unitary space, is willing to open a space let in other knowledge perspectives, in order to "know what is happening". As an example, Paulston takes a publication by Cowen (1996), in which he invokes Lyotard's critical discourse of performativity in modern culture, in a (that is Cowen's) basically modernist theoretical framework. Critical modernists retain a strong commitment to the narratives of emancipation (that is critical theory in the broadest meaning of the term), while seeking to breathe new life and credibility into the project, in order to shore up their own positions. As an example Paulston tables McLaren's (1994) acknowledgement of the limitations of a Marxian approach, and where he (McLaren) reaches out to the positivism of modernisation. Such a nuanced,

constantly interrogated concept of modernisation there is an indispensable and irreplaceable place in a future-orientated scholarly field of Comparative and International Education, relevant to and valuable for twenty-first century society.

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