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Jürgen Schriewer

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> A consensus exists that comparative research consists not of comparing but of explaining.

No matter how paradoxical the above quote by Przeworski (1987, 35) may seem, it refers to a *problematique* which has been under discussion not only in comparative education, but in the comparative sub-disciplines of the social sciences in general. In fact, in most of the fields which later on became the human and social sciences, attempts at explaining the enormous variety of peoples, belief systems or social practices encountered on voyages, in the course of expeditions or through systematic studies have marked the decisive shift from earlier forms of ethnographic description to more academic forms of comparative study that occurred towards the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. The explanation of social and, in our case, educational phenomena came to constitute an essential epistemic achievement and, therefore, the *raison d'être* of comparative research. The rise of the modern concept of 'culture' testifies to this shift. From a sociology of knowledge perspective, one can even assume a virtual co-evolution of the heightened interest in comparative studies and a specifically 'culturalist' approach to transmuting a social object domain into those studies' distinctive subject matter (cf. Luhmann 1995). This approach was geared towards examining the amazing variety of social institutions and practices not *as such*, not in disjointed isolation, but always in terms of their affiliation to and dependence on their more encompassing socio-cultural conditions. In varying proportions, it combined basic notions of cultural relativism with forms of seeing things in historical and sociological perspectives. In leading the comparative scholar to comprehend the phenomena of interest by capturing the interrelationships with their distinctive social and cultural environment – couched in terms that originated in that period: by grasping their 'functions' or their embedding in 'organisms/organisations' – this 'culturalist' mode of looking at subjects and articulating problems gained research-framing significance for the further development of comparative education.

In the long run, however, merely culturalist and holistic approaches underpinned by ideas of historicism – as evident in the works of the founding generation of comparative educationalists – were not able to provide convincing explanations. On the other hand, conceptual alternatives were obviously dependent on the state of theory formation in the human and social sciences. This became particularly obvious from the 1960s onwards, when comparative education underwent a major shift from traditions of hermeneutic historicism to decidedly social-scientific theories and research procedures. Not only were strongly generalised sociological and economic models developed, such as models derived from encompassing theories of modernisation or human capital; but, in the context of the orthodox philosophy of science, the structure of explanations itself became the subject of intense debates revolving around the covering-law model (cf. Przeworski and Teune 1970 for comparative social science in general, and, for comparative education, Farrell 1979).

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And yet, in spite of the considerable methodological sophistication induced by the social-scientific shift of comparative education, corresponding strands of theory-building and explanation came in turn under pressure. On the one hand, this was an outcome of comparative research in education and the social sciences itself. In fact, in contrast to the universalist assumptions proper, for instance, to arguments emphasising technological change, economic development, or the exigencies of a universal rationality purportedly intrinsic to industrialism, comparative research has unearthed an impressive range of regional variation regarding the problem-solving patterns and strategies that came to be institutionalised in diverse socio-cultural and political contexts. In this sense, comparative research has tended to produce falsifications instead of convincing explanations. As has been argued elsewhere (Schriewer 2000, 14ff.), it is the universalist form in which social theories have stated their explanatory claims – viz. in terms of general causal relationships, or of functional relationships interpretable in causal claims – that will again and again be refuted by the amazing variety of socio-cultural processes and organisation patterns unveiled by comparative research. In this respect, it seems to be precisely the advantage of comparative analysis to actually throw into relief, in contrast to the reductionism inherent in many of the macro-social models (as well as, incidentally, in education policies), the full complexity of causal networks.

On the other hand, considerable changes in theory construction and paradigmatic orientation have taken place. Processes of a growing rapprochement between history and the social sciences have occurred during the last decades of the past century. And they have given rise to a 'historical social science', which has generally been considered to have a natural affinity to comparison and therefore to be constituted as 'comparative-historical sociology' (Badie 1992; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). More generally, the lines of epistemological conflict inherited from the nineteenth and early twentieth century – the harsh contrasts between the natural and the human and social sciences and, within the latter, between historical disciplines geared to idiographic reconstruction and social science disciplines striving for nomothetical knowledge – have been called into question. Developments of this kind have been summarised by, among others, the authors of the interdisciplinary *Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences* (Wallerstein 1996). This was a group of widely known experts both in the natural and in the human and social sciences who definitely highlighted a number of ideas that have emerged from advanced scientific research, and which imply suggestions for far-reaching theoretical re-orientations across the established frontiers between disciplines. Such ideas pertain, above all, to an increased awareness of the significance that irreversible processes play even in physical nature, and to attendant requirements to introduce the aspects of time and temporality into systematic theory building itself. They include, moreover, a broadening of the conception of causation so as to allow room for the idea of 'complex causality'.

In accordance with paradigmatic changes of this scope, theoretical innovations have emerged that offer more differentiated explanatory potentials. Theories have been formulated over the past decades, which seem to be capable of integrating and developing further the insights, generated in various fields of comparative study, into interrelationship networks and systems dynamics, deviation-amplifying mechanisms and complex causality as well as into structural elaboration and the dependency of recurring structural change on previous structures. Under headings such as 'self-organisation' or 'morphogenesis', and drawing on research in the natural sciences, the life sciences, and the social sciences, they delineate an inter-disciplinary research programme of growing importance. Such are the theories developed, in particular, by Margaret S. Archer (Archer 1995), Edgar Morin (Morin 1977–2004), or Niklas Luhmann (2012–2013). Their advantage is that they deliberately introduce the 'arrow of time' into the structure of theory itself. This applies equally to Archer's emphasis on the temporality of all processes of structural elaboration and Luhmann's interweaving of systems theory with evolutionary theory, or, more specifically, of a theory of social communication with a theory of social differentiation. As particularly emphasised by Morin and Luhmann, these theories also take into consideration, in theory construction itself, the complexity of causal relationships so conspicuously demonstrated through comparative analyses. This is where concepts such as 'self-reference' and 'meaning', 'attribution' and 'contingency' as well as 'function' and 'functional alternatives' play a significant role.

Nonetheless, the theoretical options and potentials for analysis offered by this body of theories have so far been taken up only to a modest extent, if at all, in the context of professional Comparative Education. This reticence is all the more surprising with regard to Archer and Luhmann since both authors have shown great affinity to comparative analysis. It is surprising in the case of Archer who developed her original approach – which was of course later expanded theoretically – on the basis of detailed historical-comparative studies of the emergence of modern educational systems in Europe (Archer 1979). After a heated dispute in the pages of this journal in the wake of a critical review of her book by Edmund King (cf. Archer and King 1980), her presence among Comparative Education scholars was reduced to occasional references to that book. But otherwise, her work has been drawn on more by historians and sociologists. In a similar vein, the extensive ignoring in Comparative Education of the theoretical tools conveyed by the work of Niklas Luhmann is surprising given that his 'functional' method is, at its core, a comparative method. As demonstrated not least by the editor of this issue, Luhmann's works not only provide inspiration for a revitalisation of comparative analysis (Schriewer 2000); they also provide the conceptual tools for a sociology of knowledge-based re-examination of comparative reasoning (Schriewer 1988). Moreover, the theoretical concepts elaborated in Luhmann's work have proven their benefit for the actual structuring of substantive comparative studies, be they focused on topics regarding educational system formation and transformation or dedicated to a cross-cultural critique of the discursive construction of internationality (Schriewer 2004). In the cases of both Archer and Luhmann, the observed reluctance, which oscillates between misunderstandings and rejection, may to a considerable degree be due to the highly elaborate theory constructions and conceptual apparatuses that have been devised precisely with a view to accounting for the complexity, contingency and temporality of phenomena. The systematic 'estrangement', so to speak, of educational subjects that is implied by their conceptualisation by means of such theories is obviously at odds with the expectations of educational research geared towards a relevance that can be quickly implemented in social or educational policy and practice.

Theoretical orientations, on the other hand, that have gained wide acceptance not only in social science research, but also – and especially – in Comparative Education, are theories associated with the institutionalist paradigm. This includes sociological neo-institutionalism as well as the more recent versions of historical or discursive institutionalism which have particularly emerged from comparative history and political science. Concepts such as 'legitimation', 'organisational environment' or 'mimesis' may indeed be easier to translate into the everyday understanding of both researchers and readers. Quite particularly, neo-institutionalist theory has proven to be highly successful in providing plausible explanations of our globalising world in terms of an all-encompassing 'world society' or institutional 'world culture' (Meyer 2009). These explanations are all the more convincing as they are based on a tremendous amount of wide-ranging international surveys and quantitative analyses, which numerous groups of scholars brought together by John W. Meyer and Francisco O. Ramirez have compiled. Moreover, by going far beyond the field of education proper, corresponding studies have applied the world culture paradigm to fields as diverse as political organisations and the nation-state, science and academic institutions, law and management, environmental issues or children's and human rights regimes (Ramirez 2016).

Nevertheless, however stimulating the explanations developed within the world-culture framework may be, comparative studies not committed to the assumptions underlying this approach have unearthed more and more complex findings. Such studies have indeed shown that the diffusion-promoting thrust of globalising forces, the ideologies produced and circulated by international organisations, and the purportedly 'isomorphic' impact of world-level models and myths are refracted, as it were, by multiple re-contextualisation mechanisms and fragmentation tendencies on the part of varying groups, societies or socio-cultural contexts. Their findings have therefore stimulated debates which have increasingly called into question the scope and the cogency of the world culture paradigm. By highlighting the intricate interaction of global processes with local agency, and of world-level forces with the self-evolutionary momentum conditioned by context-bound social experiences and meanings, these debates have raised additional, and increasingly complex, explanatory problems (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Schriewer 2016). In their wake, theories, concepts and analytical approaches have come to the fore which, to varying degrees, place importance on meaning-based human agency and communication as well as on 'meaning processing schemata' rooted in a group's or nation's history, on collective experience crystallised into taken-for-granted 'meaning constellations', and on corpuses of accumulated language-bound knowledge. Especially in connection with aspects such as these, historical and 'discursive' institutionalisms deserve particular attention (Broschek 2016). Historical institutionalist concepts and models such as 'critical junctures', 'path-dependence', and 'self-reinforcing feedback mechanisms' have not only demonstrated their explanatory power, especially in the context of comparative politics. They also link up with insights formulated by the theory of self-referential social systems and corresponding to the model of 'multiple modernities'. They seem to have a promising future ahead of them.

This special issue is designed, then, to demonstrate – or rather to explore – the explanatory power of theoretical approaches that address the challenges posed by the historicity of socio-cultural institutions and practices as well as by the vast variety of education systems and system transformation processes that are internationally observable. And it is not surprising, seen against the backdrop of the theory shifts just outlined, that most of the articles in this issue are linked to different variants of institutionalism, to the main strand of neo-institutionalist world culture theory as well as to historical or discursive institutionalism. What is surprising, however, is the coherence with which these contributions conform to the overall theme of the issue and take up the challenges associated with it. What is also surprising, finally, is the ease with which the articles lent themselves to being grouped into thematically and theoretically compatible pairs.

Thus, the first two articles explore the issues of educational system formation and transformation in countries organised on a federal basis. Jörg Broschek (2021) uses the examples of Germany and Canada to examine the 'resilience', as he calls it, with which the individual states – the German *Länder* and Canadian *provinces* – defend their primary or even exclusive responsibility for education policy and funding against encroachments from the national level. Drawing on the perspectives of historical institutionalism, he is able to show that the development of public education systems, and thus the responsibility of the individual states or provinces in this regard, goes back to the time before the founding of the modern German and Canadian nation states. And related models from political science, such as the concept of 'border control', provide the lens through which he explores the effectiveness of different strategies with which the individual states not only preserved their competences in education policy, but also expanded them. Lukas Graf (2021), on the other hand, in his study on dual apprenticeship training systems in Germany and Switzerland, does not look so much at the emergence of these systems, but at their ongoing transformation in the face of changing qualification requirements. In so doing, he convincingly combines concepts of historical institutionalism with models of gradual institutional change and models of 'small states'. Drawing on these models, he is able to explain why the responsible stakeholders in Switzerland – taking into account the relative vulnerability of their 'small state' – opted for a transformation strategy of conversion (i.e. a system-adequate expansion of vocational training and promotion opportunities through the creation of a vocational baccalaureate). German stakeholders, in contrast, convinced of the strengths of the German apprenticeship training system and less prone to consensual solutions, ended up with a strategy of layering (by introducing a new layer in the form of privately run 'professional academies').

The next two articles focus on the momentous role of education in multi-ethnic societies characterised, to varying degrees, by a colonial or dictatorial past and inter-community conflicts. Both authors draw on historical and, in particular, discursive institutionalism and, in so doing, place strong emphasis on capturing the multiple 'framings' of ideas, models, and discourses – whether colonial, ant-colonial, governmental, nationalist or international – that are at the centre of public debate. By tracing British colonial involvement in educational system building and policy in Cyprus and the Straits Settlements/Singapore from the nineteenth century through the interwar period to the years immediately after World War II, Eleftherios Klerides (2021) is able to demonstrate how the manifold interactions between the coloniser and the local communities, as well as between the latter, led either, as in Cyprus, to the situation of a 'frozen conflict' or, as in Singapore, to the emergence of a flourishing multi-ethnic polity. An educational pan-Hellenism and its violence-driven struggle for 'enosis' – the unification with Greece – stands in sharp contrast, then, to the rise of an English-medium educated upper middle class of 'Anglo-Asians' who served as the cultural and economic pillars of Singapore's meandering process of becoming an independent country. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina is, as Taro Komatsu (2021) describes, a country in which ethnic tensions with strong religio-cultural underpinnings, that were long suppressed under the former socialist regime of Yougoslavia, violently broke out in the Bosnian war. The post-war reconstruction – not alone, but especially – of the education system was obviously only possible under close monitoring by the international community, represented by a multitude of international and European organisations, and within the framework of an over-complicated multi-level system of government whose arrangements, based on mutual mistrust, tend to lead to a stalemate situation rather than a platform for inter-ethnic mediation and reconciliation. Both articles, thus, while highlighting the reciprocal amplification of ethnic conflict and ideology, describe complicated and by no means easy interactions between educational system formation and modern nation building efforts.

Two more articles then examine current transformation processes of fully-fledged education systems. In so doing, they, in a sense, resume the disputes about the scope and cogency of world culture theory mentioned above. The article by Mike Zapp, Marcelo Marques, and Justin Powell (2021) is intended to outline an analysis of what they see as an inevitable and 'isomorphic' transformation of higher education institutions all over the world – whether public, non-profit or for-profit, prestigious or low-ranked, US-based, European or Asian – into rationalised, sovereign and responsible organisational actors. It is a transformation understood as a response to corresponding changes in the institutional environment of higher education institutions. Not, as usual, on the basis of statistical evidence, but drawing on a rich international research literature on universities and higher education institutions, and referring to the discourses, models, ratings and prospective scenarios produced by NGOs, experts, and stakeholders, the authors present a paradigmatic example of a social constructivist explanation. Not in direct response to this demonstration, to be sure, but with the intention of differentiating and complementing neo-institutionalist arguments, Christian Maroy and Xavier Pons (2021) develop in their article a largely reconceptualised version of the 'policy trajectory' model discussed since the 1900s. In so doing, they rely on the results of an important comparative analysis they have previously carried out on the implementation of accountability reforms in education in two contexts as different as centralised France and de-centralised Quebec. This empirical research, which examined the implementation of a globally circulating policy at all levels of political decision-making and administrative governance – the ministerial, the intermediate authority and the school level – has elucidated quite particularly the working of mechanisms such as path dependency, translation and bricolage. The integration of these mechanisms into the trajectory concept, then, is thought to constitute an explanatory model that is flexible enough to take into consideration the breadth of variations, both in forms and in outcomes, manifest in policy implementation processes that take place in quite different socio-political contexts and under the impact of changing conditions over time.

Finally, the last contribution to this issue by Victoria Konidari (2021) refers to a rather different perspective. She is not so much concerned with transformations of educational systems and policies as she is with school failure and dropout of those who are pushed to the edges of the system. By viewing well beyond standardised school achievement tests, she seeks to grasp the psycho-social mechanisms that underlie the learning difficulties of young people, especially those from disadvantaged social classes or people with migration backgrounds. Drawing on a broad range of philosophical concepts, sociological analyses, and psychological models, and based on an exploratory study of young people in France, Italy and Greece, she develops the model of the 'perceived operational space' as a summary framework for aspects such as purpose in life, personal growth, mastery, sense of coherence, autonomy and others that undergird individuals' willingness to learn and actual learning behaviour.

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Jürgen Schriewer
Humboldt University, Berlin
✉ juergen.schriewer@cms.hu-berlin.de