

Ancestral voices, policy superglue, and Cassandra: An optimistic note about comparative education

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ABSTRACT

This article picks up one motif within the multiple contradictions and tensions that would need to be acknowledged in - and which would shape - a serious comparative history of comparative education.

The article uses, as its narrative device, a brief discussion of a couple of moments of confidence about (i) the kind of knowledge which «comparative education» tries to create and (ii) its own expectations about its correct contribution to public life. The article uses as its intellectual device the tension between the fact that we have histories of ourselves as a field of study; but we are also part of history itself.

The world changes. Perhaps we have been very alert to our changing epistemic sense of ourselves, but less alert to our contemporary historical condition. Currently, in what senses are we well fitted to the *Zeitgeist*? Are we doomed to be successful?.

Introduction

This article is about the changing condition of «comparative education»: the idea which is explored is that the political framing and social use of the field of study has altered in the last forty or so years but we have not re-thought, carefully enough, the consequences of those politics of knowledge for our work as academics.

The proper nouns in the title of the article are all metaphors. The phrase «ancestral voices» is taken directly from Coleridge («...Kubla heard from far/ancestral voices prophesying war!») but my own memory of those remarkable lines was probably stimulated by a phrase of Erwin Epstein and K.T. Carroll (2005) on «abusing ancestors». The metaphor of «policy superglue» refers to

the traditional aspiration for certainty and usefulness which is emphasised in the classical literature of comparative education. The metaphor of «Cassandra» (invoked briefly at the end of the article) links, loosely, with contemporary notions of knowledge transfer, «robust and relevant» data, and research which is to be judged by its «impact». These metaphors are used to organise the narrative of the article and to shape its strategic argument.

The point of departure for the article is simple: there has been a fresh (and refreshing) flow of discussion in the last decade about the academic field of study called «comparative education». For example, there were the normal Millennium Questions about the condition of the «discipline» in Special Issues of the journal *Comparative Education* (2000; 2001) and there has been a flurry of recent specialist books (Phillips & Schweisfurth 2006; Masemann, Bray & Manzon 2007; Bray, Adamson & Mason 2007; Cowen & Kazamias 2009) about the field.

However, much contemporary discussion was inward-looking, asking perfectly legitimate and proper questions about ourselves and about what should be our new ways to think (Ninnes & Burnett 2003; Bray, Adamson & Mason 2007; Wolhunter & Popov 2007). This article re-balances that perspective by worrying about «the outside», the political talk which murmurs away in our ears, calling us to account and restructuring rewards and punishments for the academic profession. Perhaps we should start thinking about how the world is changing us?

Ancestral voices and their uneasy echoes

The field of study known as «comparative education» has, from time to time, changed its collective definitions of its cultural heroes, both epistemic and embodied. Or photographed (Jones 1971). These collective definitions, of cultural heroes and what they said, and these shifts in icons and what they mean, are here called «ancestral voices».

Ancestral voices are not Delphic utterances. Delphic utterances, pregnant with multiple meanings, tend towards complexity, ambiguity, and historical *dénouement* («the wooden walls will hold»). Ancestral voices should be and often are clear, and usually offer meanings that have only minor ambiguities. Ancestral voices are not always given a firm historical *dénouement* by changes in the world. After a fluster of academic dispute, the voices are often forgotten; the field slides across to other things. We undergo what seem to be «Shameful Discontinuities» (Cowen 2009a). Icons alter and tension accumulates around an even more peculiar continuity: are we going in

the right direction (as if physics, rather than philosophy or sociology or historical studies, is our epistemic lodestar); as if there is always A Direction.

There was, for example, such a question about A Direction and a shift in ancestral voices in the 1960s. At that moment, the struggle against ancestral voices was a struggle against the dominance of historical (and idealist and humanist) perspectives in comparative education, a dominance which had lasted for quite some time (Kazamias 1961; 1963; Kazamias & Schwartz 1970). By the end of the 1960s the field had begun, in a flurry of new books, to be re-focussed. Many scholars in the field began to embrace assumptions about the virtues of positivist science, in several of the many forms of positivism identified for sociology and in social thought by Giddens (1977). Thus, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, comparative education rewrote its claims to be «a science» (Mattheou 2009). There were some shifts in embodied iconography (for example, the replacement of Kandel, Hans and Ulich with the new names of Anderson, Bereday, Holmes, King, and Noah and Eckstein).

There was also an epistemic shift. This epistemic shift, with perfect commonsense, has been seen as a «methodological moment». The shift certainly included aspirations to achieve the epistemological form of econometrics (as in the thinking of Noah and Eckstein) and – not necessarily the same thing – a political aspiration to be useful, though the vocabularies of King («critical points of decision») and Holmes («to make successful predictions») varied.

With hindsight, the decade can also be thought of as a decade which repositioned the field of study known as «comparative education» ideologically.

In other words, the debate looked as if it was about methodology – the protagonists said they were discussing methodology; our histories of ourselves discuss the period as if the debate was about methodology; and it was possible as a student to «learn» the methodologies and be examined on them. However, the moment was also ideological. The methodologies were used as a statement of disciplinary identity and as a claim for the arrival of the «discipline» as a social science (Anderson 1961; 1977; Bereday 1964; King 1967; Noah & Eckstein 1969; Holmes 1986). That was fairly obvious, some time ago (Cowen 1982).

What is also more or less obvious now, with the benign assistance of hindsight, is that the literature of that period was refining two propositions which – when interlinked – are potentially important in terms of an external politics of knowledge. One of the claims was that comparative education would possess precise knowledge. The second, interlinking, claim was that the form(s) of this new precise knowledge would bring comparative education closer and

closer to being able to contribute to a socially significant politics of educational action (Cowen 1973).

The claims to precision were varied. Noah and Eckstein (1969) became more and more visibly linked to the «precision» of numbers and variables; Holmes (1965; 1986) more and more linked to theories of precise classification of social phenomena, to specification of «initial conditions», and then to «scientific prediction»; and King (1976) to the possibilities of finally comprehending the interminably elusive Holy Grail of comparative education: context (variously labelled by Edmund King as «cultural envelopes» or «total contextual dynamics»). It was not merely that the buzzing complexity of the world could be understandable through new precision created by applying *seriatim* a range of social sciences (such as economics, political science, anthropology, history) to a specified educational problem (Bereday 1964). It was not merely that social time itself was truncated to concentrate on time-present («critical moments of decision») which still informs the official epistemic position of the journal *Comparative Education*. The point was also that, with the new precision, comparative education would be a social science, and would be able to give responsible and reliable advice to governments.

Thus the surface structure of the 1960s and early 1970s debate is an epistemic discussion about methodology. This epistemic repositioning of comparative education involved the rejection of many of the ancestral voices that had emphasised «an historical approach» as a main method in comparative education.

However, the deep structure of the debate repositioned comparative education ideologically: the surface structure of the «methodology» debate tended to obscure anticipated shifts in the external power-relations of the field of study. The aspiration of some of the 1960s scholars was for the political repositioning of comparative education as an applied science at the service of governments.

Thus, what seemed to be an academically inspiring moment was also a moment of potential political significance. Clearly comparative education would now move quickly to rethink the ethical and political implications of policy action on the world and its own role in the construction of that policy action. This was when (in the vocabulary of 2010) the «militarisation of anthropology» was beginning to occur, in both Latin America and Vietnam. It was a moment of student protests – as in Paris – against certain kinds of governmental power. It was also a time of the probable penetration of academic-professional societies in a number of western countries by members of the «intelligence community» (Beales 1969).

However, a debate about the relations of «politics» and «comparative education» did not occur. There was a loud silence about the ethical and political responsibilities of comparative education (Cowen 1973).

Two other things happened. One was long-term; and the other was more or less straight away. The long-term effect was one of those extraordinary quirks in «unintended consequences» (the phrase is borrowed from the methodology of Brain Holmes). This inspiring «methodological moment» – inspiring, because the literature was being re-written by bright young scholars – tipped into hubris. It was from this moment that comparative education began to try hard to become historically illiterate. The earlier «ancestral voices» (for example, those of Hans, Kandel and Ulich) were increasingly ignored or politely dismissed and the pursuit of «historical perspectives» in comparative education became a radical position (Kazamias 2001). It still is (Kazamias, *passim*, in Cowen & Kazamias 2009). As a consequence, remarkable little historical work of good quality was done in the name of comparative education from within comparative education in the late 1970s, while outside of the field there was a flurry of comparative-historical or sociological-historical work on societies and education (Archer 1979; Ringer 1979; Skocpol 1979; Müller, Ringer and Simon 1987).

The second, relatively rapid change – though it never shifted into a full debate about the sociology (and politics) of knowledge of comparative education – did emphasise politics. The change came from a new «reading of the global» (Cowen 2000). This «reading» was from within neo-Marxist perspectives, not least under the influence of Latin America and theories of *dependencia*. This produced writing on neo-colonialism, and a fresh concern over the implications of American power in the «Third World» and American approaches to «development» (Carnoy 1974; Altbach & Kelly 1978). This thematic was later illuminated, in a very different way, in brilliant writing by Arnove (1981) on «the world system».

However, this new radical voice did little to slow the growth of that aspect of comparative education which became labelled «international». This «international-comparative» work was concerned with Third World development and was powerfully linked with a range of governmental agencies in a range of countries and gradually became part of diplomatic and other international soft-power policies and interventions in the Third World (Wilson 1994; Beech 2009; Kendall 2009). The moves from that concern with the Third World to a «First World» whose educational policies are powerfully influenced by the World Bank and OECD were smooth. It is only now that serious research is beginning to illuminate this new modality of «development» (Jones 2007).

Overall, we have been somewhat unprepared for the remarkable political shifts in the location of neo-liberal discourse, the rise of the European Union

(EU) and its new role in education reform (and contract research), the invention of «market-states» (Bobbitt 2003) and their crisis, and the deduction of educational policy from a new ideology about effective and efficient educational systems serving knowledge-economies. The political world to which our earlier «ancestral voices» suggested we make a scientific contribution has changed; but not our generalised historically-inherited position that «comparative and international education» ought to be «useful». With obvious exceptions, such as work on postcolonialism (Unterhalter 2009), we have still not rethought the idea of ourselves as part of a «policy superglue».

Policy superglue and coming unstuck

It is worth reiterating that the potential for us to locate ourselves ideologically close to policy talk and policy action has been permanently with us in the definition of comparative education which our textbooks normally offer us. However, as «history», what is on offer is not the marvellous anecdotal and antiquarian «histories» of some parts of the writings of William Brickman (1966) or Fraser and Brickman (1978) and Hausmann (1967). What is on offer is an organised and linear history which is relatively coherent and teleological, such as that provided by Noah and Eckstein (1969). This particular history describes a comparative education born in the philosophical positivism of Comte and French assumptions about science in the early nineteenth century, with these motifs being visible in Jullien (Fraser 1964) who became construed as an icon in our history. Our history is a history of progress, it seems: these French themes were reprised within the comfortable empiricism of Sadler and his «commonsense» English version of how one might learn things of practical value from the study of foreign educational systems (Higginson 1979).

The choice of these two icons (as «academic» legitimators of the field of study) helps to fix comparative education in its «modernist» cage (Cowen 2009b). As a field of study gradually taking shape inside universities, comparative education – with variations and touches of internationalism in the writings of Ulich and Kandel – has retained for over 100 years a commitment to «learning things of practical value» from education elsewhere. The intention (on the basis of «transfer», i.e. noting educational ideas and practices «elsewhere» and bringing them home) has always included the improvement of domestic educational policy talk and domestic policy practice. As argued earlier, the 1960s was a moment of great confidence: the more carefully this process of selecting relevant data and interpreting such «facts» could be done, the more the risks of

transfer would be reduced, and the more useful the field would be to political actors doing policy.

Even though the forms of understanding to which the field aspired changed in the twentieth century, the aspiration to be «a science» was there in the modernist beginnings in Jullien, along with emergent assumptions about the value of links between «science», «improvement», «educational policy» and «advising governments». Fascinatingly this quadrille (and its relative invisibility as an ideology) means the inclusion of William Torrey Harris, Horace Mann, Victor Cousin and Kay-Shuttleworth as «administrative» comparative educationists in the history of our academic field of study. This ideological move may be continuing in the inclusion of major local policy actors in Japan and China in the nineteenth century in current sketches of East Asian histories of comparative education as a field of study.

Thus the main political positioning of comparative education within the history of the field of study is as meliorist, incrementalist, and benign: the field, in its advice to public political actors, would gradually improve policies on educational opportunity, teacher education, «comprehensive» schools, curriculum, post-secondary education, and university systems.

It is this advisory role – the comparative educationist as the expert consultant – which has loose cultural resonance with the third metaphor, «Cassandra» (including the problem of how much truth do we know and how much truth do we tell). It is how to re-interpret this earlier political positioning of the field of study in twenty-first century which has become quite an urgent task (Cowen 2006).

Comparative education has been remarkably successful. It has shifted from puzzling over whether it is multidisciplinary (finally, there are many examples of that knowledge-form in contemporary universities) to enjoying a considerable visibility as a «voice» on policy conceptualisation or formulation or delivery. For example the recent (2009) Higher Education Conference of UNESCO was advised academically by teams led by Phillip Altbach and Ulrich Teichler. Many distinguished comparative educationists are involved in the contextualisation and delivery of educational policy with a range of agencies in a range of countries. A major flow of consultancy and funded research provides the EU and other agencies with «robust and relevant» research data. There is something of a convergence between action and the academy: for example, the journal *Comparative Education* has had – and soon will have more – Special Issues on the «progress» of education in a number of places, such as Africa and India. In those Special Issues the assembly and documentation of the evidence on the effectiveness and progress of policy is thorough. The broad question addressed is how much progress is being made against interna-

tionally-specified public policy goals. Overall, such volumes represent a fascinating symbiotic closure between «academic» evidence and «policy» aspiration. The volumes bear witness to «robust research» – and robust research which is intended to be «relevant».

Not only has there been this modality of closure of the gap between the academy and policy, there has also been a discursive shift with major political implications. The political times have changed and – apparently – the times suit us.

The political context and vocabulary of our times stress «knowledge transfer» and «impact». In the current managerial vocabulary of universities in the UK, «knowledge transfer» activities are important, partly because they can produce income but also because they locate the university in external social and political space in politically-requested ways. Knowledge transfer activities are being defined in detail by English universities in line with national policy. My own institution, for example, indicates that such activities «...can include consultancy, conferences, outreach work, short courses, INSET and tailored training, intellectual property licensing and creation of spinout companies...» (internal Institute of Education University of London document, July 2009). The other contemporary national code word is «impact». This concept is under strenuous discussion – it has been included in revised criteria for the measurement of «university quality» by national UK agencies, at a time when the national quality-measurement policy for university knowledge output known, rather obscurely, as the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) is being replaced by a slightly different exercise known, rather obscurely, as the REF (Research Excellence Framework). Basically «impact» is research that has had an impact beyond the walls of the university, through «benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture and quality of life».

Obviously the debate and choices will be of historical importance. Official statements currently permit «impact» on economic growth, business efficiency, social trust and social capital. The anxiety, of course, is that the new politics of knowledge will frame impact as emphasizing returns to public life in economic terms rather than returns to «culture» and «quality of life». Equally obviously the debate is not merely a simplistic «science versus the arts» debate: even at the tactical level of pilot studies, the areas include English Literature (along with Clinical Medicine, Physics, Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences, Social Work and Social Policy and Administration). More generally – and this too is an anxiety about current proposals for a new politics of knowledge – it is clear that basic research in the natural sciences has an impact and a massive one; but often some time after the research was done. A similar underestimation of the time-life of important work in the social sciences may have occurred also in the thinking of those who pressed for an «im-

pact» criterion: the writings of Marx and Hayek had «impact», but not perhaps within the five or eight year cycle that may (the debate is not yet finished) attend the cumbersome and expensive measurement systems that have been one feature of the disciplining of UK universities in the last three decades.

The contemporary situation – of political pleas in a number of countries for «robust and relevant» research (St Clair & Belzer 2007), the growth in «knowledge transfer», the encouragement for university fields of study to have «impact» – would suggest that «we» are relevant and becoming more so in times marked by the code-words of «globalisation» and «internationalisation», «social cohesion» and «social capital». This new political horizon contrasts sharply with the slightly wistful aspirations of Edmund King for comparative education to be involved in «critical points of decision». Perhaps, then, the political and social *Zeitgeist* has caught up with our ideological history of ourselves? Perhaps our history has become teleological, not in the normal sense used to criticize the historical classifications and historical directions of «the Noah and Eckstein history» – that we have been unfolding until we arrived at a condition of «being scientific»; but in the broader sense, that we have now arrived in a political moment in which the world had changed enough for us to be relevant. So, amid the echoes of ancestral voices, we have heard the call and met the challenge: our departments are wealthy and our conferences large and we have succeeded? Perhaps. The historically significant question is: successful at what?

Conclusion

No doubt our intellectual icons, our ancestral voices and our «histories of the field» have changed, are changing, and will go on changing. The theme of this article has been that, fairly recently, «our» field of academic study has altered in terms of its external legitimation, its tacit alliance with forms of power, and in the social contexts of its use. To put the point in a different vocabulary, this article has sketched some of the ways in which academic comparative education, as an episteme, has «shape-shifted» in the last couple of decades (Cowen & Klerides 2009). In general we are comfortable about discussing intellectual maps of our condition – for example, through the remarkable *oeuvre* of Rolland Paulston and through proposals and responses about the ways in which we might re-think (*Comparative Education* 2000; 2001). What perhaps we have grown careless about is our Cassandra voice – on what terms and with what intentions do we use our knowledge to intervene in social affairs (Cowen 2006). Always: in cooperation with governments? Always: in opposition to governments? Such simple dichotomies are unhelpful. So, as usual,

we had better do what we do best which is, think for a while and reinterpret some of our traditional and almost silent «rules of engagement» with the reform of education.

The starting points would include at least two «gazes», one outwards; and one back onto ourselves:

- ▶ the implicit (domestic and international) political contract involved in our range of roles in public affairs (including consultancies and contract-research) and our own politico-academic confidence about the «geometry of transfer» which we have aspired to create: the «applied comparative education» of Michael Sadler and Jullien;
- ▶ our histories of ourselves and further reflection on and analysis of what our specialist academic professional Societies actually do within the academic world and outside it, once you get beyond the official rubrics with which they introduce themselves to the world (Cowen 1990).

Already some superb work has been done, anticipating a contemporary «rules of engagement» at the intersection of academic creativity, policy work, new transnational agencies, new public discourse about «research», and universities (Ozga, Seddon & Popkewitz 2006). Already some basic research has been undertaken on the «professional societies» (Masemann, Bray & Manzon 2007). Equally obviously, we must continually revisit our own sense of our own history.

However one of the charms of scholarly history as a genre is that it is rewritten in each generation. The new lived-world changes, and historians see the old lived-world differently. Unfortunately even scholarly histories can become stabilised as ideologies of a collectivity called «ourselves» (e.g. as a nation); and mutate into ideologies in themselves. Similarly, on the smaller scale of fields of study, it is a crucial generational task to keep the «history» of a collective academic-self under review by rewriting present options in a critical conversation with the past.

Fortunately, this dialogue is occurring with increasing speed. The efforts are multiple but certainly include the insistence by Mehta & Ninnes (2004) on «re-imagining comparative education». New books – for example that by Noah Sobe (2009) on educational reform in extreme political circumstances – help us to think about the relation between political intentions, educational transfer (or the lack of it) and educational reform. This contemporary re-thinking of the field is also obvious in writing by scholars such as Steve Carney (2009) and Marianne Larsen (2009) and in brilliant – and brilliantly fresh – doctoral theses by young scholars such as Maria Manzon (University of Hong Kong 2009) and Jeremy Rappleye (University of Oxford 2009).

Such sharp and resistant conversations – with ancestral voices by new voices – edge us towards a re-thinking of the politics of knowledge of our field. The unexpected bonus is that a canny and cautious optimism about the future of our intellectual work has suddenly become a possibility.

This is a pleasant surprise in the surreal work-world of many of us, which is marked by the concept of «quality» being deflated to mean «measurable university output», by aspirations to construct an academic South Sea Bubble of «world class universities», and by the realignment of the responsibilities of the academic profession around the criteria of State agencies. Such surreal ideational worlds of this ilk are also one of the real worlds in which we live. Thus, questions about the politics of knowledge are sharp and urgent. What contribution to the social world do we wish to make, and on what terms do we wish to succeed?

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Φωνές προγόνων, μελιορισμός και η Κασσάνδρα: ένα ελπιδοφόρο σημείωμα για τη συγκριτική εκπαίδευση

Το παρόν άρθρο αποτελεί μια πρώτη απόπειρα συγκρότησης μιας ιστορικής αφήγησης για το επιστημονικό πεδίο της συγκριτικής εκπαίδευσης. Σημείο αφετηρίας του άρθρου αποτελεί η παραδοχή ότι ένα από τα πολλά αντιφατικά ζητήματα που προκαλούν εντάσεις στο εσωτερικό της συγκριτικής εκπαίδευσης είναι το γεγονός ότι το εν λόγω πεδίο έχει τις δικές του πολλαπλές ιστορίες, αλλά ταυτόχρονα, αποτελεί και αναπόσπαστο τμήμα της ιστορίας και της κοινωνίας. Σε αυτό το πλαίσιο υποστηρίζεται η θέση ότι μια σοβαρή ιστορία του πεδίου θα πρέπει να επικεντρωθεί στις «εξωτερικές» του σχέσεις: δηλαδή, πρώτον, στη σχέση της συγκριτικής εκπαίδευσης με το ευρύτερο πολιτικοκοινωνικό και οικονομικό της συγκείμενο· δεύτερον, στη χρησιμότητα και στο ρόλο που διαδραματίζει στη δημόσια ζωή η γνώση που καλούνται να δημιουργήσουν οι συγκριτικολόγοι της εκπαίδευσης· και τρίτον, στο πως τόσο η σχέση αυτή όσο και η νομιμοποίηση της ωφελιμότητας και του ρόλου της συγκριτικής εκπαιδευτικής γνώσης μεταβάλλονται από περίοδο σε περίοδο και γιατί.