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Comparative education: the status controversy and dynamics of scientific development

Abstract: The article addresses the problem of identity and status of comparative education in contemporary science, as well as its developmental dynamics and scientific potential. In its first part, the author reconstructs the debate on the ‘crisis’ of comparative education and also the various avenues of its critique, especially, but not exclusively, in the context of its relationship with other (sub)disciplines. Part two focuses on the developmental dynamics of comparative education, against the background of the discussion regarding the various criteria and aspects of estimating the state of (sub)disciplines. Thus, the theoretical and methodological openness of comparative education and its responsiveness to social change will be presented. Furthermore, comparative education is placed in the context of the debate between essentialism and scientific constructivism, the problem of interdisciplinarity and research integration, the density paradox or the narcissism of small differences, as well as the challenge of postmodernism. The final section of the text presents the idea of a comparative educator as a traveller and its potential to transcend one’s own epistemological script.

Keywords: comparative education, identity, scientific status, theory, developmental dynamics.

A crisis of the identity and status of comparative education?

The tradition and research potential of comparative education appear to be particularly rich and undeniable, however, the debate over its status has been continued for decades, through the recurring cycles of the same

questions and problems. There have been further (and further) attempts made to identify or reconstruct its identity. Therefore, in the first part of my text, I will try to capture the phenomenon referred to as the 'crisis' of comparative education, and in the second part I am going to present its broad academic range of possibilities.

A few threads can be distinguished in the arguments critical of the (lack of) identity and status of comparative education. The first one refers to the un(sufficiently)-specified problem area and research methods exposed by its critics. At this point one may quote, after C. C. Wolhuter, David Wilson's thesis from 1996 (he was a former president of the 'World Council of Comparative Education Societies') concerning the prosopagnosia of comparative education. In psychology, the term prosopagnosia describes the inability to recognise faces; in this case, however, it illustrates the belief that comparative education does not have its 'clearly recognized face or identity' (Wolhuter, 2015, p. 11). Comparative education is also referred to as an amorphous (featureless, structureless) area of research (Wolhuter, 2008, p. 323). C. C. Wolhuter also wrote about the 'identity crisis of comparative education', based on the fact that it is 'conceptually difficult to define' and its object of study is 'extremely broad'. He recalled the claim of Ervin H. Epstein and Katherine T. Carroll who referred to it as an 'eclectic/diverse field with adjustable borders and contours which are difficult to demarcate' (Wolhuter, 2015, p. 16). C. C. Wolhuter also wrote that comparative education has an 'empty interior' (Wolhuter, 2015, p. 26).

The second thread of criticism against comparative education addresses its relationship to other subdisciplines among broadly understood educational and social sciences. Two contradictory starting points of consideration can be distinguished here. As early as 1974, Laadan Fletcher wrote that in the debate on comparative education, a concern has been expressed that it failed to have a 'generally recognised affiliation with any major discipline'; and he considered it to be an 'anomaly'. He argued that while subdisciplines such as history of education or philosophy of education have an 'immediate identification' with reference to the 'canons of scholarship' of their respective disciplines, comparative education seems to exist – if I may use the metaphor – in a kind of disciplinary vacuum (Fletcher, 1974, p. 348). However, the second starting point of criticism is quite different; it stems from the conviction that comparative education does not have its own theories and research methods. It is therefore not autonomous, as it must inevitably draw on the contributions of other sciences, most notably sociology, history, economics, political science, philosophy as well as law and psychology.

Contrary to Laadan Fletcher, another well-known theorist Philip G. Altbach argues that ‘because education itself has no standard methodology (...) comparative education has in recent years generally oriented itself to the social sciences – and in earlier periods, to history or philosophy’ (Altbach, 1991, p. 492). As David A. Turner puts it: ‘the concepts and methods of comparative education were, therefore, dependent on external reference to other, foundation disciplines for their legitimacy’ (Turner, 2019, p. 14). Alexander A. Wiseman and Nikolay Popov propose a thesis that comparative education borrows or adopts theories and methodologies from the disciplines of the social sciences, while there are virtually no instances of its own contributions being used, for example, by sociology or political science (Wiseman and Popov, 2015, p. 4). We definitely witness an ‘asymmetry of influence’ here. Thus, for this reason specifically, the words of Harold Noah and Max A. Eckstein are quoted at times, arguing that the identity crisis of comparative education stems from its eclecticism, (Fletcher, 1974, p. 353).

The aforementioned C. C. Wolhuter claims that all classifications of the approaches within comparative education contain an ‘impressive kaleidoscope’ of theories, however, they have ‘their origin outside Comparative Education’, for example in economics (human capital theory) or sociology (economic or cultural reproduction theory) (Wolhuter, 2015, p. 30). The latter further wrote: ‘This creates the impression that Comparative Education is at its best some exercise in applying theories from other disciplines to education, not a fully-fledged scholarly field or discipline in its own right’ (Wolhuter, 2015, s. 31).

It is worth adding that the discussion about comparative education is a part of a broader one – concerning the status of pedagogy as a scientific discipline. The basis for the unjustified, in my view, critical assessment of pedagogy in this respect is the belief, expressed by i.a. Richard Peters, that it is not an ‘autonomous discipline’ but a ‘field’ in which other disciplines, most notably philosophy, psychology and sociology, find their application (McCulloch, 2002, p. 100).

Another problem associated with the crisis of comparative education is exposed by Euan Auld and Paul Morris. They draw attention to the fact that it is often reduced to its sole ‘applied’ function – as a ‘provider’ of data for optimising the educational policy. Following this line of thought, it can be said that understanding the applicability of the experiences or educational achievements of one country to other countries is an inherent part of the tradition of comparative education. However, it is now more often reduced to nothing but collection of comparative statistical data (especially in terms

of pupils' achievements) to provide an almost 'mechanical' starting point for a change in the educational policy of a particular country. The traditional analyses of historical and cultural differences between the country from which the experiences have been 'borrowed' and the country in which they are implemented are neglected in this context. The 'explanatory' function of comparative education is then less significant while its applicative function becomes considerably more substantial. It is pragmatically assumed that what 'works' in one country or system will certainly work in others. Euan Auld and Paul Morris emphasise that comparative education loses, therefore, its academic dimension, the reason being its abandonment of the analysis of epistemological, theoretical and methodological problems. The comparative analyses, mainly statistical ones (rather than qualitative), become, to reiterate, only an instrument of educational policy (Auld and Morris, 2014, p. 130).

Comparative education is then transformed into a 'servant' subdiscipline, which aims to contribute to the ability of a given society and its economy to succeed in the global competition, with the younger generations being reduced to human capital in such comparativism (Auld and Morris, 2014, p. 135). The comparative research is then incorporated into a simplified technocratic assumption: 'Everything can be measured. And what gets measured, gets managed' (Auld and Morris, 2014, p. 137).

According to the critics, who cite the views of Sarah Igo, in such actions we face the embodiment of the idea of a 'statistical community' (Espeland and Stevens, 2008, p. 413), where 'quantitative measures are a key mechanism for the simplifying, classifying, comparing, and evaluating that is at the heart of disciplinary power' (Espeland and Stevens, 2008, p. 414). The groups numerically scaled are able to be 'monitor[ed] or governed "at a distance"' (Espeland and Stevens, 2008, p. 415). In such a situation, comparative education constitutes an instrument of power, using indicative measurement to implement the desired changes in education – from an economic, ideological or political perspective.

The most common occurrence, in the practices described above, is the isolation of Western values and 'epistemologies' from the cultural system, for which they are 'relevant' (in the sense of growing out of its traditions and culture). They thus acquire an 'independent life', are 'exported' and used as a 'metanarrative structure' for the comparative analyses of different societies and cultures. What becomes obvious therein, is that the comparative patterns, which are the product of Western culture, by no means express the models and values of other cultures. The language of totalisation and the cognitive habits of the West will – in the course of the comparative

procedures – assimilate distinct local realities. The comparative education then becomes an ‘imperialist’ comparative education (Melosik, 1995, p. 280).

Also Robert Cowen wrote in 2018 about the progressive redefinition of comparative education: its aim becomes more and more to define the conditions for the ‘transfer’ of educational experiences (both the ideas and the practices of education) (Cowen, 2018, p. 20). In relation to the above, he writes explicitly that he finds it ‘professionally embarrassing’ for the academic comparative education to have professors from that subdiscipline increasingly involved in ‘doing comparative education’ through non-academic research and consultancy contracts. Hence, it is necessary ‘to distinguish various forms of “applied” comparative education from academic forms of comparative education’ (Cowen, 2018, p. 20).

Multidimensionality and ambiguity as the sources of developmental dynamics of comparative education

It is important to emphasise that many theorists believe – and I completely agree with their stance – that the ambiguity of the theory, methods and problem area of comparative education is not a limiting factor; on the contrary, it determines its scientific openness and potential. Thus, the lack of demarcation of its boundaries, the absence of a clear theoretical or methodological core, and the borrowing of diverse methods from the disciplines of social sciences or humanities may constitute the source of vitality of comparative education.

Comparative education is therefore an ‘open’ subdiscipline, ‘interested in’ or rather ‘inquisitive’ about the multidimensional, multidisciplinary contexts of the reality of education. It is heterogeneous in its nature. As early as 1974, Harold J. Noah wrote about the need for a range of diverse approaches in comparative education. He stated with confidence: ‘none may claim monopoly on truth’, ‘The task of the scholar (...) is to recognize which approach gives the most useful results for a given purpose and in a given situation’ (Noah, 1974, p. 344). Whereas Phillip G. Altbach wrote in 1991: ‘Comparative education looks at many directions at once, and this has helped to shape the field that at the same time is left without a clearly defined centre’ (Altbach, 1991, p. 491). Comparative education also has a ‘borderland’ aspect in all its dimensions. And this so-called ‘borderland character’ by no means has to be a destructive factor in relation to this subdiscipline, on the contrary – it may be a factor of its scientific potential and developmental dynamism. Borderland character allows for a growing research focus and differentiation of approaches of comparative education. Hence, to refer now

to the reflections of Robert Cowen, comparative education is a very ‘exciting’ research area, ‘rewarding and flexible’ (Cowen, 2008, p. 18). In relation to this subdiscipline, particularly accurate is the statement by Rudolf Stichweh that ‘One of the most interesting features of modern science is exactly that it gains an almost unlimited capacity for *self-activation* through its internal differentiation (...)’. (Stichweh, 1992, 12).

One can also refer here to the words of Steven J. Klees from 2008, when he proudly stated that ‘The principal comparative advantage of comparative education is that the field is literally constituted by crossing borders, and comparative educators, by necessity, roam far beyond education itself’. He reasoned that no other area of science ‘has such a broad, interconnected vantage point [with other disciplines] from which to view the dilemmas of our time’ (Klees, 2008, p. 302). Certainly, one should also agree with the thesis by W. James Jacob and Sheng Yao Cheng that the fundamental distinctiveness of the theories used by various comparativists is not an expression of weakness of comparative education. On the contrary, the existing ‘dynamic variety’ is the foundation of its ‘comparative and theoretical strength’ (Jacob and Cheng, 2005, a. 230). The authors even wrote about ‘the power of theoretical synergy’, which is made possible by the use of diverse and increasingly more recent theories and methods in comparative education (Jacob and Cheng, 2005, p. 245). It is therefore argued, with some validity, that ‘that there is no single or unified <<comparative education>>, but that there are multiple comparative educations’ (Wolhuter, 2008, p. 323-324)

Also Robert Cowen discussed the above, although from a slightly different perspective: ‘There is not one comparative education but several. For example, there are different epistemic traditions, within educational studies, which affect how scholars in Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom and the USA construct comparative education’(Cowen, 2018, s. 16). On the other hand, however, one can also notice ‘centripetal forces’ in comparative education, in favour of convergence, integration, coherence – a search for a ‘disciplinary identity’ (Wolhuter, 2008, p. 324) (also in the context of the efforts of international comparative associations and journals in this regard). And this dynamic, created by the pursuit of an unambiguous self-identification of this subdiscipline and the parallel phenomenon of its decentralisation or fragmentation, is certainly pro-developmental.

Similarly, the growing tendency to move beyond traditional comparative schemes in comparative education is firmly in favourable to its development. Back in their text from 1980, Francisco O. Ramirez and John

W. Mayer complained that ‘for the most part (...) research in “comparative education” consists in studies of education in individual countries, with few direct comparisons’ (Ramirez and Meyer, 1980, s. 369). Nowadays, direct comparative research between countries is even ‘routine’, as reflected in hundreds of books and thousands of articles. It appears, though, that what can be observed today is an increasing move away from – as Alexander W. Wiseman and Nikolay Popov put it – ‘methodological nationalism’, the essence of which is to compare nation states as ‘national societal units of analysis’ and to ‘create national models’; often at the expense of internal diversification within these nation states (Wiseman and Popov, 2015, p. 8). Comparative research is becoming increasingly multidimensional and complex, encompassing a variety of phenomena ‘across’ and ‘within’, and state/nationality is often only one of the factors accounted for.

At this point it is worth reiterating the views of the British comparativist Robert Cowen on the essence and objectives of comparative education. He emphasises the significance in this context of the ‘international mobility of ideas, discourses, institutions and practices’, in terms of three theoretical categories: transfer, translation and transformation. While transfer refers to the very act of their movement across different types of boundaries, translation refers to their re-interpretation and transformation refers to their ‘changed shape and metamorphoses’. Whereby the aforementioned ‘transitions’ of ideas, discourses, institutions and educational practices are never linear (Mehta, 2010, p. 105).

In relation to the developmental dynamics of comparative education, Mattei Dogan’s and Robert Phare’s considerations relating to the integrity of disciplines can be applied. They expose three ‘ideal types’ of researchers within a discipline: pioneer, builder, hybrid. A pioneer is a scientist, who creates a new problem field within the discipline. ‘This expansion moves into *terra incognita*, into an area about which science was ignorant’ (Dogan and Phare, 2019, p). The builder, on the other hand, continues the pioneer’s work. He or she develops the emerging problem field defined by the pioneers; brings it to maturity; conducts empirical research, develops theories, constructs methods, establishes new journals and associations. The latter often becomes the author of classic works. Finally, a hybrid researcher is one who crosses the boundaries of his or her discipline and enters territories which were previously the domain of another discipline. Sometimes he or she creates a scholarly ‘province’ out of fragments of two disciplines (Dogan and Phare, 2019, p. 172-173). The history and present state of comparative education provides an excellent exemplification of the above assumptions.

It has its scientific pioneers (for example, Marc Antoine Julian de Paris or Mathew Arnold) and its builders, who have given it full scientific validity (and are authors of canonical works – for example, Michael Sadler, Isaac Kandel, Nicholas Hans, George Bereday or Brian Holmes). Meanwhile, the INCREASING number of contemporary hybrid researchers constantly push the boundaries of comparative education in interactions with other (sub) disciplines.

The thesis of Mattei Dogan and Robert Phare is also quite accurate in relation to comparative education; they are convinced that when in a certain research field knowledge is already considerably accumulated then over time the field slowly starts to become drained (Dogan and Phare, 2019, p. 29). It begins to be characterised by ‘density’. There is even a talk of a ‘density paradox’, referring to ‘densely populated’ subdisciplines or problem fields, which by no means results in a greater accumulation of valuable knowledge, despite the increasing amount of research (Dogan and Phare, 2019, p. 32). Tony Becher and Paul Trowler also point out that disciplines experience ‘transient fashions’ for certain problem fields at different times; they become ‘hot’ and the number of researchers and publications addressing them increases (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p. 95). With the slow depletion of a problem field that is situated within the mainstream of research, innovations arise from research conducted on the margins (Dogan and Phare, 2019, p. 35).

Over the last decades and the entire twentieth century, these ‘densities’ and ‘depletions’ of problem fields in comparative education (and sometimes successive returns to the same problems in new contexts and configurations) have occurred very frequently. There is an evolution of the problem field of comparative education, depending on the changing educational and socio-cultural reality. At various stages in the development of comparative education, there was a different interest in the study of issues such as, for example, school reforms and the role of the state in this respect, the access of different social groups to various types of educational credentials, the relationship between education and globalisation processes or the role of technology in education. It is noticeable, for example, that there has been a decline in interest in illiteracy problems (due to the worldwide increase in the level of literacy) or in the issue of mandatory schooling (due to the significant standardisation of rules in this matter). One can also see the extraordinary responsiveness of comparative education to, for example, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and the increase role of distance learning. In this context, C. C. Wolhuter and L. Jacobs even referred to Covid-19 as a ‘potential catalyst’ for comparative education (Wolhuter and

Jacobs, 2021), there have also been mentions of ‘post-pandemic prospects of scholarship’ in comparative education (Oleksiyenko and co-authors, 2021).

Without a doubt, discussions on scientific status and potential are also part of a binary view of a scientific discipline – from the perspectives of essentialism and constructivism. Essentialists assume that the starting point for the creation of a discipline or subdiscipline is the cognitive factor, associated with the discovery of a specific problem field and then with detailed discoveries within it. This leads to the creation, and then, popularisation of the related knowledge (publications, teaching) (Hider and Coe, 2020, p. 11). Essentialists also believe that knowledge related to a problem field relevant to a (sub)discipline already exists before it is discovered. A discipline is thus created as a result of the human mind ‘operating’ within a particular field of knowledge, or a problem field, which was previously unrecognised. For example, the notion of the ‘essence of mathematics’ (Nis, 2014; Tymoczko, 1994), the ‘essence of astronomy’ (Putnam, 1914), or the ‘essence of history’ (Berlin, 1980, p. 172), or hundreds of the ‘essence of philosophy’ (Dilthey, 1954) appears repeatedly in the literature.

In contrast, the constructivist approach views disciplines as social constructs, formed as a result of the differentiation of knowledge, a process that has often been saturated with arbitrariness and power. Similarly, as with essentialism, the origin of new disciplines here is considered to be the result of the fragmentation and specialisation of knowledge and the emergence of new problem and knowledge fields (Woolgar, 1976, p. 270). However, the similarity ends there. Indeed, advocates of constructivism argue that the category ‘discipline’ does not have essential characteristics constituting the grounds for its creation (McCulloch, 2018, p. 91). Disciplines are not natural categories, instead, they are based on ‘arbitrary classification’ (Messer-Davidow, Shumway and Sylvan, 1993, p. 11).

I agree in this respect with the claim of Wolf Lepenies that the identity of disciplines cannot be defined by any ‘ultimate meanings’ derived from the category of ‘science’ (Lepenies 1998, p. 155). The division of disciplines within science is therefore not the result of some internal definitive logic of science, but is related to the ‘power’ of providing knowledge within a given scientific field by a relatively well-organised group of scientists who identify with it. Disciplines can thus be conceived as ‘projects, in the sense of socially constituted authoritative purveyors of explanations and descriptions of segments of reality’ (Carreira da Silva, 2016, p. 7), full of conflict and uncertainty. I believe that comparative education, with its dynamically changing problem field and shifting boundaries and its inherent uncertainty with

regard to its identity and self-identification, strongly affirms the validity of the constructivist approach.

Comparative education is interdisciplinary by nature. However, this interdisciplinary character is not unconditional, nor does it lead to the dispersion or elimination of the distinctiveness of the subdiscipline. The predominant approach among scholars, not only in the context of comparative education, is rather expressed – as neatly put by Marc De Mey – in the statement: ‘first disciplinarity before engaging in interdisciplinarity’ (Bechtel, 1986, p. 3). Thus, interdisciplinarity does not lead to the questioning of (sub) disciplines, but can lead to their enrichment, by introducing new research contexts (Mittelstraß, 2018, p. 17). Stephen Rowland expresses it in a similar manner: ‘interdisciplinary contestation [...] is not to merge or loosen disciplinary boundaries’ as much as it leads to a ‘clearer understanding of disciplinary difference’ and to the perception of disciplines as dynamic practices (Rowland, 2006, p. 81). Interdisciplinarity also becomes one of the sources of creative ‘disciplinary instability and dynamism’ (Wardle and Down, 2018, p. 115). Undoubtedly, the thesis put forward by Angelique Chettiparamb that interdisciplines could not exist without disciplines is also correct (Chettiparamb, 2007, p. 16). John A. Aldrich writes: ‘the term “interdisciplinary”, itself, requires a base of disciplines from which to consider acting across disciplines’ (Aldrich, 2014, p. 3). In this context, it can be argued that comparative education is not an interdiscipline, but is embedded in the broadly defined educational sciences, although individual researchers may refer to (and be ‘embedded’ in) the theories or assumptions of different social sciences or humanities. And this seems to be the line of thought followed by George Bereday and Martin Carnoy, who assume, as David A. Turner puts it, that a prerequisite for comparative education to be scholarly is for the comparativist to have ‘strong disciplinary background in one of the “contributing” disciplines’ (Turner, 2019, p. 14).

Nor can the term elevator or silo – which is applied to disciplines that focus towards ‘their interior’ (Jacobs, 2013, p. 17-18) be used in relation to comparative education. The notion of elevators or silos is clearly pejorative; they are seen as ‘remote, solitary and quiet places with high walls; their purpose is to provide isolation’ (Jacobs, 2013, p. 17-18). The basis for the silo mentality, in relation to scientific disciplines, is collective thinking, which creates a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, with the ‘us’, clearly separated from another container. The silo is ‘obsessively dependent on its boundaries of separateness’ (Cilliers and Greyvenstein, 2012, p. 3). Quite often, within teams located in the silos, depreciation for those outside is observed. They

are considered unworthy of trust, lacking in competence and unable to either 'understand' or respond appropriately (Cilliers and Greyvenstein, 2012, p. 3). In relation to comparative education, which is open to the contributions from other sciences and 'constantly interactive', the term 'silo' is meaningless. It does not lock itself into a homogeneous orthodox way of thinking, it is oriented towards a permanent interdiscursive and interparadigmatic dialogue.

Logically, the notion of 'narcissism of small differences' (Brewer, 2013, p. 50-51) is irrelevant to comparative education as well (Brewer, 2013, p. 50-51). The source of this narcissism stems from deriving a "inward-looking" identity from small differences between ethnic groups, nation or (sub)disciplines; these differences are even perceived as a serious gap (Kolstø, 2007, p. 155-156). Similarly, Marjorie Garber exposes the notion of 'narcissism' leading to a 'sibling rivalry among disciplines' (Garber, 2001, p. 55). Representatives of a discipline, especially when these 'small differences' are exposed, frequently tend to take action defending their discipline from being 'diluted' through the creation of 'arbitrary or artificial disciplinary boundaries', as critically noted by Armin Krishnan, which evidently leads to reductionism (Krishnan, 2009, p. 4). In the case of comparative education, there is no place – let me reiterate – for any scientific narcissism or egocentrism. The phenomenon of a kind of uncertainty relating to its scientific identity is a source of constructive change in its framework and boundaries – in response to changes in educational and socio-cultural reality. Obsessive and neurotic closing in its otherness and distinctiveness is foreign to comparative education.

Despite the fact, as emphasised above, that comparative education is not an interdiscipline, it is of an inherently interdisciplinary nature. As Botho von Kopp writes: '(...) CE is in theory, research, and practise about "border crossing". Its paradigmatic plurality and its positioning between humanities, social sciences, education policy, and education practice, is constitutional'. Botho von Kopp believes that by 'maintaining a balance' between different approaches, comparative education can 'develop further into a unique and innovative "interdisciplinary discipline", and have a sustainable impact on education research and education' (Kopp, 2010, p. 17).

Perhaps it is more legitimate to use the term 'integration' in relation to pedagogy and comparative education. According to Julie Thompson Klein, it has more 'power' than interdisciplinarity, which is only concerned with 'combining of established categories, methods and perspectives' (Thompson, 1990, p. 26). This author, echoing the views of Richard Pring, writes that the concept of integration 'raises certain epistemological questions to which

“interdisciplinarity” is indifferent. “Integration” incorporates the idea of unity between forms of knowledge and their respective disciplines, whereas “interdisciplinarity” simply refers to the use of more than one discipline in pursuing a particular inquiry’ (Thompson, 1990, p. 27).

Is this openness of comparative education to new theories and approaches, highlighted above, of a ‘limitless’ nature? A partial answer to this question can be obtained by recalling the debate on its relation to postmodern way of thinking. Here, in 2005, Ervin H. Epstein and Catherine T. Carroll in their text ‘Abusing Ancestors. Historical Functionalism and the Postmodern Deviation in Comparative Education’ made a strong critique of attempts to define this pedagogy through the assumptions of postmodern thought. They concluded that postmodern discourses ‘abuse’ the history and classics of comparative education. They considered that although ‘in comparative education, the formative scholarship of Kandel and his contemporaries represents a relativism’, it acknowledged the existence of reality and did not, as postmodernists do, reduce it to various types of language games or mind representations. Ervin H. Epstein and Catherine T. Carroll have written, with criticism, that the postmodern approach rejects the possibility of any real cultural context (Epstein and Carroll, 2005, p. 69). Critics of postmodernism recognise, as Sonia Mehta and Peter Ninnes write, that ‘postmodernist theories contradict comparative education’s goals’; they are convinced that postmodernism and comparative education are mutually exclusive (Mehta and Ninnes, 2003, p. 244).

Attempts to ‘post-modernise’ comparative education have been unsuccessful, although arguably, the trend has made an impact on broadening the problem field of the subdiscipline; e.g. with issues of post-colonialism or a greater interest in the ‘pedagogy of difference’. Interestingly, an avid supporter of the integration of postmodern ideas into comparative education was Val D. Rust, who published the (often quoted and criticised) text ‘Postmodernism and its comparative education implications’ while he was chair of the ‘Comparative and International Education Society’. He claimed that postmodernism would make it possible to ‘define more clearly the metanarratives’, which determine the shape of comparative education. Also it would dismantle them and replace with ‘small narratives’ (Larsen, 2009, p. 1045). Such an approach, as has already been reported, has not gained popularity, although in contrast, the post-structural theory of Michel Foucault is often used in comparative education. According to Marianne A. Larsen, this theory creates a ‘provocative’ context for comparative education, full of developmental potential, not specifically in the prescriptive aspect (‘what

to do?’), but in the context of understanding the past and its relation to the present (Larsen, 2009, p. 1056), I would add – especially in the context of socially constructed truth, knowledge and power. Thus, post-structuralist theory allows us to understand the historical and current shape of educational phenomena, practices and institutions – through analysing the phenomenon of the struggle for dominance between different ways of thinking about (the role of) education. The point here is to effectively impose a particular definition of ‘true knowledge’, by the government or a particular social group. This is tantamount to exercising power. Understanding the mechanisms of truth and knowledge construction to be instruments of power in shaping educational reality deepens the analytical and interpretive potential of comparative education. Whereas Simon Marginson and Marcela Mollis write that, from the perspective of the theory of Michel Foucault, ‘comparative education is an academic subdiscipline implicated in circuits of “power/knowledge” (Marginson and Mollis, 2010, p. 57).

Comparative educator as a traveller

In the final part of my text, I would like to state that the heterogeneity (and unorthodox thinking), which characterises comparative education as a subdiscipline, should also apply to the way each individual comparativist thinks (and to his or her mindset). At the same time, he or she should be ready to interrupt his or her own ‘epistemological script’ - that is, to question own ways of perceiving, ordering, analysing and interpreting reality, which have so far often been considered irrevocable (Melosik, 1996, p. 47-56). Such interruptions can also occur through interactions with different ways of thinking and social practices. I wrote about this as follows: ‘Encountering the Other makes one’s knowledge and beliefs relative, undermines the faith in the sense of one’s own truths (...) There are then two options. One can close oneself in his or her metanarrative (close its doors and windows) and elevate it to the status of the Absolute Truth. One can exclude everything that is not compatible with it. On the other hand, one can accept the fragmentation of his or her own Story; then his or her identity and biography cease to be the Standard and the Norm for him or her. People discover themselves through collisions and amazements. They break through the “barrier of imagination” and reconstruct their own categories of perception of the world’ (Melosik, 2007, p. 389-390), becoming a different persons and, in the realm of science, a different scientists; a different comparative educators.

Moving through the different ‘versions of reality’, the comparative pedagogue is able to notice the richness and contradictions of meanings.

This is what I wrote on this subject in an earlier text: ‘We can travel through theories like continents. Each new theory can provide an excuse to relativise one’s own assumptions. Similarly, the journey through different cultures and communities allows us to observe that what is seen as normal and natural in one place, as universal and metanarrative (as legitimised by religion, traditions or as the result of specific power relations), is elsewhere defined as particular. Such a journey teaches humility towards the world – it is too complex and internally contradictory, diffused and decentralised to be covered by a single theory. To wander through discourses and cultures, a holiday from one’s own meanings; all this offers a unique chance to understand oneself and one’s approach to the world, and gives hope that if “everything is different” (and yet comprehensible to us), then we do not need to search fiercely for “foundations” and “sources” (...). We can give up the stubborn derivation of the shape of the world and of life from however misunderstood “universals” (...) What for us constitutes the essence of our identity, biography and dreams or the axis of our theoretical narratives, for other people or in other theories may be of marginal significance’ (Melosik, 2007, p. 390). Once we understand this, it becomes easier for us to replace the typical question of the past, “what is the world like”, with a question of “which world is it” (Bauman, 1988, p. 41-42).

In doing so, the comparative education may take on the role of a ‘perpetual traveller’, who will continually travel across discourses and explore under which circumstances they may acquire the status of relevance. However, it is also possible to choose a ‘permanent’ residence – a theory which fascinates us with its possibilities and research potential (Melosik, 1995, p. 31). Nevertheless, we must not colonise the whole map with one’s own approach, erase competing approaches, or create blank spaces. Here, we return to the origins of comparative education – the journey and the traveller. However, the traveller (comparativist) places his or her thinking and scientific identity within the theoretical and methodological rigours of contemporary science.

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