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Reacciones al postmodernismo desde la educación comparada: de la ortodoxia inicial a la heterodoxia creativa

Reactions from Comparative Education to Post-modernism: From Initial Orthodoxy to Creative Heterodoxy in a Globalized World

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Resumen

El presente artículo aspira a analizar la influencia que el paradigma del posmodernismo ejerce, como reacción al modernismo, ejerce en la educación. Al mismo tiempo revisa cuáles son sus efectos inmediatos: la adopción de una disponibilidad reflexiva creciente y el aumento de la conciencia de apertura a diversas perspectivas, las cuales conducen a

adoptar ciertos componentes de relativismo, crítica e ironía respecto a la educación. Unido a lo anterior, aumenta el espectro de “incertidumbre” debido a los continuos cambios que se desarrollan a su alrededor.

Como consecuencia, desde la *educación comparada*, emergen dos propuestas teóricas: la *ciencia del aprendizaje* (del original “*learnology*”) y la *transitología* (del original “*transitology*”), que contribuyen a dotar de nuevas visiones a la disciplina. La primera propuesta interpreta los incessantes cambios, que requieren nuevos códigos educativos a fin de comprender las transformaciones mundiales; la segunda, se refiere a la realidad más inmediata de la subjetividad y el acceso al conocimiento. En la conclusión se reconoce cómo, desde ambas propuestas, la educación comparada ha encontrado una nueva dirección; ello, probablemente, conducirá a diversas *educaciones comparadas* o al nacimiento de una fase de *educación neocomparada*.

Palabras clave: Educación Comparada, postmodernismo, ciencia del aprendizaje.

Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the influence that the paradigm of Postmodernism exerts, as a reaction to Modernism, and what the consequences of all these are in a globalized world: the adoption of a reflective disposability *in crescendo* and an increased consciousness and openness to diverse perspectives, which lead to adopt a certain component of relativism, criticism and irony in education. With all this, the spectrum of “uncertainty” is growing, due to the continuous changes which are developing around it.

As a consequence, two theoretical proposals emerge from Comparative Education, *learnologies* and *transitologies*, which contribute to a new vision of the discipline. While the first one interprets the incessant changes, which require new educational codes in order to understand the transformations of the world, the second one refers to the closest reality of the subject and the access to knowledge. To sum up, Comparative Education has found a new direction from both proposals, and it will probably lead to diverse *Comparative Educations* or a phase of *Neo-comparative Education*.

Key words: Comparative Education, Postmodernism, learnology, transitology.

Introduction

At the present time, although it is a result of a process started in the 1980s, reality proves that Comparative Education has become a rich, attractive field, appreciated from a theoretical and intellectual point of view. The problems inherited through the stream of history remain latent issues, yet it has been possible to create an organizational infrastructure powerful enough not only to guarantee the current survival of the discipline, but also to deal with new challenges and problems raised by the imminent future. This is possible, at the same time, as a result of the great heterogeneity of the ways of analysing and approaching new coming issues that have not been subject of study or reflection yet.

Subsequently, it is my intention to focus on two of the subjects of study and attention that cover, at present, a good part of the spectrum of Comparative Education, both from the theoretical ambit and the methodological one within a globalized context. In the first case, I will analyse the influence of the paradigm of Post-Modernism on the discipline nowadays. In the second one, I will review the models arisen as a consequence of new theoretical scenarios –distinguished for their high complexity, the spectrum of “uncertainty” and the incessant changes that take place in them– to which they react with a certain degree of relativism, criticism and even irony, as it has been said on other occasions.

From Modernism to Post-modernism: The influence on Comparative Education

Beyond the appearance of the theories that represent the different movements and lines of research and study of Comparative Education, the 20th Century has witnessed the consolidation of a movement that would have repercussions in all cultural and scientific ambits: Post-modernism, as a legacy of Modernism, from which it extricates and stands out with its own idiosyncratic features. Comparative Education, as a scientific discipline, is also influenced by this movement, through which creative theories arise trying to face up to the spectrum of uncertainty, that seems to be the consubstantial feature of the Post-modern movement.

Modernism in itself meant a change in the conception of man and the world and it chose liberty and European individualism as its symbols, as opposed to feudalism; an image that prevailed until World War II and that materialised politically and socially in the figure of the bourgeoisie. Succinctly, three characteristics of Modern Educational Systems could be underlined (Cowen, 1998):

1. The role of the State mainly focuses on monopolising the education of the masses, in alliance with the church, using moralising messages for this purpose.
2. The contents and structures of education hold implicit messages of social and cultural stratification, which lead to internal contradictions.
3. Regarding international relations among educational systems, there is a proliferation of the policy of “borrowing”, although from a practical point of view, there may be real problems and difficulties to transfer them.

Now, three types of changes are distinguished from this moment on that affect and modify the previous image of modernization (Hüfner, Meyer & Naumann, 1992):

- a) The support to the State interventions to promoting and consciously controlling social modernization and economical growth.
- b) The Decolonization (the extension of the privilege of citizenship to people and races other than white), which forces the interruption of the homogeneous and indifferent model of modernization.
- c) A change towards new forms of thinking and a reconsideration of science.

Therefore, with regard to the third change, Masemann (1990) points out that just as the logical-syllogistical thinking arose during Industrialization, in the Post-industrial era a change towards new forms of wisdom is taking place. In effect, at the present time a new term has been coined to define the paradigm that substitutes Modernity: *Post-modernism*. The step from Modernism to Post-modernism and the differential features between one paradigm and the other are well defined by Siebers, who indicates that while Modernism states the desire to seize the feeling of totality, Post-modernism tries to create a picture with an emphasis on all those parts where nothing has been left. As it avoids conflictual dualism, it collects and combines the whole into a new vision as much as possible. It constitutes, as Siebers claims, "the 'heterotopia' of mixed places and themes that visualises utopia in terms of multiplicity and difference (...) and tries to reformulate the utopian desire, explicitly opposed to totalitarian models and binary organization" (Siebers, 1994, p. 8).

This new paradigm presents, in effect, some features that distinguish it, as long as it is composed of an ironic sensibility, a growing reflexive awareness, as an increasing consciousness of self, space and multiplicity, in Paulston's words (1999, p. 439). With such features, Post-modernism aspires to nothing but to open institutional and discoursing spaces through which gender and social identities may develop more fluently and plurally (Hebdige, 1999: 226). In order to achieve so, other postulates are also configured. Among them, the following could be underlined (Owen, 1997; Paulston, 1997):

- The detection of a lack of trust in any of the *great* answers or the *great* theories. Any form of totalising reason or great theory is rejected, as part of that illustration that had faith in the privilege of reason and that found in the narrative of progress the key to issue different projects.
- This could be considered as a consequence of the previous one: the lack of social and political compromise, the deliberate oversight of history and the legitimisation of factionalism and particularism, that are, in Popkewitz's words (1997, 2000), reminiscences of earlier classifications such as *relativism* and *nihilism*.
- The rejection of a universal hegemonic knowledge and therefore, the search for the acknowledgement of a critical and anti-hegemonic pluralism.
- The attack on *Eurocentrism* and the opening to the knowledge of post-colonial experiences and non-westernised cultural codes.
- The change in research towards new concepts of time and space, facts and interpretations.
- The acknowledgement, by tools such as conceptual maps, that all knowledge is problematic.

In this way, the educational systems within Post-modernism are now clearly distinguished from the modern ones because (Ball, 1990; Brown, 1990; Edwards & Whitty, 1992; Gordon, 1992; Carl, 1994; Coulby, 1995; Bernstein, 1996):

1. The role of the State gets more diversified and complex: the State becomes the agent that certifies the suppliers, through the control of the structures of qualification and the different agreements. The project of education becomes then the market supply of services to consumers, who have their own right to choose the type of education they want. In this way, the State creates a framework that legitimates diversity, freedom of choice and rationality of consumption, among others. As a result, the moral imperative of equality reconverts to an exercise of rational education choice. The purpose of education and training changes now into the preparation for the market while the articulation of education and training standards changes into the economical division of work. Starting from this premise, the State does not acknowledge any longer minority identities from a cultural point of view. They are considered as consumers and as such, they have the right to participate in the educational market.
2. As results of globalization, and depending on markets, the contents and structures of education get diversified and they suffer an obvious disintegration due to the effect of those. Several specifications and specialities become the *leitmotif* of the curriculum: the structures of secondary education are distinguished within an ideology of diversity and election. Post-fordist pedagogy stops being industrial and it is articulated by modules, set up packages of a great utility for the market, which prove to be more effective to deal with business requirements.
3. As a consequence, the international ambit is reconceptualized not only as a potential element for “borrowing”, but also as a central guide for other principles within the educational system and their purposes: international economy becomes a crucial *item*, an obliged reference to define the purposes, efficiency and effectiveness of the educational system, its contents and structures and even its pedagogic style.

The latter are, in outline, the elements that shape the Post-modern scenario. However, many authors take into consideration some aspects that give clear proof of the paradigm of Post-modernism, besides the debates originated about it.¹

To this effect, one of the most extended criticisms has to do with the increase of Post-modern theories within Comparative Education. This has strengthened a scenario dominated by a void of morals where judgement was sought (Popkewitz, 1997). Due to this remarkable lack, the call from the education in general to a reconversion in the relations between democratic and cultural ethics is not a surprise (Snodgrass, 1992). But as Welch states (2000), it is also a call to an implicit acknowledgement of values, since the Post-modern opening knows no ethical limits, understanding that values are a matter of choice, a matter of aesthetical personal taste.

Another criticism is that despite the pertinence of the political, philosophical and aesthetical implications of Post-modernism, which lead to a profusion of “plurality, difference and multinarratives”, critics have also underlined the restrictive implications for the theory of change and social justice. According to Welch, this is because, as he says, “the cultivation of a sort of ironical blazon as a key value orientation to the world”, clearly devalues any compromise with social change and social justice” (Welch, 2001, p. 484). The same could be said about the lack of involvement in the reality of knowledge as a cultural practice through which national, regional and local schooling contexts are located.

As a conclusion, the change from Modernism to Post-modernism reveals a reality that shows and emphasizes the factor of doubt, surprise and uncertainty that spreads over every ambit of life, but especially over the Human and Social Sciences, silent witnesses to events that take place very rapidly. To this effect, in view of the lack of certain models, theories and paradigms to which hold fast, the responsibility of every one of us increases, just like Cox points out when he states that “the lack of certainties sets the centre on us, the citizens, to debate collectively, to take the better decisions and so to acknowledge our responsibilities for the society we want to live in” (Cox, 1995, p. 81).

Therefore, as opposed to a context insistently based on references in permanent mutation and change, it appears the seminal idea of *education for uncertainty* (King, 1999, 2000), and the *uncertainty era*, that is, educating for confusion in order to know how to react to imminent changes; while adapting to the new demands and requirements by the suitable conceptual and methodological means. According to King's words, this has to happen under the premise that knowledge needs to be continuously reacquired and reapplied through the educational systems that are constantly questioned, since the context of the world shows, in the author's words, a compartmentalised world of supposed certainties (King, 1999, p. 110).

However, here also lies a very significant lack, in my opinion. We should have to know how to react to it, since we have been educated within a system of certainties but, paradoxically, our education for uncertainty proves to be deficient. As Morin points out, “there exist some nuclei of certainty, but they are very small. We are sailing over an ocean of uncertainty wherein there are some archipelagos of certainties, not vice versa” (Morin, 2000, p. 35). Although there are many that, facing this reference, full of challenges, state that the lack of a lodestar, of a certain guideline to struggle against unpredictable storms, proves to be, by any reckoning, an insoluble obstacle. Caivano, for instance, in quite a catastrophical way, declares that beyond doubt there are bad times for educating when “the prestigious Post-modern doctrine of uncertainty rules as the only admissible certainty” (Caivano, 2000, p. 39). He concludes remarking that “doubtlessly, there are no clear horizons”.

Reactions from Comparative Education: *Transitologies* and *Learnologies* as models to read Postmodernism

In the current scenario, and perhaps as a reaction to it, new theories come up from Comparative Education that prove to be creative, since they open new paths for the discipline. These are: *Transitology*, as a nexus between Modernism and Postmodernism, and *Learnology*.

Transitology is a part of a global proposal whose authorship belongs to Cowen. According to his approach to the issue, Comparative Education has to (a) read the global; (b) understand transitologies; (c) comprehend *the other*; and (d) analyse pedagogies (Cowen, 1998, 2000a). Regarding *transitologies*,² this is what the author means by *transit*: the process, more or less simultaneous, of collapse and reconstruction to which the systems of the State are subject, the social and economical stratification systems, and the political view of the future, whereupon the role of education as a precious instrument for reconstructing social processes and redefining the future is remarked by this term.³ As its background, Cowen highlights the evolution of modern societies, whose premises identify with equality and the sense of citizenship, towards societies of post-modernity or late modernity, ruled by the market. This way, Comparative Education will play its symbolical role as if it were a lighting storm on dark days (Cowen, 2000b, p. 339). Besides, it will try to provide some balance to this context wherein many changes have taken place, so that the new educational codes will be revealed through the first, that is, the comprehension of political and economical powers within educational systems.

Thereby, the proposal of the author, within his project, is that Comparative Education has to re-read the global context. And, starting from there, to extend its agenda of research, and to recover its concern about cultural analysis, historical dimensions, and an emancipatory criticism of politics, which are aspects that had in a certain way become lethargic. To this effect, Transitology is important as long as it places the State and its educational and social projects on the core of Postmodern Comparative Education (Cowen, 2000a, p.165).

Learnology is a term coined by Broadfoot and also called by her *Neo-comparative Education*,⁴ to refer to an approach to Comparative Education which is in tune with the more general efforts to reconceptualize social sciences to reflect the realities of life in the 21st Century (Broadfoot, 2000, p. 363). Both education and Comparative Education have to focus in aspects that, in essence, refer more to the subject and his access to knowledge, rather than to educational systems and their resulting supply problems. In order to achieve this aspiration, new promising lines of action and reflection are opened. Some of them will configure about how the subjects learn and access the society of knowledge, how the world's aspiration to *education for all* is being implemented, how a contradiction is produced between what's taught at school from a curricular point of view and the wide objectives of the philosophy of *Lifelong-Learning*, or how should the distribution of education in today's society be looked over (Lindsay & Parrott, 1998), among many other subjects. Being conscious that there exist many queries concerning this issue,

Broadfoot points out, to this effect, that comparative studies from a cultural perspective will doubtlessly help to interpret new realities. In fact, its utility is proved from the moment in which it is considered an opportunity to contribute to national and international political debates. And it is predicted that "If we take the right road, we may find ourselves on a major highway" (Broadfoot, 2001, p. 104).

As a conclusion, there is a scenario where the effects of Post-modernism in education in general and in Comparative Education in particular present new challenges that are answered by the latter through proposals such as *Transitology* and *Learnology*. So, Comparative Education has to be prepared to continue giving renewed senses to the role of education and educational policies in a comprehensive and interpretative way. Specially since the lot of theoretical proposals is coming from the different current models and theories, although they are linked by their own connection and location on today's global society.

Conclusions. In search of a lodestar for Comparative Education

In a world, according to Delors (1996), dominated by educational tensions that, both in the theoretical-paradigmatical level and the pragmatical one, manage to prevail as sometimes irreconcilable dualisms (global and local; universal and individual; difference and similarity; tradition and modernity; short-term and long-term considerations; competitiveness and equality of opportunity; spiritual and material, to name the most significant ones, some of which have already been subject of study on these pages), which course should really be taken by Comparative Education? Where is its lodestar?

Comparative Education, as it has already been proved, has started to establish alternative courses in order to manage through the current scenarios that raise the flag of uncertainty as an explanation to the numerous educational realities on an international scale. *Transitologies* and *Learnologies* show this trend. Watson acknowledges that here lies one of the most provoking and defiant challenges, as she predicts that "how to make sense of the proliferation of ideas and values, and the rejection of commonly accepted norms and traditional values, will be a test for comparative educators in the decades ahead" (Watson, 2001, p. 13).

In view of this dual panorama, full of contradictions that counterbalance the linear past, balanced and even predictable both in its problems and its solutions, it is inevitable to wonder: are these bad days for Comparative Education? All through these pages, I have tried to transmit a spirit that reacts with energy to obstacles, and tries to overcome the inherent uncertainty in the paradigm of Post-modernism through the theories that appear feasible alternatives and that, in fact, are directing a good part of the current research projects of the discipline on an international scale. In this way, the new approaches, theories and ideas that are bursting iconoclastically into the theoretical and methodological areas of Comparative Education can be considered elements that act as a spur to further perspectives and *modus operandi* within the discipline. This will bring new airs that augur a

future, but also an imminent success to Comparative Education both in research and action.

From this perspective, all these analyses and the emancipatory purposes of Comparative Education should, in Cowen's words, finally show and reveal the critical and social power of the metamorphosis taking place within the discipline, so that it enters "the 21st Century making a lot of noise, in a discordant way, and with energy" (Cowen, 2000b, p. 9). In short, this is the panorama that Comparative Education is drawing at the present time in view of a world that keeps changing and from which lots of new *Comparative Educations*⁵ will appear, yet always interrelated to the discourses that discontinuously superpose, in their deep structures, to the political, economical, sociological and cultural reality.

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¹ Synthesized by Paulston into two main trends: Post-modern metanarratives and Modern reflectiveness (which adopts some Post-Modern features, especially its critical view) (Paulston, 1997).

² The term *transitology* emerges with a special strength, according to Lowenhard, to better understand the political, economical and cultural problems of Southern Europe and Latin America between the seventies and the nineties (Lowenhard, 1995; Price, 1977, as cited in Cowen, 2000a).

³ Main thesis defended by Cowen, R. (1999, as cited in Alexander, Broadfoot & Phillips, 1999). Some examples of these *transitologies* are: Castro's Cuban revolution, Thatcher's British government, and the end of regimes such as Franco's or the Shah of Iran's. Through these examples, Cowen highlights that the difference between a *revolution* and a *transitology* is that the latter took place in less than ten years (Cowen, 2000, as cited in Coulby, Cowen & Jones, 2000).

⁴ Inherent features of this *Neo-comparativism* are its rigor (necessarily considered as an expression of a perspective of Social Sciences generally conceived) as well as its radicalism dealing with unregarded issues (Broadfoot, 1999, pp. 228-230).

⁵ The idea of the appearance and, at the same time, co-existence between *Comparative Educations* rather than *Comparative Education*, is shared by several comparativists, like Cowen, Crossley and Jarvis. The arguments to justify these positions can be looked up in further detail on: Cowen (2000a); Crossley & Jarvis (2000). Idea that appears too in Louisy (2001).