

Culturalism in Comparative Education: Is it possible to be both for and against?

比較教育における文化主義： 賛成も反対も可能か？

BRADLEY William

ブラドリー・ウィリアム

Abstract

This paper reviews some of the uses of the culture concept in theories of comparative education, particularly World Culture Theory, and critiques them following earlier debates in cultural anthropology over the use and misuse of culture. Further it outlines a brief discussion of recent theories of decoloniality in knowledge production, which are both supportive of alternative cultural frameworks but against a homogenizing global culture concept.

Key words : Comparative education, Culture, Decoloniality

概 要

本稿では、比較教育論、特に世界文化論における文化概念の使い方を概観し、文化人類学における文化の使用と誤用をめぐる以前の議論に倣って、それらを批判する。さらに、知識生産における脱植民地主義に関する最近の理論について簡単に概説する。この理論は、オルタナティブな文化的枠組みを支持しつつも、均質化する世界文化概念に反対するものである。

キーワード：比較教育、文化、脱植民地主義

Introduction

In this paper I examine aspects of comparative education theoretical models with regard to the concept of culture. As outlined below culture is a notoriously wide and ambiguous concept as exemplified by its historical usages and permutations in anthropology as well as its general adaptations and applications in other fields, including comparative education, causing wide misunderstanding about its different meanings.¹⁾ One of the dominant understandings for explaining education around the world (hence comparatively) is labeled World Culture Theory (WCT in short) and has been heavily critiqued in the past decade for both its biases and normative implications regarding the positivist and positive development of education (for example, Carney et al., 2012; Mohammed, 2017; Silova and Brehm, 2015; Silova et al., 2020).²⁾

Aware of the problems of locating culture in a body of work that spans an enormous amount of research as well as focusing on the problems of both translation and transmission of culture in the form of educational policy “travelling” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012), that is, how educational policies are reproduced across wide-ranging countries and contexts, in this paper I will outline some of the critiques of WCT and then briefly look at the position of culture primarily in WCT but also in other frameworks of comparative education. Next I outline a more general discussion of the for and against of the culture concept in cultural anthropology as a way of thinking in, through, beyond, and around culture, move to a recognition of the decolonial turn in some recent social science research, and conclude by returning to thinking about culture as category of focus and analysis of my own teaching and research.

Theories are always cultural. They have at least two underlying cultural aspects; first, they have origins from a particular place and time (often in the form of the individual researcher who sifts through them and re-fashions a particular theory or theories to suit the task at hand). But in a second way, they purport to explain, often in the guise of scientific or universalist knowledge construction, some specific social phenomena, either disavowing a cultural bias or at least downplaying its significance to the extent that the research presented can be constructed as more universalist and universalizing. In this paper, I focus on comparative education and anthropology as social sciences, though they can also sometimes be thought of in terms of being humanities or sciences, depending on the perspective and background of the research(er). The critiques of the background of the research and truth claims of knowledge, from where and for whom, which can often seem to be a distraction from the main theme of knowledge production, is necessary as Santos argues with conceptualizations such as “ecologies of knowledges,” since “different types of knowledge are incomplete in different ways and raising the consciousness of such incompleteness (rather than looking for completeness) will be a precondition to cognitive justice” (Santos, 2014, p. 212). Cognitive justice is admittedly an ideal, which may be unobtainable in a strict sense, but still can be posited as a condition for a better global regime of knowledge production.

Many of the explicit uses of culture in comparative and international education, as in other social sciences, are signposts that reinforce what Walter D. Mignolo (2018) has termed the “Colonial Matrix of Power,” a term that he and co-author Catherine Walsh have adapted from work of Peruvian Sociologist Anibal Quijano.³⁾ They are predicated on conceptions of culture that reinforce subjectivities that can be arguably be viewed as shortcuts to identification while implicitly reinforcing infallibilist narratives about identities.

A rather simple but mundane example can be introduced in the way that individuals signal who they are with a short list of outstanding cultural attributes (for example in the author’s case as a male of North American origin; one can also add such attributes as ethnicity - read as race by some - and gender depending on the contexts). When such orientations are addressed, we enunciate those things as if durable and (at least) of some value even when we acknowledge them to not to have such qualities (i.e. durability and quality) in other contexts. As if the identity of a person doesn’t change over the course of a lifetime. Of course, identities do change; they add, subtract, emphasize, downsize various aspects of the self that the individual wishes to foreground at any stage of their life, in given contexts, and in any type of discussion, from the very informal to the more formal examinations of knowledge and research, though often only obliquely, if at all.

On the other hand, it is indisputable that how we represent ourselves and how we represent others is an unavoidable “work-in-progress” and in many cases, eminently of value in sense-making for theorizing, research and analytic work to call attention to and begin to remediate the many problems of inequity, i.e. resources, status, access and others that exist in the power structures and arrangements in higher education

as a global system and indeed, education more generally.

The question in the title of this paper is meant as a discursive device in relation to the specifying aspects about culture (either explicit or also implicit). How does a culturalist-oriented identity affect our ideas and theories about education? Whose identity? Whose identities? The majority? How much should, or can, we include discussions of minorities? Should education be focused on being as objective as possible? Or is it necessary and even beneficial to think through and with the subjective aspects which are often labeled as culture?

Such questions can proliferate until they can possibly steer us away from the focus on classifying and analyzing a particular knowledge domain. They complicate the questions of epistemology, in short. Recall that no less an authority on historical uses and shifts in the meanings of culture as the British literary theorist Raymond Williams, once described culture as “one of the two or three most complicated words in English” (Williams, 1976, p. 87), at least when describing society and social science approaches to its analysis. I return to this discussion below in discussion of decoloniality.

In this paper, I looked specifically at 3 textbook introductions (Edwards, 2018; Spring, 2015; Verger et al., 2018) as well as discussing several others in passing. Heuristic models or holistic frameworks for understanding comparative education and in particular that focus on global education are varied and diverse. World Culture Theory (afterwards referred to as WCT) and international political economy perspectives (which includes critical analyses of capitalism and neoliberalism, also often glossed as “corporatization”) are noted in most comparative education metatheoretical overviews, while other theoretical groupings include global governance (of which world systems is a subset; or Globally Structured Education Agenda, GSEA), theories derived from political sociology (network theories, for example) and political analyses of national and local level policy adoption (Edwards, 2018, Verger et al., 2018). Sorensen and Dumay (2021) have recently referred to these latter frameworks as flows and systems-based approaches.

In an earlier paper, Verger (2016) contrasted rationalist and normative approaches with Cultural Political Economy and Critical Constructivism, the latter two he argued included “power relations” as “consubstantial policy processes” (2016, p. 70). The preeminent approach that is critiqued, here, as in many other overviews, is WCT, which he argues “err[s] on the side of ideationalism...structuralism...and de-contextualization,” not paying enough attention to material and economic factors, local actors’ preferences and the many levels of interaction between the global and the regional and local (2016, p. 69).

Many of these categorical analyses of conceptual models also include space for what are referred to as anthropological approaches or what Spring (2015), for example, has labeled and agglomerated as “culturalist” approaches. These include religious and indigenous ways of understanding and organizing education that have more salience in different parts of the world (for example, Muslim education in Muslim majority societies such as Pakistan or Bangladesh or Christian-based education in the U.S.) Other analyses contrast the cultural aspect in WCT with a contrasting type of “anthropological culturalism or global-policy localization” as in Sorensen and Dumay’s (2021) recent review of peer-reviewed articles from 1990-2018 on the teaching profession and globalization. Here we should also note a more negative usage of the term “culturalism,” as distinct boundary making and enforcement, a totalizing or incommensurable difference. Such boundary framings have two types of adjudication, in critical discussions of researchers and more positively as resources for resistance by indigenous peoples and others who wish to assert a “traditional” means of demands for recognition and have inputs into their localized education (Hoffman, 1999).

Here then we raise a question, what is the culture that WCT and other (anthropological and ethnographic) cultural approaches have in common, if any? Are they using the same concept of “culture”?

Is culture doing the same work in these different theoretical overviews? As Mohammed has argued, drawing mainly on WCT, comparative education relies on a cultural model that is “highly rationalized around universal laws and truths, promulgated by modern science and the professions, notably the law” (2017, p. 437). Thus while presenting advantages in “reducing diversity within and across educational institutions,” at the same time there is a promotion of “diversity and variance in the expectations, criteria, practices, and structures of education that create an atmosphere of organizational stability and organic isomorphism” (2017, p. 440). One could summarize the approach to culture in WCT as having it both ways, arguing for a homogenization of culture across diverse contexts while also calling attention to the way local and regional variance balances and adds multicultural instantiations leading to shades of continuity to the larger scale processes of change in education. In short, culture exists on the side to provide a localized flavor to the expanding tendencies seen in a progressive globalizing force of and through education in most parts of the world.

This has led a number of researchers to conclude more critically that WCT has expanded from a tentative search for myths and meanings to overdeterministic models, which purport to explain the inevitable development of education on a global scale in most countries and regions following the same overall patterns. This critique of the balancing of policy and practice in much WCT analysis, which is referred to as “decoupling,” or “loose coupling,” which attempts to explain the local enactments of the main scripts of mass schooling, standardized education, linkages of education and the economy and work is but one type of problem of the cultural model in WCT (Silova and Brehm, p. 205). The ideology of neoliberal globalism is also self-referenced in positing both causes and effects simultaneously, based on positive inflections of Weberian theories of modernization (Carney, Rappleye, and Silova, 2012).

Terms such as “diffusion, embeddedness, legitimation, scripts, myth, ritual, and ceremony” (Silova and Brehm, 2015, p. 12) lend a cultural perspective to the discussion of how world culture is enacted across cultures and regions of the world. This is a soft version of culture, as “rationalization” and “actorhood” are also reified in a way that aligns with the spread of a globalized culture of educational norms. The focus on global convergence in educational norms, which in latter years has also included gender equality and human rights, is either assumed or reinforced as a conclusion, as is educational progress and development within the larger frame of neoliberal economic policies.

Verger, in a recent commentary (2021), suggests that WCT has started to pay more attention to cultural toolkits (my phrase) in explanatory analyses of macro-meso interaction in production of educational change in the past several years or so. This is likely in response to critiques that WCT has been overly homogenizing and neo-hegemonic, both its theorizing and in its centrality to the field of comparative education, particularly in the U.S. This is particularly true in that research on schooling or higher education has often paid particular attention to North America and Europe as if they were the ideals of education for the rest of the world to follow.

Verger also emphasizes a contrasting approach not only of ethnographic accounts of local practice (e.g. the anthropological view) but also a Cultural Political Economy approach to overcome the dualism of ideational and material foci opposing these to the flawed homogeneity with culture added on top that many think is inherent in WCT scholarly work, exemplified by the phrase “for better or worse,” calling attention to the localizing elements of culture that influence schooling but at the last stage reuniting the theory with main tenets of the spread of WCT, namely for better or worse (Silova and Brehm, 2015, p. 27, ft. 9).

To summarize this section then, we can see the use of culture varies widely in different overviews. On this point we can summarize that there is no single definition of culture. Nor does putting an “s,” on the

word help very much unless we want to expand the concept into thousands and perhaps even millions of categories and sub-categories. This is probably linked to the weaknesses inherent in a polysemic nature of the culture concept (entire books have been written about culture throughout the 20th century). I outline this in slightly more detail below drawing on, of necessity, a brief review of the history of the debate about culture in anthropology.

The Focus on Cultural Frameworks

Culture has a long and protracted history in anthropology for which I can only briefly provide an overview here. Let it suffice to point out some of the weaknesses of the culture concept as outlined in critical reviews. Abandonment of the culture concept was a fairly typical argument in cultural anthropology of the 1990s (especially in the works of Abu-Lughod, 1991 and Trouillot, 2002, cited in Lentz, 2017), although then, as now, there were advocates of reform as opposed to those who argued for removal of the concept in whole or part.⁴⁾

In recent years, occasionally the argument reignites, with some anthropologists (Fornas, 2017; Lentz, 2017) arguing for culture's continued relevance while others (Palacek, 2020) remaining skeptical about its possible rehabilitation. Palacek's analysis of the use of culture in evolutionary biology illustrates the risks of a concept which having expanded beyond its original disciplinary borders threatens to be equally inconsistent and unsustainable in disciplines that have picked it up as a unit for analysis and research. His final summary is dismissive, "culture, it appears, remains an approximate concept that can provide a quick orientation. Otherwise – from the perspective of the social sciences ... culture remains an unredeemed concept in terms of its explanatory power."

However, the words of James Clifford, an early critic of the culture concept in the 1980s, appear to be a refrain for more than a few anthropologists (and in the social sciences more generally), that culture remains "a deeply flawed idea that [many] cannot yet do without" Clifford and Marcus, 1986, cited in Palacek, 2020, p. 57; note "I" in original).

Lentz' comprehensive overview of the culture debate retraces the "origin" of culture in the US (note that culture has not been as highly a favored term in other places, e.g. British social anthropology) from its earliest incarnations within the Boasian school of anthropology and with the introduction of "cultural relativism," the underpinning that pluralist approaches to the study of diversity had both an "additive" quality while maintaining study of "integrated wholes" (Lentz, 2017, p. 185). The debate over Franz Boas' theoretical contributions (especially his counterbalancing of culture to race, and his strident public work against racism) continue to this day. However, even the most enthusiastic Boas proponents concede that the culture and personality school of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead (two of Boas' most well-known students), as important at the time as it may have been, tended to veer into "national" character studies, which alongside the rise of the field and departments of Area Studies; e.g. East Asian Studies, South Asian Studies, etc. (particularly in the U.S.) in the wake of the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s led to oversimplification of cultural models that in turn led to the critiques of culture by anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s (Lentz, 2017, p. 142).

Lentz argues that anthropology needs to retain a "nonessentialist" concept of culture, contingent and to be observed in a self-reflexive manner. "Anthropology therefore must inquire into *how* differences are being made, i.e. study processes of differentiation, and not simply assume differences as ontological facts" (2017, p. 199). Additionally culture needs to be pluralized, and boundaries are not maintained as separating

and impermeable barriers but as discontinuous, incomplete, and multiply intersecting; “tangled patterns of crisscrosses and loops, making it impossible to establish a definitive line of demarcation,” (Berkow, 2004, cited in Lentz, 2017, p. 201)

Returning to Fornas’ (2017) book length treatment, *Defending Culture*, he concludes, drawing on his research interviews with a dozen scholars at the University of Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, as well as his own departments of Critical and Cultural Theory in Sweden (Sodertorn University and Linköping University), that culture is more of an aspect, approach or perspective rather than a class of objects or practices (2017, p. 221). Meaning making, the hermeneutic concept, was important to some scholars, but “materiality” was mentioned by nearly everyone. Post-antihermeneutic,” refers to a transformation of romantic hermeneutics into critical approaches. Culture is ok, as long as “you make it clear at every particular moment which concept you use” (a colleague cited in Fornas, 2017, p. 225). The study of words, cognitions, or culture is not a problem, but “it is their reification that [leads to] logocentrism, cognitionalism, or culturalism” (2017, p. 224).

A final point that can be made about culturalism is that the trajectory of research on culture in social science can be seen over the span of a more than 50-year academic career, namely in the work of Zygmunt Bauman, a cultural sociologist who wrote his first works in the 1960s and was writing up until his death in early 2017. In one of his first works, *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*, which was thought to have been lost in the chaotic events of 1968 (both in the world and for Bauman who was dismissed from his job in Poland and was forced to emigrate, first to Israel and then to Great Britain) but subsequently re-discovered during an archival cleaning at the University of Warsaw in 2016, Bauman outlined a structural approach to culture. This was in line with much thinking of the time and influenced by structuralist theories of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss with its emphasis on signs and semiotic meanings.

However, as Bauman writes in his afterword to the recently rediscovered and published book (dated 2018), that while he was at the time indeed concerned with the structural aspects of culture, he had already understood the fluidity that also exists in culture as “a tool of constantly, insistently, obtrusively, and irrevocably dynamizing the human condition” (Bauman, 2018, p. 253). This view of culture evolved over time to a more emphatically “lived culture” (pragmatic but also much more open to change and flux), as symbolized by one of his first well-known published books *Culture as Praxis* (1973) and the more recent, *Culture in Liquid Modernity* (2010), in which culture is hybrid, fractured, unstable, and overall, in a word, *liquid*. Bauman critiques Pierre Bourdieu’s well-known classic work *Distinction* (1984, but based on research in the 1970s), in which he identified various strata of French society with corresponding tastes, high, middle and low culture (this is admittedly an oversimplification of a highly influential treatise on the practice of culture), as hopelessly dated. An “omnivorous,” taste fuelled by globalized consumer culture now permeates all strata of industrially advanced societies, so that culture can no longer be reliably located in a social group or used as Bourdieu had argued last century “for the creation and protection of class divisions and hierarchies” (Bauman, 2010, p. 4). No longer a stabilizer or homeostat, culture has entered the “post-paradigm era.”

“Released from the obligations on it by its creators and operators [of regulation], culture is now able to focus on fulfilling individual needs, solving individual problems and struggles with the challenges of and troubles of personal lives” (Bauman, 2010, p. 12). This is culture as pertains to fashion, consumer activity and mentalities/lifestyles, and identity. But what of the larger picture, of national culture, for example? Here also Bauman paints a bleak picture for the concept of culture as providing little more than a fiction in the face of porous global boundaries, awash in waves of migration and contradicted by the ethnic

disaporadic living conditions of many Europeans, as well as in most other parts of the world.

Mass education, which was a prime promulgatory site for nation-state consciousness has given way to “self-supervision and self-control,” along with a multiculturalism that is premised on the “the right to be distinct, and ... also have the right to be indifferent to other people’s distinctness” (Bauman, 2010, p. 59). In short culture has no traction except as used on occasion as a measure of self-defense.

In the next section I move briefly to a discussion of the decoloniality where, as noted above in the observation of Hoffman (1999), culture is still necessarily a bulwark against the domination of neoliberal globalization originating in (but not limited to) “the West” or more systemically organized knowledge frameworks utilized by powers in academia and business in all parts of the world and circulated through policy frameworks and academic production, publication, and discourse.

Decoloniality

Walter Mignolo’s (2018; in collaboration with Catherine Walsh) overview of decoloniality is worth quoting at length here since it highlights some of the central problems in discussions of culture, which attempt to move beyond dominant modes of knowledge in and of Western-centric models of globalization and academic outputs.

Decolonialization requires more than a commitment to “decolonial studies,” which can/will remain “hostage to modern epistemology” (2018, p. 106). “Thinking without modernity, delinking from its fictions, is one major decolonial challenge” (2018, p. 109). Throughout recent work, he utilizes the term Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP), from which, he argues, it is difficult, if not impossible to theorize outside of, as modernity/coloniality/decoloniality structures undergird much of our (read Western-centric, the degree to which is replicated can be debated in other contexts such as Japan or China) academic knowledge structures and discourses, even as we may attempt to balance their effects on our attempts to forge new understandings. We can of course promote and valorize intellectual interests which contrast to and challenge the main power structures of states, corporations, and finances (also promoted by media), for example, harmony, creativity and plentitude (2018, p. 109). And the degree to which there is a corresponding integration of all or any attempt at emancipatory knowledge frameworks into complicity with and through Mignolo’s CMP is open to debate, just as individuals have agency and contexts are variable.

Referencing Anibal Quijano’s (2000) much earlier key term of “social classification,” by which racial, ethnic, anthropological and national differences were codified into discriminations, Mignolo rebrands this term as “cultural classification” (2018, p. 181). The hidden strategies of CMP are constituted at the intersection of knowledge, subjectivity, and racial [and other] classification (2018, p. 186). CMP emerged from “new cultural-historical conditions in the praxis of Christian Western European actors, the drivers of these historical and regional chapters in the era of the anthropos (theologians, missionaries, merchants, continental monarchies, scholars, and mapmakers) propagated their own regional praxis of living all over the population of the continent they named the New World, Indias Occidentales, and America. The model was extended in the subsequent centuries to Asia and Africa...” (2018, pp. 220-221).

If we examine closely the field of comparative and international education we can see that the normative work embedded in the structured agenda of global neoliberalism previously analyzed by numerous scholars, (e.g. Dale and Robertson, 2015, cited in Funez-Flores, 2022, p. 5 and the subject of many excellent empirical studies with regard to the OECD and a large number of other policy actors and in WCT as outlined above), has and continues to purposefully underestimate the importance of “cultural,

epistemic, and colonial implications of education reform.” At the same time, examinations and critiques of the cultural aspects of the field of comparative education, while not numerous, have occasionally been undertaken (Hoffman, 1999; Mason, 2015) arriving at similar conclusions to my summary of the discussion of culture above in relation to anthropology.

On the other hand it is necessary to continue to reinforce the cultural resources that exist outside of the CMP, that I have referred to above in, for example, Mignolo’s work. He also notes that such critique doesn’t mean that everyone (or all theory) has become incorporated into a globalizing linearity, sometimes implied in narrative terms such as the anthropocene. Funez-Flores is one of numerous scholars who emphasize indigenous and shared ways of conceptualizing in his analysis of Latin American higher education with utilization of terms such as pluriversities (*pluriversidades*), university of the earth (*la universidad de la tierra*) and the good life (*buen vivir*), as well as concepts like coexistence, interconnectedness, communality, and collectivity (*convivencia, vincularidad, cumunalidad, y colectiva*) (p. 7).

Returning to comparative education, some researchers (for example, Takayama, 2016; Xu, 2022) have also addressed the problem of the global imbalances in production of knowledge, based on globalized and historical inequalities. Takayama and co-authors (2017) have written, “the very difference [the idea of cultural and social difference] that CIE researchers [strive to] uncover...itself has roots in the colonial division of the world, which played a formative role for the social and educational sciences created in the global metropole” and while writing not much more than seven years ago, their argument that such notions are yet limited to small groups of scholars is both instructive and perhaps has served as some small incentive for other researchers of comparative education to re-think their conceptual frameworks.

As another example, Iveta Silova (2021; p. 602) in her presidential address at the Comparative and International Education Society (based in the U.S., but which has a substantial number of non U.S. based members) several years ago also called attention to the need to think beyond what she termed the “dominant ‘culture’” (i.e. beyond the West). Likewise in a more systematic treatment of options for CIE research, Silova, Rappleye, and Auld (2020) outline five distinct pathways, drawing on a framework from Mignolo: Rewesternization, Dewesternization, Reorientation of the Left, Decoloniality, and Spiritual/Ontological of which the latter four have a similar goal of decentering the former; namely they all challenge the dominance of Western knowledge production.

Here we can quote at length from Walter Mignolo:

“Thinking and doing otherwise’ emerges.. [from] the need to think from the experiences of what modernity disavowed and by doing so to show that modernity is half of the story constantly hiding and repressing what doesn’t fit the imaginary and desires of the storytellers that legitimize themselves in the name of science, politics, and economy that provides a warrant for the well-being and interests of the storytellers (2018, p. 113)

In a similar manner, Santos has proposed the concept of “occupying epistemology,” or “turning absent subjects into present subjects,” to include “lived knowledges” and “ways of knowing, rather than knowledges” (2018, pp. 2-3), embedded in a larger framework that he has called variously “cognitive justice,” or an “alternative thinking of alternatives.”

To summarize here, on the one hand comparative education research should critique the lack of emphasis on the taken-for-granted assumptions about education, about globalization, and about what constitutes reform, especially of education systems that are increasingly integrated by both capitalist

(material) and policy (ideological) networks, while on the other hand it is necessary to conceive of and propose new ways of thinking about and analyzing these phenomena based on the specific and context-based analyses of education (especially of the others outside the dominant global metropolises). Other work in comparative education has also started to focus on decolonizing knowledge (Rasiah, 2022; Xu, 2022) often proposing either intercultural or cross-cultural research. Cowen and Kim (2023) have argued that such perspectives have been overly marginalized in the development of comparative education with its historical trajectory of continuously focusing on the upgrading and evaluation of efficiency of educational systems.

Teaching Globalization of Education and Cultural Models

In my class of Globalization of Education, taught to anywhere from 50 to 100 students every year for the past 8 years at Ryukoku University in Kyoto, I have introduced different frameworks for understanding comparative education and while I present them briefly at the beginning and end of the course (occasionally applying them to a specific research problem such as the continuous global increase in study abroad and student mobility, only briefly interrupted by the Covid pandemic), it is the presentation of cultural models that the most misunderstanding among my students occurs. While I attempt to highlight how various frameworks can be used in each of the specific cases of educational policy that I introduce (e.g. Pisa tests and the OECD, global rankings of universities, and so on), students start to raise questions about what could be considered a Japanese educational model. What is distinct about Japanese education? How is it useful (or not) and how should it be reformed? These are questions well worth asking and pursuing, and we can do that with or without reference to culture, although the use of the adjective, Japanese, in front of the noun, education, already biases the answer towards a culturalist explanation.

I would like to add three suggestions or caveats for the role of culture in our work. First it is important to be as specific as possible, taking into account critiques of methodological nationalism, statism, and globalization. Second, avoid binaries, especially between large entities like the U.S., and Japan. Finally, social imaginaries can be summoned to think beyond and around culture.

Rockhill (2017) argues in his study of counter histories that “there is not a single concept capturing the specificity of the present, or of a significant subset thereof ... because it is irreducible to a sole dimension or a unique trajectory” (2017, p. 103). This is why historical (and cultural) imaginaries are important. The “present of ‘specific social space’” is unlike that of another, even as there are overlaps and conjunctures. A topological capture, “meaning fallibilist cartographies anchored in a particular perspectives,” brings together chronology, geography, and sociality. In this way we can propose counter-histories, which necessitate counter-geographies and counter-sociology (2017, p. 4). We shouldn't simply challenge what Rockhill calls “historical positivities – so-called historical givens” [but] instead attempt to “modify the logic that has produced them” (2017, p. 3).

We shouldn't attempt to deny the global diffusion of education policy, or downplay the difficulties of challenging global discourses on educational purposes that are promoted by the OECD and other large transnational actors, nor should we underrate the value of cultural exchanges and interculturality more generally, but it is necessary to challenge the logic of a knowledge economy based on a decontextualized version of cultural syncretism, or culture simply as the local add-on to the global force of an obliquely referenced progress, one that is linked to inequities both historically and in the present.

In other words, education is and will continue to be linked to change, both by the normative stances of the dominant vectors of comparative education and those who would promote alternatives and

those who are interested in those alternative ways of knowing, researching and comparing, as a way of opening the world to possibilities should continue to strive to be at the forefront of understanding how to promote education not only for better educational futures but also more generally in the hope of helping create a more equitable world. This includes resisting the reduction of difference to a box called culture as appealing as it may be as a shorthand for understanding but also widening the sphere of what passes for knowledge to include much of what has been excluded, peoples, areas, and lived knowledges. This leads us to not champion a universal understanding over the particular, but at the same time to avoid making a fetish over the particular differences that may in the end amount to small variations. In short, then, we need to ask ourselves repeatedly whether and how we can "unthink" (Rappleye, 2025 proposes a different aspect of unthinking for comparative education) culture in a way that it does not become either the gloss or the panacea to explain what makes the local simply another instantiation of education in a globalizing world of educational policy. Or to tentatively and cautiously answer the question posed at the outset of this paper, we can be in favor of a culturalism, as long as we acknowledge its severe limitations beyond its context of origin and its provisional and transitory aspects. A tool, perhaps, not a codification.

Notes

- 1) I use the term comparative education in this paper, shortening the field also known as comparative and international education for sake of brevity, although I will allude to international education briefly in relation to intercultural communication in a later section of the paper.
- 2) A rather more mundane and practical origin of this paper is an undergraduate class in the department of Global Studies (Ryukoku University, Kyoto Japan) that I have been teaching for the past 8 years, called Globalization of Education. I present students with various models or frameworks for understanding theories of the globalization of education.
- 3) The degree to which anthropology has addressed and grappled with questions of decoloniality in knowledge production earlier and to a greater extent than comparative and international education can not be addressed here, but is arguably the case, which however would need to be analyzed in further research.
- 4) A strong retention argument was made in a special issue of *Current Anthropology* by Brumann (1999), who recited the critical claims of earlier work such as Abu-Lughod (1991) and then advocated for the continued usages of culture in anthropological research and theory. His article was debated by six well-known anthropologists, including Abu-Lughod. Brightman (1995) also introduced a series of critiques by anthropologists over the "defects" of the culture concept, e.g. reification, discreteness, homogeneity, etc. and cited counter conceptual framings such as hegemony, habitus, and discourse. Andrade's (1999) response to Brumann was the explanation that "there is nothing wrong with reification and essentialization if what one reifies and essentializes has strong causal properties," using the example of motor oil reducing friction in a car to contrast with culture which in his view failed to explain much as a totality without reference to social individuals and a tool kit notion of culture as cognitive action.

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