

I. STUDIA I ROZPRAWY

RENATA NOWAKOWSKA-SIUTA

ORCID 0000-0001-7227-6127

*Chrześcijańska Akademia Teologiczna
w Warszawie*

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE FOR COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

ABSTRACT. Nowakowska-Siuta Renata, *Historical Context and Culture of Remembrance and their Significance for Comparative Education* [Kontekst historyczny i kultura pamięci oraz ich znaczenie dla edukacji porównawczej]. *Studia Edukacyjne* no. 66, 2022, Poznań 2022, pp. 7-16. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 1233-6688. DOI: 10.14746/se.2022.66.1

The article presents a new approach to comparative education in the Polish comparative discourse, based primarily on the ideas of pedagogical constructivism, opening a discussion on a new methodological paradigm, which is the place of historical context and memory in comparative research. In Polish comparative education there is a tendency to attach less importance to the role of history and memory for a comprehensive grasp of the meaning of the phenomena analyzed and the search for answers to important cognitive problems. The traditional approach is focused on the present and future perspective and this is how educational problems are perceived in the discourse of comparative education. Taking into account the importance of historical thinking in the methodology of comparative education is important insofar as it shows a wide context and helps understand rather than only present phenomena. The contextual analysis, including the embedding of phenomena in their logic of historical events, is the basic task of comparative education.

Key words: comparative education, methodology of comparative education, culture of remembrance, comparative research, historical method in comparative education

Chronological and orderly presentations of the history of memory studies can be found in numerous publications that appeared in Polish in recent years, as well as in books published primarily in France and Germany, from the writings of Maurice Halbwachs to the now classic books by Astrid Erll, Ernst Nolte, Jürgen Habermas, Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann. Memory

is both a process and a phenomenon. The separation of individual memories from fiction and confabulation, the representation of different approaches to the same problems in different societies or nations, such as the memory of Nazi crimes in Germany and Poland, or the memory of the political and social breakthrough of 1989 in both countries, and then the representation of these phenomena and processes in school textbooks serve as an example of how difficult and even intricate is the work of comparing and reconciling meanings in two different societies. The situation is further complicated by the fact that many people perceive the past as largely “practical”, the kind of past that Michael Oakeshott and Hayden White have written about, i.e. one that helps to make decisions, find orientation in the present, seek the foundations of one’s identity or justify one’s personal views. What we remember (what we want to remember) and what we repress from memory, both in the individual and in the group sense, defines us and our attitude to the world.¹ At the same time memory may become a material for dialogue and understanding as easily as a source of conflict. Disputes over memory are visible not only in relations between nations but also in the individual sense: intergenerational or intra-group. Suffice it to mention, for example, autobiographical memories of older generations about Nazism and their images in the minds of subsequent generations, the shape of commemorative ceremonies and discussions about their meaning, symbolism and accompanying cultural attributes, the creation of lists of memorials that play an educational role servile to the ideology of states, etc.

It sometimes seems, especially to decision-makers responsible for the educational process, that it is enough to create an appropriate list of so-called necessary museum objects or places of remembrance in order to effectively control the process of producing memory. This conviction is accompanied by a kind of pedagogisation and objectification of memory and remembering, which is all the more absurd the stronger the political intentions accompanying this process. Can memory become a significant research problem for comparative education?

It is impossible to decree memory or command somebody to remember or forget these or other historical events, just as it is impossible to deprive a human being (leaving aside, of course, questions of neurophysiological or personality disorders) of the ability to personally create what he or she wants to remember. It is customary to think that the analysis of the past consists in understanding the sequence of cause and effect. The fifth principle in John Mill’s canon of logic states that a phenomenon which changes in any way

¹ J.K. Olick, J. Joyce Robbins, *Badania nad pamięcią społeczną: od „pamięci zbiorowej” do socjologii historycznej praktyk pamięciowych*, [in:] *(Kon)teksty pamięci. Antologia*, ed. K. Kończal, Warszawa 2014, pp. 99-141.

when some other phenomenon changes is either the cause or the effect of that phenomenon, or is connected with it by some fact of causality.²

And yet the historical entanglement of events should perhaps (as Karl Jaspers wrote) not only be seen in terms of cause and effect but also in terms of cause and responsibility/guilt.³ Why did something happen and what was the reason that it had to happen? Jaspers understands causation as necessary and blind, but blame for what happens as conscious and free. (...)

May tend to accept and stress their responsibility when they talk of their present actions whose arbitrariness they would like to see released from restraints, conditions and obligations. In case of failure, on the other hand, they tend to decline responsibility and plead allegedly inescapable necessities. Responsibility had been a talking point, not an experience.⁴

Jaspers explains that in the causal relationships that occur in history, cause and responsibility cannot be separated whenever human action is involved. Since events are influenced by human decisions, something that is a cause is also a merit or a fault. That which does not depend on will and decision is also always a task.

Historical necessity is therefore a kind of illusion. For it is impossible to declare with certainty that something is an absolute necessity in the course of history. Just as we are not able to anticipate anything with absolute certainty, neither are we able to recognise retrospectively that something that has occurred was inevitable. It has happened and it is a fact, but our decisions in relation to what has happened create a new fact of a completely different nature. The issues of understanding meanings in comparative education are as fundamental to this sub-discipline as fact-finding is to history or proving theorems is to mathematics. Therefore, answering the question whether pedagogical comparative studies can also deal with the study of individual, social and cultural memory, I will say yes. It can and should.

A comparative approach can be extremely helpful in understanding the perception of complex social constructs including memory and remembering accompanying individual states and nations or social communities. The non-obvious categories Jaspers writes about can and should present new challenges for comparative education. For each age creates its own constructs on the basis of the past, confirming or rebutting what has been, but always setting for the present a specific framework of responsibility for learning from past events or the lack thereof. Jaspers uses categories that were also brought

² J.S. Mill, *System logiki dedukcyjnej i indukcyjnej* [A System of Logic: Ratiocinative and Inductive], no. 1, Warszawa 1962, p. 156.

³ K. Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, New York 2007, p. 95.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

closer to pedagogy by Michael Foucault and his archaeological and genealogical methods. Both are brilliantly discussed by Zbyszko Melosik in his essay *Poststrukturalizm jako teoria życia społecznego* ["Poststructuralism as a Theory of Social Life"].⁵

The idea that man creates history and, most importantly, creates formal knowledge (*connaissance*) in a logical, rational, continuous way is, in a way, the lens through which researchers model or construct the image of reality in a rational and logical manner. Man is both the subject of research and its object. Foucault's methodology in its genealogical approach undertakes a critique of the traditional view of history – "historians' history", as Foucault puts it.⁶ According to Foucault, a true sense of history recognizes that we live among billions of past events, without guidelines or source coordinates.⁷

The archaeological method is a form of historical analysis that refers to the general system of making and transforming claims that existed at a certain time in a given society. The aim is to capture what can be 'said'; and which claims persist, which disappear, which are reused and which repressed.⁸

Zbyszko Melosik writes:

The archaeological method differs fundamentally from traditional historical analyses, which are linear and based on an evolutionary concept of social change. (...) The genealogical method, too, rejects the assumption of an „uninterrupted continuity that links phenomena“ and thus, „dissolves unity and identity“. It aims to „preserve the dispersion associated with events and to reveal their multidimensionality“.⁹

Understanding social phenomena such as trust, care, sense of community, social responsibility or just social memory in comparative terms opens up completely new possibilities for comparative research. Such research is already being conducted in many countries around the world. In Poland it is still waiting for its relevance to be recognised.

Discussions around the paradigms of contemporary comparative education generally focus on quantitative and qualitative analyses of the systemic changes taking place in education in its broadest sense. The epistemological and methodological problem of the relationship between reality as an object and the social scientific act of cognition constitutes a new and important par-

⁵ Z. Melosik, *Poststrukturalizm jako teoria życia społecznego (możliwości i kontrowersje)* [Post-structuralism as a theory of social live style. Opportunities and controversies], *Kultura Współczesna*, 1997, 1(13), pp. 57-71.

⁶ M. Foucault, *Aesthetics, metho, and epistemology*, New York 1998, p. 125.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Z. Melosik, *Poststrukturalizm jako teoria życia społecznego*, p. 58.

adigm for understanding comparative content First of all, it should be noted that social-scientific insight is not a reflection of real structures, and that the reality to be explored does not sufficiently determine the concepts, models and theories designed to capture it. The second point is that the scientific formulation of topics, the creation of concepts and theories necessarily depends on viewpoints determined by non-scientific orientations that reflect the values of the researcher. Thirdly, research and formulated scientific problems, concepts, and theories change over time and are not fully homogeneous within the same time frame, both with respect to individual researchers and scientific schools, which, however, does not preclude statements that are intersubjectively relevant. Fourthly, it can be stated that prevailing systems of social sciences do not exist once and for all, but are subject to historically justified erosion or change, while scientific discovery itself can always be only fragmentary, occurring under the influence of selective viewpoints and cognitive interests.

Therefore, the main methodological dispute in comparative studies generally revolves around accusations of the so-called decisionism. According to Weber, historical and social reality is a powerful current that flows wildly, is largely devoid of structure, amorphous and hardly influenced by the statements of scholars, even if they themselves think they can harness it or that their discoveries and theories have an extraordinary power to influence reality. However, researchers do not decide about events. They can only observe them carefully and decide which of the problems unfolding before their eyes require deeper reflection and analysis, and based on that, make further decisions about what is important or what will become important in a while. The same reality can be conceptualised and studied in an infinite number of ways, depending on which point of view and which reference to values is currently fundamental to the determination of the objective, the choice of concepts and their explanation, the formulation of problematic questions. This is how the task of comparative education was seen, among others, by Robert Cowen, who in his essay „Comparing futures or comparing pasts?“¹⁰ reflected on the essence of comparison.

The hermeneutical tradition is inclined to equate the understanding of the “what” with the “whence”, the essence of things with their becoming, or in other words: the understanding of the current “what?” with the genetic “whence?”. Thus, it expresses a tendency to take the ontological view of a problem, as something that needs to be understood cannot be anything other than its own history. And even the appearance that it is something else

¹⁰ R. Cowen, *Comparing futures or comparing pasts?* *Comparative Education*, 2000, 36, pp. 334-342.

must be understood genetically. I put forward this well-known thesis, which has been confirmed many times in philosophical and historiographical studies, especially by Georg W.F. Hegel and his followers, because I believe that it is impossible to undertake comparative studies without understanding the historical (genetic) circumstances of the object of study. We cannot understand what "is" without grasping the process of its "becoming". What a researcher in comparative education can do is to choose the relevant problems and features of the reality they wish to analyse. The category of choice as Max Weber wrote about it is always tied to decision and freedom of choice (*Entscheidungs- und Wahlfreiheit*).¹¹

Does comparative education (as well as other disciplines and sub-disciplines of social sciences) allow for free choice and free decision of the researcher? Are we not as researchers, rather determined by the problems emerging in reality and locked into a role that binds us to undertake research activities precisely in relation to these important problems, leaving aside secondary ones that are not important for us personally as researchers and socially redundant? If we were to assume that only the former applies, we would have to agree that such a course of action could lead to absurd consequences. After all, how can we explain, for example, the practical research work commissioned by industry, which undeniably has cognitive value, while at the same time recognising the freedom-based approach? Perhaps then in social sciences one should not assume absolute freedom as this would imply acknowledging the lack of structure of the object of research and its indifference to the research procedure: I am free to choose so I can also ignore the relevance (importance) of the research problem. I am not interested in whether the object of my research is useful, socially valid, ethically acceptable, etc. Absolute freedom of choice is as utopian as it is also absurd, because it presupposes the absence of control by any superior authority, including control in the form of scientific rationality.

The selection of cognitive perspectives, the formulation of problems, procedures, theories, and the determination of the validity of results can be, and in principle is, guided by the triad of ethics-rationality-relevance. Thus, perhaps we should recognise that what science offers is not so much absolute freedom, but rather a kind of "wobble room", which allows for legitimate competition between different approaches to the same reality and discussion of different points of view, approaches and theoretical foundations. Max Weber points to the category of "cultural significance" (*Kulturbedeutung*) as supervisory authority for the research procedure.¹² That which has cultural sig-

¹¹ M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, Tübingen 1982, pp. 146-214.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 153.

nificance is important. Therefore, without understanding the cultural context in which given phenomena occur, it is impossible, following Weber's logic, to understand or analyse any problem occurring in social sciences. Michael Crossley¹³ and Mark Bray¹⁴ take a similar view of the problematic nature of conceptualising comparative research. Let us therefore consider the principles for determining the relevance of the problems that comparative education can address. Establishing them, even if the process is not exhaustive, makes it possible to avoid "everythingism" in the research procedure, which is increasingly common, not only in comparative education studies. Superficiality and lack of methodological grounding in an established theory are often presented as interdisciplinary approach and readily praised as a merit of the researcher in question, when in fact scientific integrity would require that we call things by their proper names, i.e. lack of a proper methodological basis.

Comparative education research is a study of reality. In order to understand the reality of life in which we are embedded, we need to acknowledge its peculiarities, ask ourselves a number of preliminary questions, including how today's dependencies and cultural significance of particular phenomena, reasons for their historical transformations and current shapes, have made them this way and not that way. When we consider life as we directly experience it, we find its infinite variety of past, present and future events taking place within us and beyond us. The absolute infinity of this diversity remains intact even if we focus on one "isolated object", if we wish to describe its individual elements in depth and even examine them in their causal relations.¹⁵ In his treatise "Objectivity of Social Science and Social Policy" Max Weber writes:

All the analysis of infinite reality which the finite human mind can conduct rests on the tacit assumption that only a finite portion of this reality constitutes the object of scientific investigation, and that only it is „important“ in the sense of being „worthy of being known“.¹⁶

But let us go further: how to distinguish this "important" subject of research in comparative pedagogy? What principles should guide the selection? Referring to Weber's approach, I would like to draw attention to three principles of methodological procedure, although I realise that I am making an

¹³ M. Crossley, *Reconceptualising comparative and international education*, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education*, 1999, 29, p. 249.

¹⁴ M. Bray, R.M. Thomas, *Levels of comparison in educational studies: Different insights from different literatures and the value of multilevel analyses*, *Harvard Educational Review*, 1965, 3, 472, p. 90.

¹⁵ M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, p. 154.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

arbitrary choice, indicating only those principles for the selection of important research problems in comparative studies which, in my opinion, seem to be the most useful and, at the same time, the most often overlooked and underestimated ones.

The first principle consists in questioning the regular recurrence of certain causal links. The second principle aims to examine reality in terms of its cultural significance, and finally the third principle is to reject superstition and ahistorical thinking. Each of these principles are derived from the conviction that the choice of subject matter for comparative research is closely linked to the historical process of emergence and the causal sequence of events, the logic of events, and that without taking into account history and the elements of culture of remembrance it is not possible to carry out comparative research at all.

Since the 1980s comparative education has remained in a state of diagnosing its distinctiveness. For on the one hand it is firmly rooted in pedagogical issues, but on the other hand it maintains relations to other disciplines, including above all sociology, political geography, political science, philosophy or general history. This interdisciplinary character and at the same time versatility of comparative education, combined with the dynamics of changes taking place in the education of many countries, makes it seem a difficult and underrepresented field of research. What also makes it difficult to engage in comparative research is its cost-intensity, as well as difficulties in obtaining funding for comparative research, often resulting from a lack of understanding of its essence and importance. It is not uncommon for decision-makers who allocate funds to consider comparative research as an unnecessary embellishment to "superior" research, which, at the same time, does not prevent the use of knowledge about educational systems of other countries to legitimise a variety of often debatable solutions, which, thanks to comparative data, gain evidence to support their theses. Unfortunately, scientific comparative analyses are often replaced by information taken from the Internet or simple statistical data without proper interpretation, while it is comparative education that studies and analyses educational systems as historically established models of education and upbringing functioning in a particular society.

Comparative education is more than a self-sufficient specialisation. It regularly crosses the boundaries of definitions and the more successful it is the more often it does so. Reliable comparative education will never be a mere "reproduction" of empirical views, nor a reflection of previous events that have made the analysed phenomena observable in their present form. Just as in history, we are not dealing with the mere reproduction of existing facts. Intuition and understanding are important in comparative education, but as

in historiography they can lead to completely false conclusions if they are not verified by analytical proceedings.

Comparative education today is spread between two poles of research. On the one hand, it is perceived as a classical quantifying social science that follows the rules of systematic holistic science (*Einheitswissenschaft*) and, on the other hand, we are confronted with researchers, but also researchers-quasi journalists and researchers-quasi reporters, who would like to see in it only a return to personal narratives or a reflection of a kind of pedagogical geography, a record of their own travels. Seeking direct access to social experience is not inappropriate, but rather advisable, especially where we are dealing with witness accounts, ethno-pedagogical or biographical research, or the pedagogy of memory in its broadest sense. What should be worrying in terms of the correctness of the methodological procedure is the lack of consideration for the theoretical foundations, maintaining the balance between description and the process of logical reasoning, which consists in deriving a preconceived sentence from other preconceived sentences (*explanation*).

To sum up: comparative research serves a multi-faceted, contextual analysis not only of education systems, as it is usually presented in the traditional view of this sub-discipline, but also of paradigms, philosophical and political discourses present in education, its history and also social and cultural phenomena. Comparative analyses make it possible not only to describe "how it is?" but also "why it is the way it is?", to understand the entanglements of education in social, cultural, economic and political relations located in the logic of past events. Historical methods will always be prior to pedagogical comparison. After all, everything that surrounds us in the world and we ourselves are embedded in time, memory and their consequences.

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