

Comparative education, modernity and postmodernity

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OBJECTIVES

- To analyse and understand the epistemological contents behind the phenomena of globalisation and postmodernism, as well as their impact on the discipline of International and Comparative Education.
- To articulate and comprehend the implicit cultural elements of modernity and postmodernism, together with their impact on education in general and on the discipline of International and Comparative Education in particular.
- To devise and assimilate epistemological and gnoseological elements of the discipline of Comparative Education.
- To summarise the implications of cultural phenomena as well as historical and contemporary periods as they pertain to the future of International and Comparative Education.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Students will be able to analyse in detail the implications of the phenomena of globalisation and postmodernism in the discipline of International and Comparative Education.
- Students will be able to analyse the cultural elements within modernity and post-modernism.
- Students will be capable of devising the impact of these historical periods on contemporary and current education.
- Students will know how to articulate epistemological elements that are found within International and Comparative Education and may determine its future.

1. INTRODUCTION

The most recent congresses and academic conferences on Comparative Education organized by both the Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE) and the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) have focused on topics with the objective of outlining some possible scenarios regarding the future of education in general and Comparative Education in particular. Some examples of the above are as follows: In Spain, the Spanish Society of Comparative Education (SEEC) organised the XIX National Congress of Comparative Education, which took place in November 2025 and was entitled «Global education and new training spaces». In Europe, the XXX Conference of the Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE) in Roskilde (Denmark) was organized in the year 2026 under the title «Worlds of learning: comparative perspectives on the future(s) of education». The World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) organised the XVIII World Congress of Comparative Education Societies, which took place in 2026 in Ithaca (USA), with the theme being «Fostering Inclusive Ecologies of Knowledge: Education for Equitable and Sustainable Futures». This topic reveals an obvious concern from Comparative Education Societies about the uncertain future of education in the 21st century.

Certainly, reflecting on the epistemological trends and methodologies of Comparative Education nowadays is both a fascinating and complex task. Some of the 21st century's most relevant comparatists in Europe, such as the Briton Robert Cowen and the German Jürgen Schriewer, have been insisting in the last couple of decades that there are many Comparative Educations. There are, in fact, as many Comparative Education variants as there are countries in the world, given that each place has its own epistemology. The authors of this book definitely agree with this affirmation, because Comparative Education has shown itself to be a plural, diverse, heterogeneous and eclectic field as it encompasses a great variety of epistemological traditions that made Comparative Education the broad discipline it is today.

Unfortunately, describing every single trend in Comparative Education from a historical and epistemological perspective, apart from being a task of unquestionable interest, would also entail such complexity that it would simply not be feasible to address it properly in this book. For this reason, in order to make it more understandable for students, and assuming the risk of providing a panorama of Comparative Education that could perhaps be too simplistic, this chapter will be structured as follows:

First of all, a section will be devoted to briefly explaining the phenomena of both globalisation and postmodernism and how they affect the field of Comparative Education. This section will provide students with a general perspective of the context in which the discipline is unavoidably part of and how it has been developed through time. Then, two main epistemological positions of Comparative Education will be described and explained: modernism and postmodernism. In this sense, students will understand that multiple research projects have followed and continue following the typical modern tradition, which has been supported by academics like Filmer, whereas, other researchers are more inclined towards the postmodern trend of the discipline, an example of these authors being Cowen, Rust, and Scott. In addition, students will be briefly introduced to the concept of transitology, as a way of understanding sudden transformations. At the end, a general view about the current state of the Comparative Education discipline in the first quarter of the 21st century will be provided, especially focused on current research and epistemological trends, as well as how comparatists envision the challenges and future of the discipline.

2. GLOBALISATION AND POSTMODERNISM IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

The first years of the 21st century were years of great transformation for social sciences in general and for Comparative Education in particular, essentially due to the presence of two concepts that became popular among scientific journals, books, and manuals related to sociological and philosophical sciences, as well as to Comparative Education. These terms are globalisation and postmodernism.

Because of its specific epistemological nature, the discipline of Comparative Education is one of the academic fields on which the demands of globalisation made a great impact. The phenomenon of globalisation led academics like Dale to advocate for certain epistemological changes in Comparative Education, stating that «the object of study of Comparative Education should be the analysis of the nature and the causes of the diverse impacts of globalisation on diverse world contexts» (Dale, 2001, p. 493). Even though it is true that not all current comparatists intend to modify the epistemological nature of Comparative Education due to globalisation, it is indeed certain that some of the Comparative Education books that were published at the beginning of the 21st century allude to the need of reconceptualising the discipline, as well as adopting new research agendas in this field (Crossley & Watson, 2003).

2.1. Globalisation

The origin of global society is a recurring theme among experts. Some state that it is part of a modernisation process from centuries ago, whereas others associate it with the rise of the global economy that took place in the 16th century. As a precedent, it is important to highlight the Long Depression that was characterized by a stock market crash between 1870 and 1914, as well as both the First and Second World Wars (Dehesa, 2000; Burbules et al., 2005). Official definitions of globalization are difficult to provide as well, because no international consensus within the conceptualisation of the term has been reached; reason for which the definitions are indeed varied (Beck, 1998; Castells, 2005; Dehesa, 2000; Gimeno Sacristán, 2001; Held, 1997; Sousa Santos, 2012). In this book, the definitions of Robert Dale and Manuel de Puelles for the concept of globalization will be provided. On the one hand, according to Dale, globalisation «constitutes a new and specific form of relation among Nation-States and world economy» (2007, p. 48) by which «national governments are constrained to seek the modernisation of their national economies (...) and to promote the capacity of international competition of their national welfare systems» (2007, p. 49). On the other hand, according to Puelles (2006) globalisation is a phenomenon that appears in the middle of the decade of the seventies of the 21st century, coinciding with the Welfare State political crisis and with the oil economic crisis, although it is a phenomenon that exceeds greatly such crisis» (p. 86).

Notwithstanding the disparities related to globalisation, such as its definition and the geographical-temporal coordinates of its origin, since there seems to be no international consensus about the specific effects of globalisation either, two aspects of its *ethos* should be highlighted. On the one hand, the globalisation process develops a unificatory impact on countries that tends to homogenise them. On the other hand, its effects tend to diversify the countries' national policies as well. This ambivalence is known as the paradox of globalisation (Dale, 2007). What is indeed clear is that globalisation is connected to neoliberalist ideology, since it temporarily coincides and incorporates elements from the political theory and philosophy that Margaret Thatcher introduced in the United Kingdom. That had, for instance, a strong impact on the policies of, not only the Anglosphere, but also many other western societies (García Ruiz, 2013).

Regarding education from a comparative perspective, the phenomenon of globalisation mainly affects two areas: internationalisation of education, and the curricular dimension of education.

2.1.1. Internationalisation of education

One of the most noticeable effects of globalisation is the internationalisation of education. In other words, the international and educational settings have been granting

an array of international organisations great prominence, that is to say a «Government without government» (Dale, 2007, p. 51) has been configured, at the supranational level. However, the action foci of international organisations are not precisely new, since Marc-Antoine Jullien of Paris himself, who is unanimously known as the «father of comparative education», was a pioneer in promoting and leading initiatives and activities whose nature were very similar to the ones that are currently developed by international organisations (Naya Garmendia, 2017). International organisations follow a neo positivist methodology in Comparative Education (Egido Gálvez & Martínez Usarralde, 2019), obtaining their legitimacy through knowledge and technical expertise, promoting policies based on evidence that also have a cultural-cognitive orientation (Zapp, 2021). In moments of crisis such as the covid-19 pandemic in 2020, international organisations have used both intelligence and culture to create and share scientific based knowledge that contributes to the creation of new policies. These entities provide global information, incentivise models that allow understanding of, and they currently play a central role in global education (Ponce-Díaz et al., 2024).

Among all these international institutions, one of the most prominent is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which had an impact on education without precedent. The OECD is an intergovernmental organisation created in 1961 with the purpose of advising governments on delivering policies, «a forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis and best practices in public policy» (OECD, n.d. a, para 1). Many academics coincide with the fact that, in the current times of globalisation the OECD has progressively become an independent political agent (Henry et al., 2001) in relation to both national and international educational policies. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is one of the most prestigious initiatives of the OECD. It measures students' ability to use their reading, mathematics, and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges in many countries, and it publishes reports that gather the obtained results (OECD, n.d. b). It is not unusual for these reports to be «offered to the journals as if they were comparative education articles» (Cowen, 2023, p. 332). Participant countries are genuinely concerned by the scope of PISA and its results; especially the publication of these results in public reports has generated great debates in some countries, for example in Germany where these controversies are still latent (Kotthoff & Pereyra, 2009). The aforementioned debates and international concerns are only an example of the relevance that international institutions such as the OECD have in education from an international perspective.

One of the elements that has been essential for internationalisation is global interdependence, which has eased the mobility of human capital as well as unbounded economic flow. In addition, the role of digital technologies should not be ignored, especially in relation to the rise and establishment of social media and artificial intelligence (AI) tools that are currently having a direct impact on the daily knowledge transmission and is contributing to the creation of hyperconnected societies (Egido & Martínez, 2019; Matarranz & Pérez, 2016; Ponce-Díaz, et al., 2024). In the global framework, the importance of conceiving knowledge as the engine of progress together with technolo-

gization and global interdependence make both Comparative Education and the international organizations more relevant. And this is not only because they enable reading between the lines of the different educational contexts and realities among nations, but because nowadays contracts and agreements are signed supranationally, which can be detrimental to the power of the nations' governments and leads the action agendas in many areas (Egido, 2016; Egido & Martínez, 2019; Rifkin, 2000; Valle, 2015).

In conclusion, Comparative Education finds itself in a situation that is constantly susceptible to development, change, and transformation. The difference lies in the fact that, if in the 20th century these changes were dependent on the different regions and nations, nowadays the new transformations that play a determinant role in reading educational realities are beyond the limits of nations, becoming global or supranational (Valle & Sánchez-Urán, 2023). This phenomenon gives way to new challenges for education, whose future will likely be conditioned by its ability to meet economic and social demands. At the same time, new international and supranational actors are having a great influence on the configuration of educational systems. For all the aforementioned reasons, it is essential that teachers and education professionals know the nature and idiosyncrasy of these organisations and become aware of their influence on education through their reports and initiatives. It is important too that they develop a critical analysis of the old, current and future narratives of not only international organisations but also other global actors related to the future of education, in a way that education for critical and democratic citizenship that is ready for political participation and global citizenship is guaranteed (Elfert & Ydesen, 2024; Matarranz & Pérez, 2016).

2.1.2. The curricular dimension of education

The curricular dimension of education witnesses the effects of globalisation in education as well, and it can be seen through both the clear interference of economic factors in the specific mission of education, and the tendency of curriculum towards prioritising competences which, according to Carnoy (1999), can be detrimental to general education. The professionalisation of education curricula, undoubtedly led by economic and market interests, has been imposed at every educational level with the support of international organisations such as the OECD and their interpretation of topics such as Lifelong Learning and the paradigm of the new creation of knowledge promoted by Gibbons (1994).

The consequences of these adaptations are meaningful because new missions of universities are even being determined by them: i.e. the corporativist inclination of universities, from which entrepreneurial culture as well as collaboration with external companies are being encouraged; the importance that has been given to competencies and skills, on many occasions even above knowledge, etc. (Ospina García & Pujol Berché, 2016). In this line, González Novoa, Sosa Alonso & Martín Hurtado (2024) maintain that universities are currently being *infantilized* because of the adoption of

measures such as reducing the length of university degrees, the progressive loss of importance of contents among higher education curricula, and the devaluation of the academic requirements and demands, among others.

The World Economic Forum (2020) establishes as a key factor the fact that governments «must have a holistic approach, creating active connections and coordination among education providers, abilities, employees and employers, and assuring effective collaboration between employment agencies, regional and national governments» (p.49). Varea (2021) highlights that one of the challenges that education centres face today is, precisely, covering the needs of a labour market that is in constant and vertiginous change. However, it is probable that due to the complexity and time that curricular design and verification processes require, education centres (schools, high schools, universities, etc.) cannot cover the needs of society and the labour market completely by the time they arise. In other words, perhaps there is a mismatch between the pace at which social changes occur along with the corresponding emergence of new needs, and the ponderous internal rhythms that educational and academic renovation processes require, in order to meet both national and international standards.

2.2. Postmodernism

Postmodern perspectives «celebrate diversity, difference and the voices of the other» (Crossley and Watson, 2003, p. 57). Under these perspectives elements such as context and/or culture happen to be particularly relevant. Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard are three of the most relevant authors that have held a leading position regarding postmodern perspectives (Peters, 2001). While there are certain aspects of postmodernism that have been energetically rejected by a great number of academics, particularly its relativistic nature; there are other elements of postmodernism that have been greatly welcomed by some academics, principally the contextual sensibility and the denouncement of two characteristics that appear to be inherent to the modern trend of Comparative Education: eurocentrism and social injustice (Kempner, 1998). In summary, major debates in relation to the postmodern character of the 21st century have arisen in the last decades.

There seems to be more ambiguity in relation to postmodernism than to globalisation. On the one hand, there is a relative consensus between academics regarding globalisation whereas, on the other hand, there is a clear disagreement in relation to considering the present era as properly postmodern. In addition, postmodernism generates wide internal debates among comparativists and their understanding of the present and future development of education.

One way or another, considering the growing presence of postmodern educational trends, we invite you to ask yourselves if Comparative Education is currently a modern or a postmodern discipline. The answer to this question reveals crucial implications for both the epistemology and further development of this discipline.

3. MODERNISM VERSUS POSTMODERNISM IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

In the last few decades, the debates between the modern and postmodern perspectives in Comparative Education have certainly not been easily assimilated by comparatists. Nowadays, it seems like comparatists are working on finding different formulas and working on proposals of natures as wide and varied as the discipline itself. Nevertheless, in this section the main features of Comparative Education in times of modernism and postmodernism will be addressed, in order to facilitate the understanding of current and future issues within the field.

It is worth mentioning the publication of Smith & Webster (1997) in which it is possible to delve into the debates between authors that have identified themselves either as *modern* or *postmodern* academics, respectively. Academics that follow the 'modern' pattern, such as the Briton Paul Filmer, state that «the logic of the post's (postmodernism, poststructuralism) is one that informs speculative theorizing but is not yet a socio-logic; nor therefore, does it have substantive social or cultural institutional correlates» (Filmer, 1997, p. 57). Contrary to the modern inclinations, academics that sympathise with the 'postmodern' perspective, like the British academic, Peter Scott, follow an epistemological, sociological, economic, political and technological discourse that justifies the *postmodern* character of western societies. This trend, sometimes considered radical, gathers some ideas that suggest a 'deinstitutionalization' of knowledge in higher education (Scott, 1997) or even end up in ground-breaking questions regarding 'the death of the university' that are still latent (Smith and Webster, 1997; Wright & Shore, 2019).

3.1. Comparative Education and modernism

The Latin adjective *modernus* (modern) started to be used in the 4th century A.C. Both the historian Sotelo (2003) and the philosopher Habermas (1988) linked the term *modern* with Christianity, because Christianity was considered the first modernity, the root of later modernities. The fact that the *modern*, *Christian* and *European* realities have common roots does not mean that they are still connected nowadays. The modern world starts with Christianity, and it has been subdivided in a few wide stages, such as the Middle Ages (7th-16th centuries), Renaissance or Early Modern Europe (16th-18th centuries), Enlightenment and Revolutions in Europe (17th-19th centuries), Late Modern Period or postmodernism (19th century-nowadays). But this last period of modernity can only be well understood if it is identified as the sum of the previous modernities, from the first and basic that became represented with Christianity, because «The Catholic Church was the world's first great transnational institution, and it remains essential for understanding modern global history and culture» (University of Oxford, n.d., para 1.).

Sociology is a social science from the 19th century that refers to «the study of the relationships between people living in groups, especially in industrial societies» (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d., definition 1). In other words, it analyses modernity. If Max Weber is the main sociologist that studies modernity through sociology, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is the philosopher that analyses this historical period through philosophy. If for Weber the central category of modernity is *rationality*, for Hegel the main categories of modernity are *freedom* and *subjectivity*, both introduced by Christianity (García Ruiz, 2013). According to Habermas (1988), the *Modern Project* expected that arts and sciences would not only promote the control of natural forces, but that moral progress, the justice of institutions and the happiness of human beings would also be encouraged by them. Now, it is possible to wonder: to what extent Comparative Education is a modern science or participates in the Modern Project?

Kazamias was one of the authors who endorsed the modern character of Comparative Education in its origins (Kaloyannaki & Kazamias, 2009) and he highlighted a few factors that contribute to its understanding. The first factor refers to the historical period in which Comparative Education emerged, which was at the beginning of the 19th century during the late Enlightenment. The second factor rests with the spirit of the first comparatists, since it was «full of the spirit of the modern paradigm, with its emphasis on reason (rationalism, empiricism, science), universalism, secularism, progress and Nation-State» (Kaloyannaki and Kazamias, 2009, p. 12). As a result, the epistemology of this scientific discipline was described as protoscientific, humanistic, positive, cosmopolitan, liberal, democratic, and meliorist. The third factor is the Eurocentric tendency in the initial stages of Comparative Education's epistemology. This was because many of the studies and publications of Comparative Education pioneers included the 'forces', 'factors', 'national character', and 'cultural philosophy' typical of European and Western countries. In other words, in the 19th century North American and Latin American comparatists focused their research works on the analysis and import of mainly typical European experiences and traditions (i.e. Germany, was one of the most analysed, admired, and imitated European countries by North American academics). In addition, Comparative Education contributions in the 19th century are also characterised by two elements: the first element is the manifest and recurrent emphasis on the religious and moral dimensions of education (Fraser, 1964); and the second element is the meliorist character that they assign to education. As for educational systems in modernity, according to Cowen (1996) they were characterised by the clear influence of state, together with the Church; social and cultural stratification, which were perceptible in both educational contents and structure; and attempts of transferring educational policies from foreign countries, that were not exempt of difficulties in their latter implementation (Egido Gálvez & Martínez Usarralde, 2019).

Considering that the epistemological heritage of Comparative Education in the 19th and 20th centuries revealed some markedly modern features, it is not surprising that Comparative Education during the first years of the 21st century kept some of its previous idiosyncrasy, in spite of the rise of the postmodern perspective from the 1970s.

Nowadays, more comparatists are of the opinion that the Eurocentric trend in Comparative Education, if not yet obsolete, will not last much longer.

Here is where one of the main debates that in this chapter are presented lies. Habermas believes that the Modern Project has not finished yet, and he encourages its further development. García Ruiz (2013) thinks that during all the time that modernity has been extended for –17 centuries– there has been continuity among its different stages, reason for which she finds «difficult to integrate the rupture or the breaking off character of Postmodernism» (p. 24). Some of the criticisms from postmodernism towards modernity are both true and valid, reasons for which a proper answer should be provided urgently (i.e.: Eurocentrism, attention to underrepresented collectives and minorities, etc.). However, what if those criticisms lead more into an improvement of modernity than the invalidation of the modern project as a whole? Some of the critics of postmodernism maintain that it is still a very young paradigm, and that it holds drastic criticisms and affirmations, such as ‘the death of the university’, ‘the deconstruction of art’, ‘the death of God’, closely related to modernism.

The status that the discipline of Comparative Education has achieved today is a result of its academic openness, especially in relation to its adaptability, being able to fit within a great variety of methodological perspectives that greatly support its interdisciplinarity (Egido Gálvez & Martínez Usarralde, 2019). In conclusion, Comparative Education seems to be a discipline wide enough to embrace plurality, heterogeneity, hybridisation, diversity, and eclecticism. And it is precisely all of that, together with the wide diversity of epistemological traditions that conform Comparative Education from its origins until current times, what allows its academic growth.

3.2. Comparative Education and postmodernism

The enormous transformations that took place since the last third of the 20th century have been intellectually supported and developed by philosophers such as Michel Foucault (1926-1984); François Lyotard (1924-1998), and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), which led to the rise of a philosophical movement called Postmodernism. Comparatists like Welch and Cowen referred to it under ‘late Modernity’ (Egido Gálvez & Martínez Usarralde, 2019). On the one hand, modernity in all its versions kept in its *ethos* the idea of ‘continuous transition’, ‘renewed relation’, a continuous balance between the different historical periods that conform it. On the other hand, postmodernity holds the vanguardist ideal of something new that does not fit in modernity at all, and pursues ground-breaking ideas (Habermas, 1988).

In the 1970’s and 1980’s, Foucault’s postmodern ideas denied that the modern political liberalism from the 18th century and its impacts (i.e.: Individual rights and representative democracy) gave individuals more freedom. On the contrary, he stated that modern liberal societies are oppressive and that their forms of oppression tend to be hidden as well as difficult to identify, for they have the support of supposedly objective

and impartial branches of social sciences. For these reasons, Foucault suggests the development of resistant attitudes towards the political *status quo* and the power of established institutions. These suggestions led to what became typically postmodern features, such as epistemological scepticism, ethical subjectivism, clear distrust in reason, and a great suspicion of the role of ideology in the preservation of political and economic power. Analogously to Foucault, Lyotard displayed his distrust and suspicion in relation to the rational and universal 'great narratives' like liberalism and marxism, as well as their normative proposals about the world. Similar proposals were those of Derrida, who coined the theory of deconstruction, understanding it «as an on-going process of questioning the accepted basis of meaning» (Turner, 2016, para. 1). Hence, these authors defended a relativism that sometimes has been considered extreme, for they state the impossibility of guaranteeing the objective truth of any reality (García Ruiz, 2013).

If modernity is connected with ideas of continuous transition, Christianity, Europe, rationalism, universalism, normativism, tradition, morality, history, and virtue, postmodernity is associated with ideas of rupture, worship of the new, mobility, acceleration of history, discontinuity, new value to all that is provisional, temporary and fleeting (Habermas, 1988), relativism, rebellion against what is normative, against tradition and post historicism. Lyotard defines postmodernists as those individuals who are sceptical towards metanarratives, since metanarratives constrain civilization in totalitarian and logic-based systems of thought. According to Foucault, totalitarian or global modern theories are vulnerable to 'local criticism', whereas the postmodern world is diverse and ready to acknowledge differences in social and cultural contexts. In this line, Rust states that the work of comparatists is guided by metanarratives that express and articulate differences and that promote critical thinking. Sotelo links the notion of postmodernism with the radical crisis of Christian values, both in religious, and secular contexts. In addition, he states that Nietzsche was the philosopher who announced postmodernity, for he radically criticises the Christian faith. Postmodernity, in this sense, «would not imply other reality that an atheistic interpretation of the world» (Sotelo, 2003, p. 59).

In the first decades of the 21st century many interpretations about the real extent and impact of postmodernism can be found. Some authors, like Rust, claim that the term 'postmodernism' is a concept of periodization that implies the appearance of a new era that differs from the modern one. This denotes new formal features in culture, a new type of social life, and a new economic order. Other authors state that postmodernism does not represent a drastic rupture with current cultural and political western life, but an additional discourse and theoretical orientation that competes with the other approaches that currently exist in the modern world (García Ruiz, 2013).

Rust (1991) and Cowen (1996) analysed postmodernism and its implications for Comparative Education. Rust (1991) stated that the postmodern movement existed in the scientific, philosophical, literary, architectural, and artistic fields since the 1950's, but its discourse has barely been adopted by the Comparative Education academia. It seems that comparatists joined the postmodern debate late. However, two main features of postmodernism have been found in specialized educational literature: on