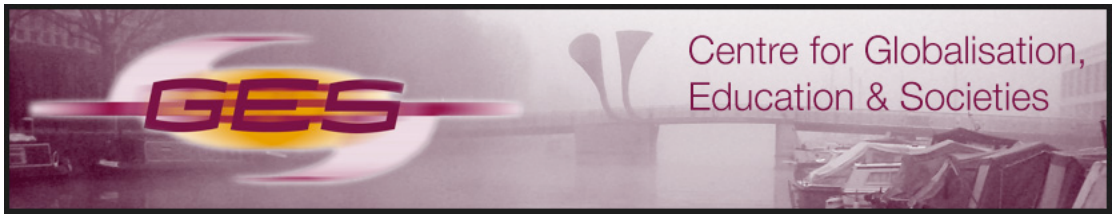

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Beyond Methodological 'Isms' in Comparative Education in an Era of Globalisation

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Abstract

In this chapter we review the main problems raised for comparative education by the current era characterised as globalisation. We see these as arising from an increasing distance between the emerging nature of education under globalisation and the focus and approaches that have dominated comparative education. The focus has been very much on 'national', 'education', 'systems'. We argue that this is not where 'education' is to be found in the current era of globalisation, and that this requires re-examination of each of the three components separately, and as a collection. To begin this process, we attempt to identify and problematise the three theoretical and methodological 'isms' that have characterized comparative education, and that assume and reinforce the national education system as the proper basis of its study. These 'isms' are: methodological nationalism; methodological statism; and methodological educationism. In each case the 'ism' is used to suggest an approach to the objects that takes them as unproblematic and assumes a constant and shared meaning. In the first part of the paper, we examine the first two isms, and seek to frame the implications of the changes that have developed through an era of neo-liberal for the governance of education; from being taken as the more or less exclusive preserve of nation states, this is now more effectively seen as made up of different combinations of (new as well as existing) agents, (new as well as existing) activities, not necessarily carried out at the national scale. We suggest that one consequence of this shift in the governance of education is a tendential functional and scalar division of educational governance, operating through both hybrid and parallel forms. In the second part of the chapter, we examine 'educationism', the tendency to regard 'education' as a single category for purposes of analysis, with an unproblematically accepted scope, and a set of implicitly shared knowledges, practices and assumptions. We advance three ways of moving beyond educationism: first, representing education as a set of questions/variables rather than as a homogeneous entity; second, examining the 're-sectoralisation' of education; and third, distinguishing competing representations of education that now characterise the field. We conclude by arguing that only when we challenge 'isms' in comparative education will we have a set of conceptual tools which might inform critical interventions in education.

Introduction

> …a whole series of key concepts for the understanding of society derive their power from appearing to be just what they always were and derive their instrumentality from taking on quite different forms (Smith, 2006: 628).

Gavin Smith's pithy insight takes us straight to the heart of the methodological—but also the substantive—problems posed to comparative education by 'globalisation'. We do not need to define globalisation very precisely to recognise that it has brought about major challenges to comparative education's objects of study, and the terms and concepts it uses—and this means, we will argue, that it has also brought about changes in the meaning of comparative education itself. In this chapter we will be suggesting that recognising the nature and extent of this problem is one of the most important requirements of being comparative in education in an era of globalisation, for a major consequence of globalisation not just for comparative education but more generally, is that while it has profound effects on the key features of the economic political and social worlds we inhabit, we remain tied to the concepts with which we described and understood the world prior to globalisation.

We will focus here on both the changes brought about by globalisation in the core objects of study of comparative education, '*national*' *'education' 'systems'* and their consequences for the area of study, both methodological and 'political'. In terms of the first, we will suggest that the three central elements of the field of comparative education, respectively directly related to those three core objects of study, are in danger of becoming somewhat ossified and of thereby restricting, or even obstructing, rather than expanding, our opportunities to come to terms with globalisation and the ways in which institutional and everyday life has been transformed.

We will suggest that the danger can be summed up by suggesting that the ways of approaching the central elements of comparative studies of education, national systems, state-run, of education, are in severe danger of becoming 'isms'. We may be confronted by, or reliant on, not just methodological *nationalism*, but methodological *statism* and methodological *educationism*. In each case the 'ism' is used to suggest an approach to the objects that takes them as unproblematic and assumes a constant and shared meaning; they become 'fixed, abstract and absolute' (Fine, 465), and the source of the danger lies in the nominal continuity provided by the ostensibly 'same' concepts, as Smith warns. The assumption/acceptance of the isms means that the understanding of changes brought about by globalisation may be refracted through the lenses of unproblematic conceptions of nationalism, statism and educationism, even as these changes themselves bring about changes in the meaning of, or the work done by, nation states and education systems, and thereby undermine their validity. One reflection of the depth of the embeddedness of this set of concepts is that they become themselves a kind of benchmark against which perceived changes are measured and represented; thus we have the 'De-' conceptions; de-territorialisation, de-statisation, de-concentration, de-centralisation, and so on (see Patramanis, 2002).

It is our argument that it has taken the impact of globalisation to expose the problems of the 'isms' in comparative education (and indeed education studies more widely). It is fundamentally the changes of the scale and the means of governance at and through

which 'education' is carried out that has exposed the shortcomings of previous theorising. What seeing the core elements of comparative education as methodological 'isms' reveals is that it has rarely ever been the case that 'the state did it all' in the case of education, that educational activities and governance have ever been confined to the national scale and that 'education' has ever been a single straightforward, unproblematic conception.

Comparative education and 'national education systems'

Methodological nationalism

The most widely recognised of the isms is methodological nationalism. The nation state has been at the core of comparative education throughout its history. It has been the basis of comparison, what has been compared. As Daniel Chernilo puts it, "…the nation-state became the organizing principle around which the whole project of modernity cohered" (Chernilo , 2006: 129). We might see it as the institution that embodies the principles of modernity and through which those principles are to be delivered. Furthermore, the nation-state conception is further reinforced by its being embedded within a well established system of similar states, (where nation states are recognised as legal entities under international law) which deepens the difficulty of both looking beyond, and of imagining alternatives to it.

The nation state has been the core concept on which the methodological nationalism that has characterised not just comparative education, but most of social science has been based (Martins, 1974). In fact, we can identify four distinct elements of this problem (for an extended critique of the conception of methodological nationalism in comparative education see Dale 2005). The first, and best known, is the idea that methodological nationalism sees the nation state as the container of 'society', so that comparing societies entails comparing nation states (see also Beck, 2002; Beck and Znaider, 2006). The second is the close association between nation states and comparison brought about by the 'national' being the level at which statistics have traditionally been gathered; as one of us put it elsewhere, methodological nationalism operates both about and for the nation-state, to the point where the only reality we are able to comprehensively describe statistically is a national, or at best an international, one (Dale 2005, 126). The third element of the problem arises from the tendency to juxtapose an unreconstructed methodological nationalism to underspecified conceptions of 'globalisation' in a zero-sum relationship. This typically takes the form of the global 'affecting' the national, or the national 'mediating' the global. This is not to say that such relationships are not present, but that they are not to be taken as the norm. The final element we wish to mention here concerns the extent of the suffusion, or identification, of concepts of the nation state with a particular imaginary of rule. This has become clearer through recent discussions of conceptions of 'sovereignty', 'territoriality' and 'authority' (see especially Ansell and Di Palma 2004). These discussions essentially see the particular combination of responsibilities and activities that nation-states have been assumed to be responsible for as historically contingent rather than functionally necessary, or even optimal. Thus, though the ontology that "…a region of physical space… can be conceived of as a corporate personality", the nature, implications and consequences of this have varied greatly, and it remains the case that "…the unity of this public authority has generally been regarded as the hallmark of the so-called Westphalian states" (Ansell 2004, 6), while "…the chief characteristic of the modern system of

territorial rule is the consolidation of all parcellized and personalised authority into one public realm" (Ruggie, 1993: 151). However, while "…public authority has been demarcated by discrete boundaries of national territory…so, too, has the articulation of societal interests and identities that both buttress and make demands upon this authority" (Ansell.: 8). The question then concerns the "…implications of a world in which the mutually reinforcing relations of territory, authority and societal interests and identities can no longer be taken for granted" (ibid.: 9)

Methodological statism

The assumptions of the unity of public authority and a single public realm take us towards and what we are referring to as 'methodological statism'. If methodological nationalism refers to the tendency to take the nation state as the container of societies, the related but considerably less recognised term methodological *statism* refers to the tendency to assume that there is a particular *form* intrinsic to all states.[1] That is, all polities are ruled, organised and administered in essentially the same way, with the same set of problems and responsibilities, and through the same set of institutions. The assumed set of institutions that has become taken for granted as *the* pattern for the rule of societies is that found in the West in the 20th century, and in particular the social-democratic welfare state that pervaded Western Europe in the second half of that century (see Zurn and Leibfried, 2005, 11). Central –and, we might argue, unique--to this conception was that all four dimensions of the state distinguished by Zurn and Leibfried (resources, law, legitimacy and welfare) converged in national constellations, and national institutions. What Zurn and Leibfried make clear, however, is that "…the changes over the past 40 years are not merely creases in the fabric of the nation state, but rather an unravelling of the finely woven national constellation of its Golden Age" (Ibid.: 1). To put it another way, both the assumption of a common set of responsibilities and means of achieving them, and the assumption that they are necessarily rather than contingently associated with each other, can no longer be sustained, outside a continuing methodological statism. A further consequence of methodological statism is that the model of the state that became taken for granted in academic discourse across most of the social sciences is not one that was ever established or present in the greater part of what we refer to as developing countries. That model was not only imposed on the majority of postcolonial states that were created after World War II, but formal acceptance of, and attachment to, but it became the main basis of membership of the 'international community'. As has been pointed out by Ferguson and Gupta (2002), among others, that model of the state was never an effective means of conceiving of how the majority of developing societies were ruled. They see work on states based on two assumptions; *verticality*, which "refers to the state as an institution somehow above civil society, community and family" (1982). This top down assumption is contrasted with *encompassment,* "…the state, (conceptually fused with the nation) is located within an ever widening series of circles that begins with family and local community and ends with the system of nation-states" (ibid). This politically imposed simulacrum of a constructed form of rule has not only distorted attempts at introducing fair, efficient and effective forms of rule in those countries, but its acceptance as a valid and accurate account by academics as well as politicians, on the basis that the same term meant the same thing irrespective of circumstances, has equally distorted analyses of the governance of developing countries. The depth of the penetration of the assumptions of the 'isms', and their consequences, is summed up by Ruggie, writing of international relations, but in terms applicable to all social sciences. He

[1] Though the term embedded statism can be found, it is usually as a synonym for methodological nationalism

sees them as displaying "…an extraordinarily impoverished mind-set…that is able to visualize long term challenges to the system of states only in terms of entities that are institutionally substitutable for the state" (1993: 143).

The main conclusion to be drawn from this brief discussion, then, is that one essential basis of any response on the part of comparative education to globalisation is to recognise that using 'the state' as an explanatory concept , without major qualification, is both to accept an inaccurate picture of the world and to perpetuate a particular outcome of political imposition. To put it briefly; one consequence of globalisation for comparative education, and for social science more generally, is to make it clear that the nation-state should be regarded as *explanandum*, in need of explanation, rather than as *explanans*, part of an explanation. Or, to put it another way, the component parts of what is connoted by the nation-state, need to be 'unbundled', and their status and relationships examined anew in a globalised world, by comparative educationists as by other social scientists. One effective means of summarising the points made here about methodological nation-statism is to display the bones of the argument diagrammatically.

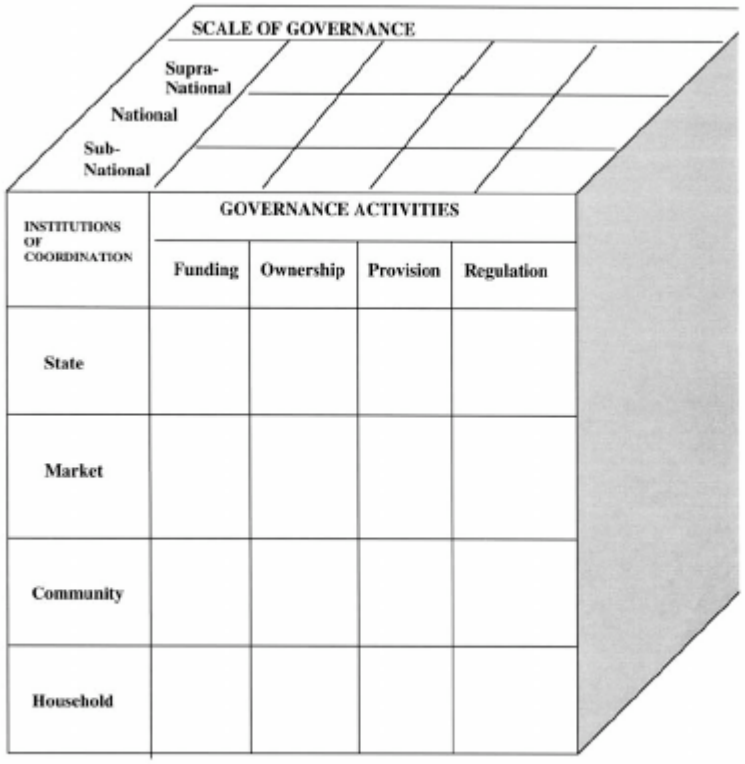

FIG. 1.—Pluri-scalar governance of education

The Figure illustrates the points made above about methodological statism by recognizing that the national state is no longer the only, or taken-for-grantedly, the most important, actor in the area of education. This means that the first thing that is to be compared as globalisation affects education more and more is the *governance* of education. By governance, we mean the combinations and coordination of activities, actors/agents, and scales, through which 'education' is constructed and delivered in national societies. The diagram seeks both to indicate, and at the same time to reduce the complexity of, what is involved in governing education, through 'unbundling' the range of activities, or

functions, of educational governance. We identify four categories of activity that collectively make up educational governance (that are for the sake of exposition taken to be mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive*), funding; provision, or delivery; ownership; and regulation*. These activities may in principle be carried out independently of each other and by a range of agents other than the state. To utilise the Figure directly, this means that all the cells can be empirically populated. However, one crucial point to be made here is that none of the relationships framed in this diagram should be seen as zero-sum, as entailing mutually exclusive relations. The lines between the various cells are assumed to be porous rather than taken as border. Thus, the diagram also reflects the argument that it is neither 'natural' nor essential that all these activities are carried out by the state, or by any other single agency. Rather, we may expect different combinations of agents, actors and scales in the governance of education, bearing in mind that at all three levels, agents, activities and scales, there will be hybrid combinations; respective examples are public private partnerships, complex forms of ownership, and 'jumping' scales from local to supranational. However, this does not mean that we are faced with choices between hybrid and 'pure' categories; we have, for instance argued elsewhere, using the example of higher education in Europe, for the existence of 'parallel' discourses, which exist separate from each other at different scales, in that case, the institutional, the national and the European (see Dale 2006c).

What this means in practical terms is that we need to focus on and seek to understand the implications for education, of not just a new range of actors who are now involved in the process, but of a new range of activities that it involves, and a new range of scales at which it takes place—as well as, of course, studying the interrelationships of these changes in actors, activities and scales.

One example of the kind of theorizing made possible by the recognition of and escape from, methodological nationalism and statism is to conceive of 'education' as not necessarily and exclusively associated with the nation-state, but as constituted through the complex workings of functional and scalar divisions of the labour of educational governance (see Dale,2003), which can mean any or all of a single locus of governance, parallel loci of governance at different scales, or hybrid forms of governance across scales, and/or activities, and/or agents. So, what is broadly meant by governance here is the replacement of the assumption that the state always and necessarily governs education through control of all the activities of governing, with what might be called the coordination of coordination, with the state possibly retaining the role of coordinator, or regulator, of last resort (see Dale, 1997).

Educationism

At this point we will turn to the third, and possibly most controversial, 'ism', 'educationism'. What is taken as education in comparative education, and far beyond, is as unproblematic as nationalism or statism. What is understood by education can be seen as equally fixed, abstract and absolute as the other two isms, as also requiring explanation rather than providing it, and as having similar consequences for analysis and understanding. It is crucial to note that the central elements of what we refer to as 'education' have themselves co-evolved in a rather similar way—indeed, alongside the evolution of the nation-state (see Green 1993)—and may be in need of a similar kind of 'unbundling'.

'Education' would appear on the surface to be the most constant of the three components we are currently examining. After all, everyone in the world has either been to school, or is to have the opportunity to go to school—which, interestingly, is how education is defined in the *Millennium Development Goals*. However, we also know both that what is understood by education differs widely and along multiple dimensions, and that the experience of schooling varies enormously—which, of course, has been the grist of comparative education from its inception.

More precisely, what we are calling 'educationism' refers to the tendency to regard 'education' as a single category for purposes of analysis, with an assumed common scope, and a set of implicitly shared knowledges, practices and assumptions. It occurs when education is treated as abstract, fixed, absolute, a-historical and universal, when no distinctions are made between its use to describe purpose, process, practice and outcomes. Particular representations of education are treated in isolation from each other, and addressed discretely rather than as part of a wider assemblage of representations -- for there is no suggestion that the different representations of education have nothing in common with each other, or that the label is randomly attached. Far from it, it is the recognition that there are crucial relationships between different representations of education that are being occluded or disguised by the failure to distinguish between them that makes it so important to identify and seek to go beyond educationism. Educationism does not discriminate between uses of the term or make them problematic, and this makes it almost impossible for 'education' to be the object of comparison. This compounded by two self-limiting parochialisms. Disciplinary parochialism restricts the bases for the study of education of education to approaches that come within the field, often, it seems, to work that contains 'education' in its title; this leads to analyses that share the same assumptions about the field—with the lexical equivalence removing the need to problematise them (see Dale 1994). Institutional parochialism similarly refers to the tendency within all education studies to take existing education systems, institutions and practices in isolation as self evidently the appropriate focus for their endeavours, and not to problematise these systems, and so on (see Dale 2005: 134)

Fundamentally, educationism treats education as single, indiscriminate aggregate of representations that are qualitatively different from each other. There are three elements involved in addressing this problem. The first is to disaggregate, or 'unbundle' these different components. The second is to seek to establish the determinants and consequences of the boundaries and content of education as a separate sector; and the third is to focus on questions around how, by whom and under what circumstances, education is currently represented.

The first, which we have discussed previously (see Dale, 2000), involves replacing the single term education by a series of questions that any understanding of education has to take into account. This essentially entails stipulative representations of 'education' with a set of variables. The basic idea behind the Education Questions is that rather than assuming/accepting that we all mean the same thing when we are talking about education, we pose a set of precise questions that can frame discussions and provide a basis for coherent discussion and systematic comparison. The questions are intended to provide some common ground where the nature and bases of different conceptions of education and its purposes, institutions and practices, might first be made clearer and eventually lay the ground for the kind of productive dialogue that their mutual neglect and incommensurability had denied. They are also intended to make different

conceptions of education 'mutually intelligible' through providing a set of questions to which they are all able to respond, albeit, and expectedly, in a range of wholly different ways (see Dale, 2006a)

(i) The education questions

These questions are set at four levels (both to reflect the range of meanings that might be attached to 'education' and to make clear the complexity of the questions, none of which can be answered from within a single level alone).

LEVEL	EDUCATION QUESTIONS
Level 1 **Educational Practice**	Who is taught, (or learns through processes explicitly designed to foster learning), what, how and why, when, where, by/from whom, under what immediate circumstances and broader conditions, and with what results? How, by whom and for what purposes is this evaluated?
Level 2 **Education Politics**	How, in pursuit of what manifest and latent social, economic, political and educational purposes; under what pattern of coordination of education governance; by whom; and following what (sectoral and cultural) path dependencies, are these things problematised decided, administered, managed?
Level 3 **The Politics of Education**	What functional, scalar and sectoral divisions of labour of educational governance are in place? In what ways are the core problems of capitalism (accumulation, social order and legitimation) reflected in the mandate, capacity and governance of education? How and at what scales are contradictions between the solutions addressed? How are the boundaries of the 'education sector' defined and how do they overlap with and relate to other sectors? What 'education-related' activities are undertaken within other sectors? How is the education sector related to the citizenship and gender regimes? How, at what scale and in what sectoral configurations does education contribute to the extra-economic embedding/stabilisation of accumulation? What is the nature of intra- and inter-scalar and intra- and inter-sectoral relations (contradiction, cooperation, mutual indifference?)
Level 4 **Outcomes**	What are the individual, private, public, collective and community outcomes of 'Education', at each scalar level?

These levels are those of educational practice; education politics; the politics of education; and the level of outcomes. Finally, it needs to be stated that the Education Questions still assume a national basis for 'education'. This is because that is the level at

which empirically we still find the greater part of the activities that come under the heading of education taking place. However, as a glance at the Level 3 questions will confirm, this does not mean adopting a wholly, or exclusively, national focus. Nor does it mean that the national is the only or the most important scale of analysis. Nor does it entail any assumption of comparability between national levels; it is still important to problematise the comparability of the categories we use within and across levels and scales (See Table 1).

(ii) Education as a sector[2]

One very useful approach to looking at the changes that have—and have not—occurred to, and within, national education *sectors* has been put forward by David Levi Faur (2006), through a Policy Sector Approach to comparative political analysis. He suggests that:

> When we study sectors we examine them in two senses, the *Generic* and the *nation-specific* (cf. Vogel 1996, 258). The generic characteristics of the sector are the most common features that a sector has; they exist beyond nations and regions and are applicable in principle to countries as different, for example, as Jamaica and Germany. The nation-specific characteristics of a sector reflect the changes in the generic features as the result of its integration into the national setting or context. To distinguish between generic and nation-specific characteristics of a sector is to be sensitive to the commonalities of ….. sectors beyond nations but at the same time to understand that sectors are embedded in national settings and thus acquire characteristics of their own. Indeed, it makes sense to distinguish three different aspects of the sectors' *generic* and *nation-specific* characteristics: the technological, the economic and the political… (Vogel: 2006, 368-9).

Our argument is that both the generic and the nation-specific (indeed, what counts as nation-specific) characteristics of education sectors have changed and are changing under the pressure of the political and economic aspects on the technological aspects. So, while this approach is extremely interesting and important in this context, but for its value to be realized it is crucial not to confine the analysis to 'nation-specific' characteristics, but, in the spirit of the changing governance of education, to extend it to 'sub-national-' and 'supranational-' specific characteristics.

It might be argued that the two central elements of the technology of the education sector are its discourses and its practices, and that both are part of a globalised Western modernity, rather than the product or property of any particular nation state. The key evidence for the former is to be found in Meyer et al's analyses of the global scripts of education (see for example, Meyer et al 1992). The most crucial, but also the most taken for granted feature of these discourses is that they essentially *equate education with (compulsory) schooling*. We see the continuing centrality of this association quite dramatically, for instance, in the formulation of the Millennium Development Goal for Education, which is 'to achieve Universal Primary Education'; this is even more explicitly related to schooling in Target 3, which is to 'Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling'. Progress towards the achievement of the goal is monitored by increases in the number of children able to access primary education. Thus the practices of education are to be found in the

[2] We take the idea of 'educational system' in this context as included in 'education sector'.

processes of schooling, which—as the Education MDG again shows-- themselves have taken on an equally 'global' aspect, to the point where we may refer to them as a common 'grammar of schooling' (Tyack and Tobin 1994; Dale 2006c). Together, then, these discourses and practices may be seen as comprising a significant part of the *technology* of the education sector. In a very real sense, they define what education *is;* 'education' is identified as that which takes place through the grammar of schooling and transmits a particular culture.

Essentially what we might see such discourses and practices explaining is the nature and tenacity of key elements of what have been historically (over a very long period—see Vanderstraeten, 2006) the generic features of education sectors—in the form of the equation of education with schooling and common curricular categories across the world—and the political—their support and diffusion by epistemic communities, professional experts and so on. What they do not explain so effectively is the economic aspect (see Dale 2000). However, more fundamentally, we see in education in an era of neo-liberal globalization, significant shifts in both generic and nation specific features of the education as a sector, and in the relationships between them That is to say, education as sector is changing in ways that make existing assumptions and forms of analysis—those that make up methodological educationism—unhelpful, even misleading. We might best elaborate this point by seeking to identify the changing nature of the sector's generic (or transnational) features, and of its political, economic and technical features. The essence of the argument here is that rather than a single set of shared features making up a fundamentally common and undifferentiated—generic-- education sector, with the 'generic' being 'mediated' into the national in various ways, what we see is a breakdown of the generic characteristics of the education sector, and their replacement by what may be seen conceptually as a dual –or even triple, if we take into account the development of the sub-national level—set of features framing different 'education' sectors, with the relationship between them not confined to one of mediation, but taking forms such as hybrids and parallel operations. And further, we suggest that the basic characteristics that set the political, economic and technological aspects of the education sector are being framed by the work of international organisations, operating to a broadly common script (see Dale, 2006b)

However, when we introduce the possibility of the sector extending beyond the national scale, a rather different story appears. Rather than an assumption of a requisite level of compatibility of national political and economic characteristics, we have been assuming that the forces of globalisation will both make the relationships of the political and economic at the national level problematic, and will themselves be formed into different but parallel sets of demands, definitions and expectations at supra- and sub-national levels. And here the emphases are rather different. At sub-national levels, the stakes concern largely political issues, of representation, voice, etc. At supra-national level, the stakes are much more economic, as is witnessed in the constant reiteration of the importance of international economic competitiveness, and the paramount need for education to contribute to a global knowledge economy. We see here clearly the functional and scalar division of education governance, with issues around economic competitiveness shifting 'upwards', and issues around education's role in the distribution of opportunities within national societies remaining at the national level, or moving 'downwards'. The key difference here concerns the nature and status of the generic characteristics. At national and sub-national level they continue to form the terrain on which the political disputes about the distribution of opportunities, etc, are carried out. At the supranational level, however, they become themselves what is at stake, as they are

perceived to be 'unfit for purpose' in a global knowledge economy (Robertson 2005). It is for this reason that we see not just the rise of supranational organisations in education, but their rise with a particular agenda to reform, reconstruct or transform the grammar of education. And the way in which we might imagine this being carried out is through the effective construction of parallel, or mutually imbricated but distinct, education sectors, and it is this attempted reconstruction of the generic characteristics of education that underpins the functional and scalar division of educational governance, which, in its turn, we suggest, is the key to understanding what should now be compared in education. So, we see a double movement of the generic characteristics of education; at the national and sub-national level, they are largely politically mediated, framed and interpreted in various, but not fundamentally challenging ways; at supranational level, there is rather a project of appropriating them, transforming them, and attaching them to the wider political project.

(iii) Representation

What the current era of globalisation has cracked open is the hegemonic status of what is a particular, spatially and temporally located representation of 'national education system' that is fused to, and directed by state power. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the representation of education constructed by the world polity theorists (see Meyer et al 1992), which essentially sees it as a set of common curricular categories in nation-state controlled education systems. In the current era of globalisation, we can see major challenges to this hegemonic status, with a range of social and political forces operating at a number of scales (global, regional, local and national) seeking to undermine the nation-state's claims to a monopoly over the sector (even when it is possible to show that it does not, and in many cases never has had a monopoly on the sector). These challenges are coming from within the national state itself (e.g. Singapore – see Olds and Thrift, 2004), as well as from global and international organisations (OECD, World Bank), firms (for example, Microsoft, Jarvis – see Ball, 2007) and institutions (for example, universities – see Marginson, 2006).

The idea of 'representation' as a moment in wider social processes is particularly useful in helping us see that discourses about knowledge production in society are semiotic processes which have ideational and representational moments (Cameron and Palan, 2004). Being able to 'fix' a particular meaning at the ideational and representational by embedding this imaginary in social institutions enables power to reproduce itself and thus give it force (Jessop, 2004). However, as Jessop points out, this spatio-temporal fix is always temporary, and always challenges by the contradictions of capitalism.

There are now a number of competing imaginaries as to what education should look like in the modern 21st Century that we outline below by way of three (illustrative and not exhaustive) examples. The point of providing these examples is to also show that these imaginaries are also getting some traction at scales beyond the 'national' 'sector, and if we are to appreciate the political import of these alternative imaginaries as challenges, we must also begin to look at them more systematically.

One particular representation of education is through the use of statistics in the form of indicators (such as with PISA run by the OECD), benchmarks (MDGs, etc) and thresholds. Paradoxically, in this context, the purpose is to make education systems more comparable (though not necessarily more diverse). So, from comparing, or juxtaposing, culturally distinct and diverse educational practices and goals, comparative education is

propelled in the direction of ranking education systems against a common set of indicators.
It is also important to note that these statiastical proxies for 'education' are not intended to represent collectively a means of more closely and commonly defining the existing range of purposes, policies and practices found in national education systems, but to create an overarching and common set of alternative purposes, policies and practices. They are intended not only to make education systems more comparable and commensurable, but to change and direct them in particular ways.

A second powerful form is in the use of new metaphors—for instance like 'clusters', 'networks', 'hubs', 'hotspots'—to drive and generate change (see Robertson and Olds, 2007). These new imaginaries borrow not only open up the space for new players into the knowledge production business, but they operate in the parallel and hybrid spaces that are being opened by national states (cf. Singapore, and the 'Singapore Global Schoolhouse' – Olds and Thrift, 2005). These new assemblages operate outside rather than inside existing regulatory spaces; they also create institutional forms that are radically different from the knowledge production sector that we new as the national state education sector.

A third example is the emergence of a powerful discourse and set of institutions that make up the for-profit education sector. There is an increasingly complex and sophisticated set of policy and social practices in this sector, including firms that supply information for investors in the sector, an annual index of publicly listed firms all trading in education services (see Robertson, 2006a). This sector articulates with visions for education, as a once decommodified service sector, to be bought into the tradeable services sector regulated under World Trade Organisation rules.

A final example is the challenge to national education systems by the international organisations, including the OECD and World Bank, to re-imagine and rescript their role in modern 21st century society (Robertson, 2005). At the heart of this criticism is the view that national education systems are products of the industrial era and have, as a result, reached their so called 'use-by date'. New visions are currently being offered as alternatives – such as networked schools shaped by personalised learning. While there is considerable variation in the responses by national actors, the idea of personalisation has seeped into the policy discourse of a number of countries.

Conclusions

In this paper have tried to make three, connected, points. The first is that the chronic tendency within social science as a whole to make the national the focus of all analytic attention is more than ever problematic in an era of globalisation, while the tendency to reify, or fetishise, the national level can be seen to extend to the form of rule—'statism'—and, in the case of comparative education, to the object of study, education. The second is that this exercise demonstrates that the three terms were never actually accurate—the state never 'did it all', for instance. And the third and most important in the chapter is that each of these is in danger of generating from the core categories of comparative education a set of methodological 'isms', which have to be recognised and overcome if we are to progress comparative education in an era of globalisation.

However, when the national is still the commonest location of educational governance, 'the state' is the commonest form of its governance, and 'education' is still the most useful portmanteau term for the activities we focus on, 'What is now to be compared?. The point is, as we have tried to show in this chapter, that the 'nation' and the 'state' of today are not the same nation and state that they were even ten years ago, and nor are the relationships between them the same. Similarly, 'education' has always been tacitly recognised as 'being' and 'doing' different things, but it has now taken on some qualitatively novel elements. In our view, this makes it all the more important to recognise the nature and the danger of national, state, and education becoming methodological isms, frozen in the assumptions of earlier eras. The danger can be seen in Smith's comment in the epigraph to this chapter; the concepts of national, education systems 'derive their power from appearing to be just what they always were'. The implications of this are by no means confined to the methodological. As we have tried to indicate in this chapter, they have very clear theoretical implications. Further than that, when that power is rooted in the maintenance of the idea that nothing has changed when everything has changed, the implications are political. As we have tried to show, 'education' is no longer, if it ever was, the national, or the public, issue, or the set of curriculum categories, that has featured in most studies of comparative education, and as long as we fail to recognise and act on that understanding, we become complicit in concealing the changes and their consequences not only from ourselves but from those we seek to enlighten. We see this most clearly in the way that 'education' is now being represented, where we may see a clear choice for comparative education, of becoming the (unwitting, if we do not see beyond the isms) accomplice of a redefinition of 'education' as framed through the medium of statistical representations, which, because of the very fact that it is so 'accountably' embedded, is both more difficult to identify and, especially to budge.

Involvement in forms of statistical representation is particularly ironic for comparative education. (see also Theret 2005, and Novoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003) It involves the purposive elision of national differences in pursuit of comparability for the purpose of more efficient and effective government, effectively both making national institutional boundaries more porous and laying the basis for both reconstructed and reshaped national education sectors, and at the same time of a new transnational education sector. In so far as comparative education is complicit in this, it is ironic that that involvement definitively undermines the national basis on which it has rested and has taken for granted.

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