

## SOCIAL COMPONENTS OF COMPARATIVE EDUCATION

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Interrelation of theory and practice is a central aspect of comparative education as well as of education as such. Comparative knowledge of education cannot, in fact, be regarded as an end in itself. It entails practical and social effects, since it takes into consideration the fact that changes are taking place not only in the organization and functioning of the school system, but also in the social conditions to which formal and informal education are closely tied up.

A careful reading of the proceedings of the conferences of the European Society of Comparative Education and of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies bears evidence of this interconnection.

The concept lying at its roots was expressed by Professor Torsten Husén at the London World Conference on «Cultural Diversity and Political Unity» in 1977. He underlined «the influence of social factors on educational systems», and argued that «uniformity and differentiation depend on the development of liberal political ideas». Hence his question «To what extent are and will educational systems be capable of modifying the differences in social conditions?»

I will not venture to catalogue and analyze the subjects dealing with social aspects of education that are part and parcel of the studies which have been brought about until now in the field of comparative education. I will not, therefore, present a summary and an evaluation of the international and intercultural elements of social research that have been properly considered worthy of consideration in conferences and in essays on comparative education.

My purpose in this paper is more limited in its scope.

I would like to shed some light on a problem that appears to me rather urgent in the situation of society today, and to stress its importance as a component of comparative education. The question I have in mind concerns the relationship between nature and society and the world dimension of the ecological crisis, with the view to underline its importance in comparative education.

The social consideration of education has undergone some important

changes during the past decades, upon which the research in comparative education is closely dependent. The conceptual framework of the social components of comparative education demands, therefore, a preliminary attention, however well-known to this audience its content and meaning undoubtedly are.

The first remark concerns the social import of reflective thinking, whose notion is closely related to the practical and social motivations of the process of knowledge.

Piaget's psychology provides a valuable contribution to the analysis of this relationship. He pointed out that «reciprocity» and «decentralisation» are «parallel» to intellectual performance. The development of the ability to place themselves from the point of view of their companions represents the evidence of the birth of logical thinking in children. Piaget's insistence on the close relation between his conception of the nature of knowledge and what he considers a basic point of Freud's theory deserves attention.

In a page of his book *Jugement et raisonnement chez les enfants* (1924) he offers an explanation of this affinity.

«Le langage et le raisonnement discursif», he wrote, «sont un produit des échanges interindividuels. Lorsqu'un individu ne peut insérer sa pensée intime et son affectivité dans ce schéma, lorsqu'il renonce à penser socialement, le fait même de cet isolement enlève à la pensée sa structure logique. Par un tout autre biais, la psychanalyse est arrivée à un résultat extrêmement comparable. Cela restera l'un des mérites de la psychanalyse d'avoir distingué deux manières de penser, l'une sociale, communicable, dirigée par le besoin de s'adapter aux autres, la «pensée logique», l'autre intime et incommunicable comme telle, la «pensée autistique». Or, Freud et ses disciples ont précisément montré que, par le fait de son «autisme», cette seconde manière de penser restait confuse, non dirigée, étrangère au souci de vérité...» (1947, p. 165).

From an educational viewpoint, Dewey had already considered communication the «genuine» factor of social life. In his writings on the nature and process of thinking he anticipated Piaget's idea that interpersonal exchanges are an essential constituent of the act of thinking. As he stressed in *Democracy and Education* (1916, p. 173), «Through the growth of social sympathies does thinking develop».

However, he explained, «a large number of human relationships in any social group are still upon the machine-like plane». They gain a truly social character as an effect of «sharing of purposes and a communication of interests».

The educational value of communication lies in the fact that it produces a change of personality both on the recipient of communication and on the individual who communicates. At the same time Dewey stressed the inner and personal source of communication. «The formulation of an experience» that makes possible communication is something whose responsibility pertains exclusively to the individual. Therefore, if communication

represents the genuine character of social life, freedom lies at its roots. «No thought, no idea», — he wrote — «can possibly be conveyed as an idea from one person to another. When it is told, it is, to the one to whom it is told, another given fact, not an idea» (*Ibid.*, 188).

Another contribution to the concept of the social aspect of education is Dewey's insistence on the need to widen «the intellectual and moral horizon of educational theory». One of the most important meanings of what was later called «permanent education» is already announced in his statement that «any serious theory of education must begin with an account of the social institutions and arrangements which condition the work of education rather than with the school system as such». A primary aim of education is to find out to what extent each one of the social institutions is operating upon the responsibility and control of all its components. On this basis only, Dewey insisted, «we shall arrive at a conception of the intrinsic nature of a democratic society educationally considered» («The Economic and Social Conception of Education» by John Dewey and John L. Childs, in *The Educational Frontier*, 1933, p. 39).

This idea of society opens a wide horizon for research in comparative education on the local, national, and international levels.

A further point, closely bound to this, deserves consideration in Dewey's educational theory. It concerns the concept of science and technology as contributing factors in the development of individuals and institutions. The problem of the relationship between nature and society in Dewey's conception is intimately connected with it.

Science — it is well known — has a fundamental importance in Dewey's philosophy and educational theory. Its influence is paramount both on the process of thinking and in social life. Science and democracy are interchangeable in his mind. A democratic conception of education extended to the total organization and functioning of society is dependent upon the development of the scientific method of thinking among all its members. «Those who accept the idea that education is a social operation must, if their acceptance is sincere, consider how family life, the church, the production and distribution of goods, agriculture, the means and modes of amusement and recreation, ends and means in politics have been affected by the development of science and technology, these being the great causal forces at work» (*The Educational Frontier*, p. 52).

Both science and society are subjected to corruption when they are divorced from each other. Science and technology are rich of immense potentialities of human growth, which cannot be brought to reality under the present social system.

In order to achieve positive results, they «have to be implemented by a social-economic system that establishes and uses the means for the production of free human beings associating with one another in terms of equality. Then and then only will these means be an integral part of the end» (J. Dewey, «Economic Basis of New Society», in *Intelligence in the Modern*

*World*, 1939, p. 430).

Science and technology miss their aim when they are employed as factors of domination and exploitation of society and nature, rather than as conditions of their close cooperation. Separation of man from nature and society is the effect of their instrumental use. Domination makes communication impossible.

This separation is the result of submission of science to aims alien to its nature. Its alienation is parallel to alienation of man from nature and from himself.

In Dewey's conception «unity» of society and nature is founded on «connections» and «interdependence». Therefore he maintains that «traditional theories that separated life from nature» have to be discarded. «We cannot separate organic life and spirit from physical nature without separating at the same time nature from life and spirit. Separation has reached a point in which intelligent persons are asking whether its end will not be a catastrophe, namely, submission of man to the industrial and military machine he has created» (Dewey, *Experience and Nature*).

The human and social condition is radically altered when nature is offended, since «the human condition falls entirely within nature».

In 1945 Dewey was deeply impressed by the evidence, brought about by war events, that «physical knowledge and physical technology have far outstripped social and human engineering».

After the war, Dewey's main idea that nature, society, and personal integrity are inseparable was taken up from a deeply different philosophical point of view, by the major representatives of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research.

In *Eclipse of Reason* (1947) Max Horkheimer expounded the concept that «the illness of reason is to be traced in its being originated from the need to master nature». Along this line, he wrote that «from the moment that reason became the instrument of domination that man exerts over human and extra-human nature, its intention to discover truth was frustrated». Not only the pursuit of knowledge, but also the coming to birth of a humane society was hampered by the aggressive attitude toward nature. Stressing this idea, Horkheimer wrote that «the collective folly of our time, from the concentration camps to mass culture, had its origin in the glance that the first man casted upon nature as a prey».

Theodor W. Adorno carried further this perspective. In *Negative Dialektik* (1966), he insisted on the concept that man's control of nature is closely bound to the violence that he exerts on his fellow men and on his own nature. «With the disavowal of nature in man», he declared, «not only the *Télos* of external nature, but also the *Télos* of his own life is perturbed and dulled» (quoted in Habermas' essay for Adorno's death, «Odyssey of Reason Toward Nature» [*Comunità*, 1971, p. 293]).

Following the central theme of Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Herbert Marcuse developed the most critical view of the

conception of reason as an instrument of man's control of nature. «Technological rationality» he wrote in *One Dimensional Man* (1964), «protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of domination, and the instrumental horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society».

Marcuse's insistence on the rejection of what he calls «the totalitarian universe of technological rationality» and his «attempt to rescue the rationality of the negative» are well known. His idea that «negative thinking», expressed to a large extent by literary and artistic language, represents the new dimension of reason «transcending the established reality», has influenced educational theory during the past few decades. In Italy this pedagogical trend has been fostered by a philosopher of education, Giovanni Maria Bertin. The key-note of his «Education to Reason» is the «dissent with the existent», whose achievement «justifies...the opposition to a scientific-technological and political reason... by a poetic and artistic, religious and metaphysical reason...». His debt to Nietzsche's philosophy rests on the idea of «Ueberwindung», the overcoming and transformation of existing reality. Hence his stress of the validity of «the mistrust for scientific and technological reason which is unable to act in the direction of Nietzschean Ueberwindung».

Appeal to nature in order to escape from the violence of existing society, whose process of change was paving the way to industrialisation and technological development, had already been expressed by writers of the XIX century. Art was the forerunner of philosophy in its perception of the crisis of civilisation. During the last decade of the century Oscar Wilde, while still in prison and immediately after his release, denounced «the punishment inflicted by society» to convicted people by the English legal and penal system, particularly cruel to children in prison, whose «limitless terror» he considered something by what «our own actual society does worse itself». Wilde stressed the fact that the «contaminating influence of prison on young children is that of the whole prison system» not that of prisoners themselves. On the contrary, «the only really humanizing influence in prison is the influence of the prisoners. Their cheerfulness under terrible circumstances, their sympathy for each other, their gentleness...are all quite wonderful» (O. Wilde, *Two Letters To The «Daily Chronicle»* [1897]).

Also written in 1897, the same year of his release, is the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, at the same time the most impressive denunciation of death penalty and a strikingly vivid description of the exalted solidarity of prisoners toward their companion in the very instant of his execution.

The last lines of *De Profundis* express his feelings toward nature as the only safe abode from a cruel society, implicitly demanding a total renewal. «Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may

walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt; she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole» (O.W., *The Works*, p. 888).

Nature as the only possible refuge from an unjust society had already been described about half a century before Wilde's death by Henry David Thoreau, «who invested his life in his native village to the end of enacting the doctrines of New England Transcendentalism...» (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 22, 152A).

His search of «intimacy with nature» with the aim «to live an uncommitted life open to spirit» took place «in a commercial, conservative, expedient society rapidly becoming urban and industrialized» (*Ibid*). His «ecstatic communion with nature» during the two years he spent at Walden represented «the great occasion of his life», of which he fully took advantage after moments of doubt and unpleasant feelings. He himself described what he called his «recovery», made up of the discovery of his inner self in contact with nature. «In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in nature in the very faltering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me...» (H.D. Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods*, 1964, 92).

Nature was seen and experienced by Thoreau not as a rejection of society, but rather as the place where pursuit of a genuine society could be successful.

An Italian psychoanalyst, Elvio Fachinelli, recently comparing Thoreau's condition and emotion in touch with nature with the situation that technologic advancement has created for us, remarked that «nature appears to us today wounded and deeply changed». Both society and nature are being subjected to an unprecedented violence which has made escape from either of them impossible. «When threat has become ubiquitous and the entire world gets dark» men are naturally led to localise that threat and to find some scapegoat for their aggressive reaction. «The nanocurie of Chernobyl and Caorso have a much greater persecuting splendour than the widespread sources of pollution that invade us every day». The Holocaust threatens again our society, in which any difference between existing reality and the «most frightening monsters of our dreams» disappeared (E. Fachinelli, «Chernobyl e gli effetti sull'inconscio. Il nucleare va in analisi», *Corriere della Sera*, July 23, 1986).

Chernobyl brought about a radical change. The «atom of peace» appeared to be closely allied to the «atom of war». Shortly after the nuclear accident, the *New York Herald Tribune* published, on May 6, an article by John Wilford, whose title gave voice to the widespread anxiety all around the world: «Old Fears Resurface Over New Technology». «People», Wilford wrote, «carry in their minds images of the mushroom cloud of

Hiroshima, and so atomic bomb and nuclear power plants become to them interchangeable in their potential for death and destruction». The following day, the *New York Times* published an article by Harvard's science historian Everett Mendelsohn after a visit to Chernobyl. «Each of these technological systems», he remarked, «nuclear power and the Shuttle, has pushed the development of technology to great complexity and pushed humans to the edge of our capacities to understand and operate them». Professor Mendelsohn argued that the two accidents «should give us real pause as to the degree to which we should rely on technological systems».

Although hopes are faint in a recovery of reason in responsible holders of world power, our faith survives in the importance of education for making public opinion conscious of the threat for survival hanging on nature and society. Indeed, concern for nature offended by the present use of science and technology has been constantly growing after Chernobyl's disaster. A new sensibility for the joint destiny of nature and the human race is coming to birth. Its first sign has, in fact, already appeared in 1953 as an effect of the fall out and the increase of radioactivity after the nuclear experiments in the State of New York. A serious accident occurred during an experiment of the Atomic Energy Commission in the Pacific Ocean in March 1954 «contributed to make the problem dramatic». Barry Commoner informs in his book *The Closing Circle* (1972) that in 1958 some professors of the Washington University of Saint Louis, together with a group of political men, «created the Commission of St. Louis for nuclear information» that originated a movement for scientific information now largely devoted to the education of the public on environmental problems» (Italian translation, 1986, p. 139).

Other Universities in U.S.A. developed similar programs. I wish to mention the first Summer Institute for Educators on «The Humanities of the Sea» which was opened in 1972 at the Virginia University. Professor Horace Kallen was invited to contribute to the program and commuted from New York City to the University of Virginia notwithstanding his very advanced age. He informed me in his letters how keen he was for this which proved to be his last adventure. His dedication impressed me deeply as a testimony that something should and could be done to raise the problem of the relationships between man and nature to a central role in education. The Virginia Institute aimed to study, as its program indicated, «the humanistic elements of man-ocean relationship and the oceanic influences on man and man's culture: an area of reflection whose neglect represents a significant gap in human knowledge».

This gap is still very great everywhere. The pioneering projects which have been brought about in several universities deserve great attention. They have undoubtedly exercised some influence on youth during the recent years. In close accord with them the interest for ecological problems has been pushed forward by several publications and books the number of whose readers is increasing, owing to their translation in different

languages. In Italy, during the past few months, not only *The Circle to Close*, by Barry Commoner, which I mentioned above, but also *Our Responsibilities Toward Nature*, by John Passmore, and *The Ecology of Freedom* (1986), by Murray Bookchin, have become available.

I found Bookchin's book particularly interesting. The author, emeritus professor of social ecology at the University of Vermont, acknowledges his debt to the work of Max Weber, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Karl Polanyi, and even more to «the anarchist thinkers of the previous century, particularly Peter Kropotkin», whom he considers «unique in his emphasis on the need for a reconciliation of humanity with nature». The criticism of a hierarchical conception of their relationship is the leitmotif of his book. Some of his guiding ideas re-echo Dewey and Adorno. «Today more than at any time in the past we have lost sight of the *télos* that renders us an aspect of nature — not merely in relationship to our own “needs” and “interests” but to the meanings within nature itself» (p. 315).

There is a marxian flavour in his statement that «our re-entry into natural evolution is no less a humanization of nature than a naturalization of humanity» (*Ibid*).

He insists that «nature is as much a precondition for the *development* of society — not merely its emergence — as technics, labor, language, and mind» (p. 33). However, the concept of «emergence» of society from nature qualifies, in Bookchin's work, the relationship that binds them so closely. «Mankind», he points out in his «preface» to the Italian translation (pp. 15-16), «is a part of nature... We cannot forget our place in nature without endangering our survival. The ecological crisis which is now developing to almost uncontrollable and probably irreversible dimensions is a proof of our biological roots. But we also live in a social world which is different from nature insofar as culture has gradually come out of nature and has given us the powers of reason, artistic creation, technical invention, and symbolic representation, that are only latent in the natural world».

Notwithstanding this difference, there is «interaction» that binds up together nature and society; there is «interdependence», a «dynamic balance», a «continuum», through which nature proceeds into society. As an effect of this relationship «we are the very “knowingness” of nature, the embodiment of nature's evolution into intellect, mind and self-reflexivity» (p. 38).

Nature is, therefore, conceived by Bookchin as endowed with subjective character. It is «*natura naturans*» rather than «*natura naturata*».

Upon this concept of interdependence and continuity rests the social dimension of ecology. Bookchin's idea of «freedom» as common both to nature and society is closely tied up to the idea of «totality». Totality, or «wholeness», is conceived by him not as «a bleak undifferentiated “universality” that involves the reduction of a phenomenon to what it has in

common to everything else... To the contrary, wholeness comprises the variegated structures, the articulations, and the mediations that impart to the whole a rich variety of forms...» (p. 23).

Research on the social aspects and components of comparative education might avail itself advantageously of these concepts of a total social ecology.

Changes of the attitude of youth toward the environment have been in recent years part and parcel of an all-embracing transformation of their situation in all dimensions of reality and personal and social life. The complaints about the loss of ideal motivations in the behaviour and thinking of the young, and the insistence of sociologists on the concept of «new poverities» affecting youth are put to a serious test by the birth and spread of nonviolent groups in several countries. The importance they are giving to a «culture of the environment» and the attitude they are taking toward the development of technology based on the use of atomic power are not isolated aspects of their growing interest for nature and society, but the signs of a deep change of mind toward the human living in general and toward reality as a whole.

The problem of the attitude of youth toward the environment has been considered in some of the inquiries performed during the past few years. The importance in comparative education research to find out whether changes had occurred in the opinions and behaviour of young people with regard to the relationship toward the natural and social environment has been perceived in different countries.

Two of the many inquiries on youth that have been brought about during the past decade have been concerned with the problem of their attitude toward the environment as one aspect of their opinions with regard to personal and social life.

The first of them was performed in 1977 on students of the last two years of upper secondary schools in England, France, and Italy. The research was originated in France by professors Carmen Camilleri, professor of psychology at the Sorbonne, and Andrée Michel, research director at CNRS in Paris. Professors of education and other colleagues in Italy and England were invited to join them in this study, whose results were published in the review *Ethno-Psychologie* in 1980 with the title «La représentation du futur chez les lycéens français, italiens et anglais».

A report on the research was presented by professor Borghi at the CESE Würzburg Conference in 1983 and was published in *Comparative Education* in the same year in a revised and edited version by professor Edmund J. King.

The number of students involved was rather small, amounting to 470 in the three countries. Its results cannot, therefore, be considered representative of the opinions of youth with regard to their perspectives on the future, whose discovery was the object of inquiry. A further handicap was the fact that the sample in all three countries was made up of students —

boys and girls — who belonged to a large extent to the upper levels of the population.

Moreover, the answers that students gave to the question concerning the future of the environment were not correlated with those related to the other ten areas of the questionnaire, dealing with economic, social, political, and personal perspectives on the future.

The general attitude of the young who expressed their view about the future of the environment was highly pessimistic. Pessimistic answers reached percentages of 81 in France, 72 in Italy, 70 in England.

The ecological consciousness revealed by students who responded to this area of the questionnaire varied in the three countries. Quoting from the Würzburg Report, «The percentage of Italian respondents was much lower (9%) than that of English (27%) and French (45%) respondents». Answers of the students also varied with regard to sex. «Italian girls never mentioned this topic in their compositions, in contrast to the French, whose statements on this theme reached the highest percentage (51%) in the entire group. English girls followed with a considerably lower percentage (31%). Both French and English boys dealt with this topic in lesser proportion (respectively, 38 and 25%), followed by Italian boys, whose participation in the discussion was the lowest (14%). Pessimism ranked very high in all the subgroups. English and French girls obtaining the highest percentages (85 and 84%), followed by French and Italian boys (70 and 72%)» (L. Borghi, «Youth Perspectives on the Future», *Comparative Education*, Volume 19, Number 3, 1983, p. 273).

The second research, allowing some space to the ecological problem, was performed five years later by the Commission of European Communities. Its results are available in a brochure whose title is: *Les Jeunes Européens. Etude Exploratoire des Jeunes de 15 à 24 ans dans les Pays de la Communauté Européenne*. The report informs that «a questionnaire of 70 items was submitted in March-April 1982 to national samples representative of the population aged 15 years and more, totalling 9700 people. They were interviewed personally in their homes by professional personnel of both sexes».

The topic of their concern for the future of the environment was one of the many on which they expressed their views.

They were asked to indicate which subjects of fear with regard to the world in which we live were «truly disturbing *them* personally for the coming ten or 15 years».

Answers to this question by the young from 15 to 24 indicated that the highest source of fear was the «increase of unemployment». They were given by a percentage of 70% of the total respondents. «Increase of criminality and terrorism» resulted to be the second most disturbing fear. It obtained 65 per cent of the answers. «La dégradation de la nature» ranked third. About 60 per cent of the young expressed their fear about the future of natural environment.

In its comment on the results of the inquiry, the Report stated that «some negative aspects of European societies have become so important that the young Europeans believe that they will go on in the future».

The Report added the information that two thousands young people from 15 to 24 were interviewed: about one third of the subjects of the whole population to whom the inquiry was extended. Its amount, the Report declared, «is considered representative of this age-group in the ten countries» of the European Community.

Although a comparison between the two researches of 1977 and 1982 is not possible, owing to their difference in the quantity, social status, and age of their samples, and chiefly to the already noticed lack of representativeness of the first one, a general remark may seem all the same justified and appropriate. The concern for the future of the environment appears to be much greater in the inquiry of the Commission of the European Communities. The increase of environmental degradation was reflected in the attitude of its sample.

### Conclusion

The gist of my report is to be found in its attempt to indicate how urgent is the need of further research on the attitude of people, and particularly of the young, toward the problems of the environment, both natural and social, in European countries. Its theoretical foundation lies in consideration of social and natural ecology as interdependent, and in the stress on the concept that men's behaviour toward nature is part and parcel of their behaviour in society. This idea is to be seen as the leit-motif of the conception of the social components of comparative education that the report had the intention to develop. Its purpose, in terms of education, was to strengthen the consciousness of the mutual relations between nature, society, and spiritual life, with the view to foster genuine communication on the basis of freedom and respect for life.

This theoretical approach is presented in the report as an hypothesis whose validation depends on the attitude of people in different countries to be assessed in further inquiries about their conception of the relationship between nature and society, the perception of their «dynamic unity», and their behaviour as its effect.

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