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ESSAY REVIEW

Local meanings, global schooling: anthropology and world culture theory
Kathryn Anderson-Levitt (Ed.), 2003
New York and London, Palgrave Macmillan
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Rarely do we find authors in educational research who passionately take a stance for or against a particular theory. Living in an era of intellectual ‘heterodoxy’ (Paulston, 1999), very few scholars nowadays dare to claim that their interpretive framework is valid outside the particular context in which it was tested. What we end up with, as a corollary, is a proliferation of pragmatic empirical studies with small claims, neither stepping on other scholars’ territories nor fully exploring their own. A legacy from another era, scholars of world culture theory, at times listed under the classification neo-institutionalism or personalised in the expression ‘The Stanford school of sociology’, have taken a stand—and thereby provoked scholars, including contributors of the edited volume Local meanings, global schooling: anthropology and world culture theory.

World culture theory has had a revitalisation of a special kind. Although John Meyer, Francisco Ramirez and their researchers at Stanford University started to produce their comparative studies on mass schooling and the nation state in the 1970s, their grand claim of a world culture in education only attracted broader attention, notably by globalisation researchers, in the past couple of years. The curiosity of scholars in globalisation studies in what world culture theory has to offer is not confined to the key question of whether reform models in different parts of the world are actually converging toward a singular global model of ‘modern schooling’, but also whether an adoption of reform models from elsewhere is voluntary or imposed, randomly diffused or systematically disseminated, a complement or a supplement to existing local reforms and, ultimately, good or bad.

Kathryn Anderson-Levitt and her colleagues took on the project of scrutinising the grand claims on which world culture theory is resting, and they did so by juxtaposing it with anthropological notions of culture. They investigate local encounters with global forces in various cultural contexts, and develop a fascinating critique of world culture theory from an anthropological perspective. Different from many edited volumes, this book is coherent in its argumentation, and it reads very much like a
single-authored piece that follows a thread and a storyline. The chapters build on each other, dissecting various claims of world culture theory, and assembling the different points of critique into a powerful intellectual debate on globalisation in education.

The book needs to be applauded for its debate format giving voice both to opponents and proponents of world culture theory. The book editor sets the stage by summarising the criticism of world culture theory from an anthropological perspective (chapter 1), then the contributors substantiate that critique by presenting nine case studies (chapters 2–9), and finally one of the most prominent scholars of world culture theory, Francisco O. Ramirez, responds to the critique in the last section of the book.

Each of the nine case studies reflects on how exogenous influences in education (global forces) have been interpreted in a particular community (local encounter). As announced in the title of the book, the case studies investigate 'local meanings' to visions and pressures of 'global schooling', and find a multiplicity of (local) meanings. Their criticism builds on this finding and serves them as an argument to denounce the homogenising effects of globalisation that world culture theory has asserted. The contributors illustrate that although choice, student-centered learning, outcomes-based education, marketisation of schools, etc., went global, they neither replaced already existing models nor did they mean the same in various cultural contexts. For example, choice with regard to the language of instruction, propelled by US missionaries in Tanzania (Stambach, chapter 6), is, for a variety of reasons, a different ‘thing’ altogether than the choice in math instructional methods that factions of the PTA association in California were combating (Rosen, chapter 7). Such variations matter a great deal to the contributors of the edited volume for these differences reveal that individuals in a particular community have a shared understanding of what global reform models mean in their own cultural context. They criticise their antagonists, the scholars of world culture theory, for taking global schooling models at face value without scrutinising at the surface, and examining how they play out differently at the community level. To phrase it more bluntly, world culture theorists seem to have mistaken ‘brand name piracy’ such as choice, outcomes-based education, student-centered learning, etc., hijacked from one corner of the world and catapulted to another, as heralds of an international convergence of education. As will be presented later, Ramirez, of course, retorts this attack in the last section of the book.

Two case studies investigate community responses to educational reforms in the US (Thomas Hatch & Meredith Hong; Lisa Rosen). The other case studies examine local encounters with global forces in Thailand (Susan Jungck with Boonrean Kajornsiin), South Africa (Diane Brook Napier), Guinea (Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt & Boubacar Baye-Diop), PR China (Huhua Ouyang), Tanzania (Amy Stambach), Brazil (Lesley Bartlett), France (Deborah Reed-Dahay) and Israel (Kalani Segal-Levitt).

The two intellectual projects

The debate format of the book also sets the standard for this book review. It demands that a reviewer first gives the floor to the authors of both positions, before presenting

what they mutually criticise each other for. The two camps embark on different intellectual projects: on the one hand the project of making sense of similar developments in schooling in different parts of the world (world culture theory), and on the other the project of understanding why these seemingly similar models of schooling play out differently in various cultural contexts (anthropology).

I shall start with the theory that is under scrutiny. What authors in world culture theory have produced has both volume and deep tissue. When these sociologists write about social systems, structure, or symbols, they always refer, at times more implicitly than explicitly, to a web of fundamental debates from which social theory has been thriving for more than a century. It would be careless to present world culture theory detached from these ongoing intellectual controversies in sociology, and any attempt to summarise the theory in a few sentences should qualify as foolish.

The first chapter of Constructing world culture: international non-governmental organisations since 1875 (Boli & Thomas, 1999) provides an impressive account of the main intellectual positions in this research area. Another recently published book, Constructing education for development: international organisations and Education for All (Chabott, 2003) applies neo-institutionalist theory to prove the international convergence of discourse and programs in development as reflected in the Education for All campaign. John Meyer and Francisco Ramirez have published on this theme for more than 30 years. One of their earlier texts (Meyer et al., 1977) and a more recent publication (Ramirez & Meyer, 2002), in which they explicitly address the debate between neo-institutionalist theory and system theory, might provide the reader with at least an idea of their main line of argumentation.

For the purpose of this review, I cite Francisco Ramirez’s summary of the main contours of world culture theory as it relates to globalisation studies in education:

There are not only more schools and more students (in absolute and relative numbers) than there were at the beginning of the twentieth century, but there are also more common ways of envisioning and interpreting the realities of these institutions. (Ramirez, p. 247, quoted in Anderson-Levitt)

Ramirez’s “brief response” (p. 246 ff.) in the last section of the book also reiterates that world culture theory has examined the global dissemination of a particular “modern” model of schooling over a long period of time (over 150 years), and across various national and cultural contexts (large N), and has “recognised the Western origins of the world models” (p. 247). Acknowledging the “Western hegemony” (Ramirez, p. 250), notably the global influence of the US since World War II on spreading ideas of progress and justice around the globe, Ramirez points out “that the educational reforms that travel most extensively [around the globe] have both a universalistic and a rationalising quality” (p. 249). This particular assertion has fueled, it seems, more criticism than other assumptions of world culture theory. Thus, when the contributors of the book call into question the existence of ‘global schooling’, they criticise not only the existence of a singular model of schooling but also doubt that those that float on top in an ocean of school reforms circumvent the globe are necessarily the ones that are the most progressive and just.
I mentioned the difficulty to adequately summarise the contours of world culture theory without upsetting Weber, Durkheim and other sociologists towards whom scholars of the theory are leaning. The challenge of doing justice to the second intellectual project is even greater. The contributors, and this is a criticism that will be explained later, see themselves as representatives of an entire discipline rather than as students of a particular theory within social anthropology. Thus, as reviewers we run the risk of distressing not only a few scholars within a discipline, but rather an entire discipline. After all, the subtitle of the book does not read ‘anthropology and sociology,’ or, let’s say, ‘situating knowledge theory and world culture theory’. Instead it uses the following uneven staks: ‘anthropology and world culture theory’. While I have little doubts that anthropologically inclined scholars have much to criticise about world culture theory and, perhaps, about any other comparative sociological theory that works with ‘big structures, large processes, huge comparisons’ (Tilly, 1984), I am not sure whether social anthropologists uni-sono would criticise the theory for the same reasons.

The first chapter of Anderson-Levitt provides not only a compelling summary of the case studies presented in the book, but also clearly lays out the intellectual project on which the book contributors have embarked. In the section ‘world culture theory and anthropology’ (p. 17 ff.), she lays out the line of argumentation pursued in the case studies. To provide a glimpse into the good writing style of the book editor, I cite Anderson-Levitt’s summary of three points of criticism in full length:

The cases we present here make it clear that world culture theorists cannot afford to ignore what happens on the ground in particular ministries of education, provincial centers, and local classrooms. First, our examples raise the possibility that local actors find multiple, competing models out there in the larger world. Second, we are not convinced that local actors borrow models freely; hints of resistance by ministries of education suggest otherwise, and even where ministries import willingly, teachers often experience reforms as imposed from above. Third, our cases show that enacted policy differs from official policy and that this difference matters. Researchers cannot delude themselves that they are looking at the same model just because educators use a common vocabulary: while researchers cannot blithely assume that innovations will or can or should be implemented unchanged.

Anderson-Levitt, p. 17

Making the case(s) against world culture theory

From the nine case studies presented in the book, I have selected three for the purpose of demonstrating how the contributors build their case(s) against world culture theory:

1. Lesley Bartlett’s example (chapter 8) deals with the first point of criticism, and illustrates how competing models of adult literacy programs have co-existed side by side in Brazil.

2. The assumption of world culture theory that national, regional and local decision makers in education have voluntarily adopted the global model of schooling is refuted in Deborah Reed-Danahay’s analysis of developments in France (chapter 9).

3. Finally, Diane Brook Napier’s case study on outcomes-based education reform in South Africa serves as an example of how the contributors interpret the difference between official and enacted policies.

Competing educational projects

Lesley Bartlett’s investigation of two competing models of adult literacy in Brazil introduces an important new dimension into the debate that is seriously understudied. It departs from the exclusive focus on schooling and formal education, and draws attention to non-formal education and, in particular, on adult literacy programs. She differentiates between adult literacy programs that are embedded in a paradigm of ‘economic efficiency’ (Labarre, 1997), and juxtaposes them with ‘popular education’ programs of adult literacy, developed by the radical Catholic liberation movement and associated with Paulo Freire. The first type of programs have been state-run and government-funded (Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização), whereas the population education type of literacy programs have been administered and supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The point here is that both models endured since the 1960s, and none of them ‘disappeared’ as a result of global pressure even though one of the models—the Freirean model of popular education—achieved world acclaim and, as we all know, went global. Bartlett puts forward a very convincing explanation that, against all expectations, actually shares several traits with genuinely sociological and institutionalist paradigms. According to Bartlett, the two competing adult literacy models need to be analysed against the backdrop of the racial and social stratification of society, for they reflect the various degrees to which social inequality is produced or reproduced in different educational institutions (governmental and non-governmental). Adopting Holland and Lave’s concept of ‘enduring struggles’ (2001), she contends that the two competing educational models reflect two different goals; one accepting the stratification of society, and the other empowering individuals to reflect on and combat social inequality. Since all societies are socially stratified with regard to class, race and other social markers, there must also exist a multitude of programs at international level, all pursuing different goals with regard to the key question of how educational institutions produce and reproduce social inequality. Hence, the assumption of world culture theory that there is a shared global understanding of what progress and justice entails for each and everyone is based on a denial of such enduring struggles at supranational and national levels.

Local implications of supranational policies

Deborah Reed-Danahay takes up an interesting phenomenon that has marveled many observers of developments in Europe: ‘the Europe of regions’. She analyses two educational programs funded by the European Union (UN): the European folktales and the New horizons projects. In the first project, students from three schools in
France, one in Italy, one in Norway, and one in Germany participated, and engaged in comparative studies of folktales, including a final joint project on the tale of the Sleeping Beauty. The New horizons generated awareness for environmental issues, and involved schools and communities from two different regions in France (Normandy, Auvergne) and one region in Italy (Frascati). Both projects, and this is Reed-Danahay focus of research, emphasised student exchange across national boundaries, and sailed under the flag of creating a 'European dimension' in schools of Europe. In addition, the second EU funded project New horizons aimed at strengthening regional loyalties and identities.

She criticises in particular the statement of world culture theory that there was a lack of coercion (p. 203) in spreading mass education and concepts of 'modern' schooling as effective tools of nation building. Using France as an example of an educational system that is in the process of forging a European alliance and identity, she examines the subtle forms of coercion and control that accompany the creation of a 'European dimension' in European schools. She writes:

Supranational education, like mass education, is being spread to 'the masses' in ways that appear to lack coercion. Students are being encouraged to 'think European' rather than to stop being French or Auvergnat. (Reed-Danahay, p. 215)

This point about the subtle forms of coercion and control is well taken. Her distinction between center and periphery, however, calls for a critical comment. According to EU policy, the new Europe is supposed to develop into 'the Europe of the regions', strengthening regional economies, cultures and languages, and, as a consequence, Puy-de-Dôme in the Auvergne region, no matter how small, economically deprived and culturally distant it is from Paris or Brussels, is politically considered a 'vorderland', and not—as Reed-Danahay is suggesting (p. 206)—a 'hinterland'. These political and economic developments in Europe suggest that we should be more careful, and perhaps less enthusiastic, with interpreting the revitalisation of regional identities as a counter-hegemonic discourse or as regional resistance 'on the ground' (Reed-Danahay, p. 214).

**Policies and practices from ministry to classroom**

The third case presented in this book review deals with outcomes-based education reform (OBE) in South Africa. Diane Brook Napier traces the origins of OBE in South Africa, and provides a detailed account of how OBE has been locally reinterpreted, adapted, or resisted by various actors (administrators, trainers, teachers, etc) and at various levels of the education system (national, provincial, sub-provincial levels, and community and school level). Focusing on the sub-provincial level and at the community and school level, she discusses seven examples that illustrate in interesting detail how and why the OBE reform was reinterpreted differently by the various actors. The period of her participant observation coincided with the phase in the South African OBE reform, when quality assurance plans were supposed to be introduced at school level. The strength of the chapter lies in the contextual details that explain how the actors have modified or 'creolised' the OBE reform, and with it, the quality assurance plans, in idiosyncratic ways.

Her case lends itself almost as a prototypical example for examining how a global school reform movement (OBE) impacts local policy contexts and vice versa, how local actors selectively borrow or give specific meaning to an imported reform model. In the South African OBE reform, explicit references were made to OBE reforms in other countries (Britain, Canada, New Zealand), and in fact policy-makers used these references as leverage for generating reform pressure on the educational system. As I will explain later, this favorable condition of analysing local encounters with clearly defined external influences and explicit references to school reforms from other counties was not always given in the other examples presented in the book. Brook Napier did not have to walk on thin ice, because she had the advantage of dealing with a reform model that was explicitly tailored after experiences from elsewhere.

**Global trends that make sense and local responses that mean something**

The book tends to polarise along disciplines, and as an interdisciplinary reviewer, I suggest to view the greatest strength of anthropological research (understanding communities or bounded-systems) as the greatest weakness of sociological research. Vice versa, the greatest strength of sociologists (understanding trends across bounded-systems) as the greatest weakness of anthropologists. Ramirez is right in stating that both are in the business of 'sense making' (p. 240). The difference, however, is that they consider different levels and units of analysis.

World culture theory acknowledges local 'variations' (p. 247) of the global model of schooling, but regards them either merely as manifestations of 'loose coupling' between official and enacted policy, or views them as part of a world culture that promotes difference and diversity. It simply is not interesting to comparative sociologists to analyse how and why exactly the same school reform—let's say 'choice'—is interpreted and implemented differently in various cultural contexts. There is little to gain for them in the way of making better sense of trends at system level. The fact that policy-makers in different parts of the world justify choice, vouchers, privatisation of education and a host of other neo-liberal reforms in terms of 'progress' and 'justice' only reconfirms their theory on the international convergence in education.

Anthropological research has much to offer for understanding how globalisation plays out in communities. They have the methodological tools to understand what 'globalisation' means to groups and communities: why 'it' is appropriated or rejected, and how 'it' is adapted and modified to their cultural contexts. By analysing the local encounters with global forces, we learn more about cultural contexts than we do about 'globalisation' per se. We learn, for example, why in a given context a school reform from elsewhere is attractive to borrow, or why it does not resonate with actors involved in the 'endured struggles' at local level (see Rosen & Bartlett), and is therefore rejected. Analysing in detail local policy contexts, as the contributors of the book do, is paramount for understanding what globalisation means for and does to people. Who, if not anthropologists, are in a position to do so?
In contrast, defining the global or 'the-out-there' (Levitt-Anderson, p. 17) is not the strength of the book—and perhaps, was not meant to be: in a few case studies, the external forces or globalisation ('out-there') was actually 'in-here', such as, for example, in the Israeli case study on the Russian immigrants that pushed for school reform, or, in the Brazilian case study. With the exception of the case study on Thailand and on PR China, where the local and the global forces are clearly defined, the remaining authors in the book either did not specify the global or had to construct it. These are a few constructions that I noticed: the authors either assumed that the global is manifested in neo-liberal reforms (choice, economic efficiency programs), personified in specific groups viewed as outsiders (Russian immigrants in Israel, US missionaries in Tanzania) or, if all other methods of distilling the global from the local failed, simply used a quasi-subtractive method (the residual from what already existed locally, was established as the global) and thus run the risk of having given attention to anything new. Granted, theirs is a much more sophisticated project than merely focusing on global players and examining, for example, what international organisations portray as global reforms, and in particular, how they manage to ensure that their own 'best practices' pass as 'global'. Nevertheless, not everything that is 'out there in the larger world' (Anderson-Levitt, p. 55) qualifies as global. Precisely because the global is frequently 'in here', several anthropologists have pointed out that concepts of spatial determinism or 'the local' are of limited value (see Camaroff & Camaroff, 2001) and at the same time have acknowledged the disjunctures of various transnational developments (Appadurai, 1994). This other group of anthropologists forces us to explicitly address the blurring lines between local and global, between external and internal, and to render the overlap of these two spaces to an object of study. One does not need to be an anthropologist to criticise world culture theory. For example, Jürgen Schriewer and his research team (see Schriewer & Martinez, 2004) produced one of the best sociological critiques of world culture theory. They distinguish between 'globalisation' (real) and 'internationality' (imagined), and assert that policy-makers at times resort to an imagined world culture or 'internationality' when it serves them to generate (or ease) reform pressure in their own context. Similar to the anthropological project of the book, Schriewer and his research team at Humboldt University in Berlin (Germany) are eager to understand why, how, and when individuals and institutions refer to experiences from elsewhere. Their interest lies in understanding the 'socio-logic' and the idiosyncrasies of global references and orientations. Using similar methodological tools as the Stanford group (longitudinal comparative studies) to understand the orientations of educational researchers, they found that there was not only one world culture or world system, but many (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004). One of the world systems, for example, which has been systematically neglected in the studies of world culture theory, until it completely dissolved in 1990 (no causal relation assumed), is the socialist world-system, consisting of over 30 countries.

Many see the literature on world culture theory, precisely because it is a theory rather than an accumulation of empirical studies, as a required reading for students of globalisation. The edited volume *Local meaning, global schooling* lends itself also to being placed on a required reading list, especially for courses on globalisation in education. It presents not only an inspiring critique of world culture theory, but also critically highlights those aspects of the theory that are relevant for educational researchers. It is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting books written on globalisation in education.

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References


