(How) can comparative method be critical?

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What kinds of question is that?

- It assumes that CE could and should be 'critical'—because the task of social science is not just to state how things are, but to recognise the causes and consequences of that, how they came to be, and how they might be different
- It also assumes that CE is not by aspiration, or not altogether convincingly, 'critical'
- It thus generates a set of metatheoretical and theoretical issues

Why is it needed?

- Because: '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).

- '*institutional* fetishism, the "identification of institutional conceptions, such as representative democracy, a market economy, and a free civil society, with a single set of institutional arrangements," Unger (1998)

- 'we may have underestimted the difficuluty of not seeing what is conventionally there to be seen (in classrooms)' Howard S Becker

What is 'Critical'?

- '(Critical theory) stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about..

- unlike problem-solving theory, it does not take institutions and social power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing. It is directed toward an appraisal of the very framework for action, or problematic, which problem-solving theory accepts as its parameters.

- (It) is directed to the social and political complex as a whole rather than to the separate parts. ..whereas the problem-solving approach leads to further analytical sub-division and limitation to the issue to be dealt with, the critical approach leads toward the construction of the larger picture of the whole of which the initially contemplated part is just one component, and seeks to understand the processes of change in which both part and whole are involved'. (Cox, 1996, pp. 88–89)

Problem-solving theory

- Does not question the current social organization or framework
- Accepts power and social relationships and institutions as the framework for action; does not question their origins
- Aim to make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with the sources of trouble
- Reduces the statement of a particular problem to a limited number of variables, which are amenable to relatively close and precise interpretation.
- Deals with problems within the complexity of the whole
- Is value bound; i accepts the prevailing order as its framework
- Problem solving theory is a guide to tactical actions which,

Critical Theory

- '(Critical theory) stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about..'
- An approach aimed to critically evaluate social and power relations, looking at their origin and observing their development and change
- It is directed toward an appraisal of the very framework for action, or problematic, which problem-solving theory accepts as its parameters.
- Is directed at the social and political complex as a whole, and pursues an understanding of the whole through these methods
- "Critical theory's aims are just as practical as those of problem-solving theory, but it approaches practice from a perspective which transcends that of existing order, which problem-solving theory takes as a starting point" (130)
- the critical approach leads toward the construction of the larger picture of the whole of which the initially contemplated part is just one component, and seeks to understand the processes of change in which both part and whole are involved'. (Cox, 1996, pp. 88–89)

It is also…

- 'An oppositional attitude that highlights the disparity between what is taken as given, (+what is RD) and what could be. Critique always presupposes some ideal in the name of which we engage in critique—however we conceive of this ideal and whatever status we claim for it' R J Bernstein (1988) 255-73……

- And hence it cannot be claimed by, or necessarily associated with, either 'left' or 'right' politics/attitudes

Why might CE be capable of this?

- Because it illustrates the differences between PS and Critical approaches very well; it has been employed in very problem solving ways—especially in recent years—and that has been its stock in trade, it claim for attention

- However, through its very potential for a comparative theoretical approach, it carries the promise of explanation, and not just description, and hence has the potential to provide productively critical accounts of education policy

Problematising the current state of CE as a Field of Study; Political Opportunity Structures

- Framed by loose ideas of 'globalisation' (fairly indiscriminate across process, agent, discourse, state of affairs, cultural/economic/political, etc)

- POS for CE; as national systems of education assailed by non-nationally based forces, especially that of 'Global Knowledge Economy'. The point becomes how to do 'best' in that for both national and global levels, and their relationships

- Leads to demands for for more knowledge about nature and contributions of education systems across the world; so, who else to look to but CE, whose stock in trade this is?

Problematising C E as a Field of Study; Theoretical Opportunity Structures

- TOS is largely dominated by three main *non-critical* forms:

- Adding similarly loose 'definitions' of 'global(isation)', often seen as internationalisation, as a key 'context' for understanding national education policies

- Creation of large-scale international quantitative data bases as basis for development of correlations between education and development or economic success

- Adopting/adapting/applying theories of globalisation-- world system theory (Arnove); world polity theory (Meyer; Stanford); compare (neoliberal) political project (Dale and Robertson)

The politicisation of Comparative Education

- 'The statement 'we are all comparativists now' illustrates a global trend ..that perceives comparison as a method that would find 'evidence' and hence legitimise political action' ((Novoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003427)... (eg, political intervention in EU education is legitimised through process of comparison)'

- A logic of perpetual comparison legitimises policies..built around a rhetoric of 'identity' and 'diversity' (428)

- Comparability is promoted not...as a way of knowing or legitimising but mainly as a way of governing—not just 'discovering', but 'promoting' 'regularities'

- Current trends (in CE) can lead either to (its) impoverishment, reducing it to a 'mode of governance', or to its intellectual renewal, through more sophisticated historical and theoretical references', (426)

Quantification as a technology of governance

- Constructs standardised and normative comparison
- Provides ideological justification for politicians
- Frames public policy and administration
- Transnationally, involves the purposive elision of national differences in pursuit of comparability—'isolating sectors from their national institutional dependencies but nevertheless treating them as comparable' (Theret, 2005, 78)

Comparison as means of refining and propagating a world model; world polity theory in CE

- World polity theory—which is most expansively delivered in the field of comparative education-- rests on the assumption of a common world education culture that is essentially based on the scripts of Western modernity, and has been 'diffused' across the globe, and taken up in practically every education system.

- However, it is not only conceptually flawed, but celebrates a globalising rationality essentially based on American values; 'its normative ambitions betray a conservative agenda despite (or because of) its pretensions to scientific objectivity and its celebration of Western 'progress' (Levinson 2012, 4)

- 'For some world cultural theorists world culture…is whatever is claimed as world culture by 'people who manage to make decisions about policy' Anderson-Levitt (2012, 7)

METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL GESTALTS

PROBLEM SOLVING THEORY	CRITICAL THEORY
Education Politics	Politics of Education
Decision making	Agenda setting 'Rules of the Game'; Preference shaping
(Inter-)national Policy transfer	Globally (regionally) Structured Agenda for Education
Directly 'policy-related' conception of effects; Evaluation through 'Effects on'	Broad conception of *consequences*; Focus on relational issues Analysis of emergent properties; contingent/unintended consequences
Methodological nationalism Methodological statism	'Society' not confined to national; State as *explanadum*, not *explanans* functional scalar and sectoral division of labour
Context restricted to more 'immediate' issues reflecting policy implications	Context broadened to include production and consumption of policy
Focus on empirical level	Stratified conception of reality
Comparison of elements Comparison of systems at the surface of the institutional forms but Comparison of these structures not only according to the modalities of their own historical development …	Comparison of relations between these elements and the autonomous systems of these relations; Comparison at a level of abstraction which makes it possible to clarify underlying structures common to these multiple forms; *Tertium Comparationis* Theoretically Articulated Comparison …but also their synchronic assembly in communicational systems producing societal coherences. Theret 2002, 111

Tertium Comparationis

If we can't compare things directly, we can stiil compare them effectively and productively by comparing them with a third element common to them all—the tertium comparationis

Example; EU countries' responses to education of migrants; we can't compare these directly because of major historical differences between countries' policies. But we can compare their *justifications* for those policies, the ways that the issues are *problematised*
And in doing this,we make visible what has previously been implicit

Quantitative vs Qualitative Approaches

- Conceptions of 'Explanation'
- *Quantitative* adopts an "effects of causes" approach: estimating average effects of independent variables; sees causation as correlation; works through operationalisation and use of 'indicators'—which may sometimes be taken as defining the concept—and looks to their refinement
- *Qualitative* adopts a "causes of effects" approach in explaining individual cases; looks for necessary and sufficient conditions; focus on refining concepts and their validity; but NB, need to avoid 'applicationism'
- If we accept Cox's Critical/Problem Solving definition, clearly Qualitative is more critical than Quantitative

From Concrete to Abstract, from Simple to Complex (rather than from Particular to Universal

Theorising involves both these procedures—again, more or less explicitly, consciously. The first enables us to see more clearly what we have a case of, the second to understand how it might be articulated with (other elements of) other cases
Concrete to Abstract
Observation>Empirical generalisation>
Conceptualisation>Explanation

Forms of Empirical generalisation: Correlation, Constant conjunction of events ('regularity determinism'), taxonomy, etc **Conclusions drawn through Induction**

Conceptualisation:

Forms of conceptualisation; orienting concepts that direct theoretical inquiry; sensitizing concepts indicative of relationship between concepts and data

Construction of cases
 We need to take very seriously the construction of cases to be compared; they are not out there *as taken-for-granted units of analysis; eg nation states,cultures, etc* in the world waiting to be compared.
Comparison can be organized around common causal mechanisms or common events

Conditions for constructing cases for comparison--1

Comparativism as a method presupposes—even constructs—' the 'entitativity' of units of analysis and reifies their boundaries, inscribing them into the very terms in which we pose our research questions' (Brubaker)

This often involves the 'universalising of 'doubtful particularisms', interpretive projections from the knowledge experiences of specific times/places to all times/places…the result of the imposition of intellectual/political hegemonies from some places onto others (eg US basis of IR)' (Agnew 2007, 138),…..

treating objects of comparison as independent of and external to each other, in terms of their formal equivalence.. which ignores the historical processes forming their inter-relationships, and the changing patterns among them, *'the 'context of contexts'*,which is especially difficult to sustain in an era of globalisation—and European projects

Conditions for constructing cases for comparison--2

What this points to is the need for a double, articulated, comparison—*before we can compare cases we have to compare the theories on the basis of which they are constructed, in order to establish that they are comparable*---but when we do, we are better able to make sense of the 'bundles of relationships' of which they are part.

Rather than assuming a 'whole' that governs its 'parts', we explicitly rather than implicitly construct that/those whole(s); comparison becomes topic before it can become resource, as much the substance as the framework of the study (McMichael)

Example: Education Inspection in New Zealand--1

Susan Robertson got (very small) grant from NZ Secondary Teachers Union to carry out a 'Review' of the Education review Office

Teachers were ready to go on strike against the activities of ERO and the ways that they were being reported—ERO press releases to local newspapers

This took place at the height of the NPM era in NZ, and we initially saw it as an example of that, seeing its wider importance as 'an extreme case of an extreme case' --which it was—but that was not all it was, in its philosophy and its practices.

However, we decided not to take it at its face value—which ERO would have been very happy with—and chose to make it a 'zero-based' review that did not take ERO at its face value but started from the conception of what 'education review and inspection' was, what it had been seen as useful for, for whom, under what conditions, and then moved on to considering how ERO might be explained in those terms

Example: Education Inspection in New Zealand--2

The broader context within which we situated it was Principal Agent Theory, how to get the 'agent' (the teachers) to act in the best interest of the 'principal' (the government) rather than in their own interests (which had also been known in NZ as 'provider capture, a major target of NPM.

So, the conclusion was that it could be perceived as a—more or less effective-- tool of school improvement, looking at it only in that light would have led to a limited understanding of the union's problem with ERO in this case, but also to a wider understanding of how education policy might be seen more broadly, through taking a zero-based approach—which could be helpful in addressing some of the problems of comparing education policies that appear to be empirically incommensurable

From Simple to Complex

Education Questions

Who is taught what, by whom, under what circumstances…etc

How and by whom are these things governed, determined, etc

What comprises the 'education' sector, and what are its links to other elements of social framework…etc

What are its individual, collective, public private etc *consequences*

MOMENT	EDUCATION QUESTIONS
Moment 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?
Moment 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?
Moment 3 **The Politics of Education**	How does education contribute to the 'social contract' What 'logic of intervention' does it employ? What functional, scalar and sectoral divisions of labour of educational governance are in place? What forms are taken by the 'architecture of education'? How are the boundaries of the 'education sector' defined and how do they overlap with and relate to other sectors? How is the education sector related to the citizenship and gender regimes? What is the nature of intra- and inter-scalar and intra- and inter-sectoral relations (contradiction, cooperation, mutual indifference?)
Moment 4 **Outcomes**	What are the individual, private, public, collective and community outcomes of 'Education', at each scalar level? What are their consequences for equity, democracy and social justice?

Moment of Practice

Outcomes

Moment of Policy

Moment of Politics
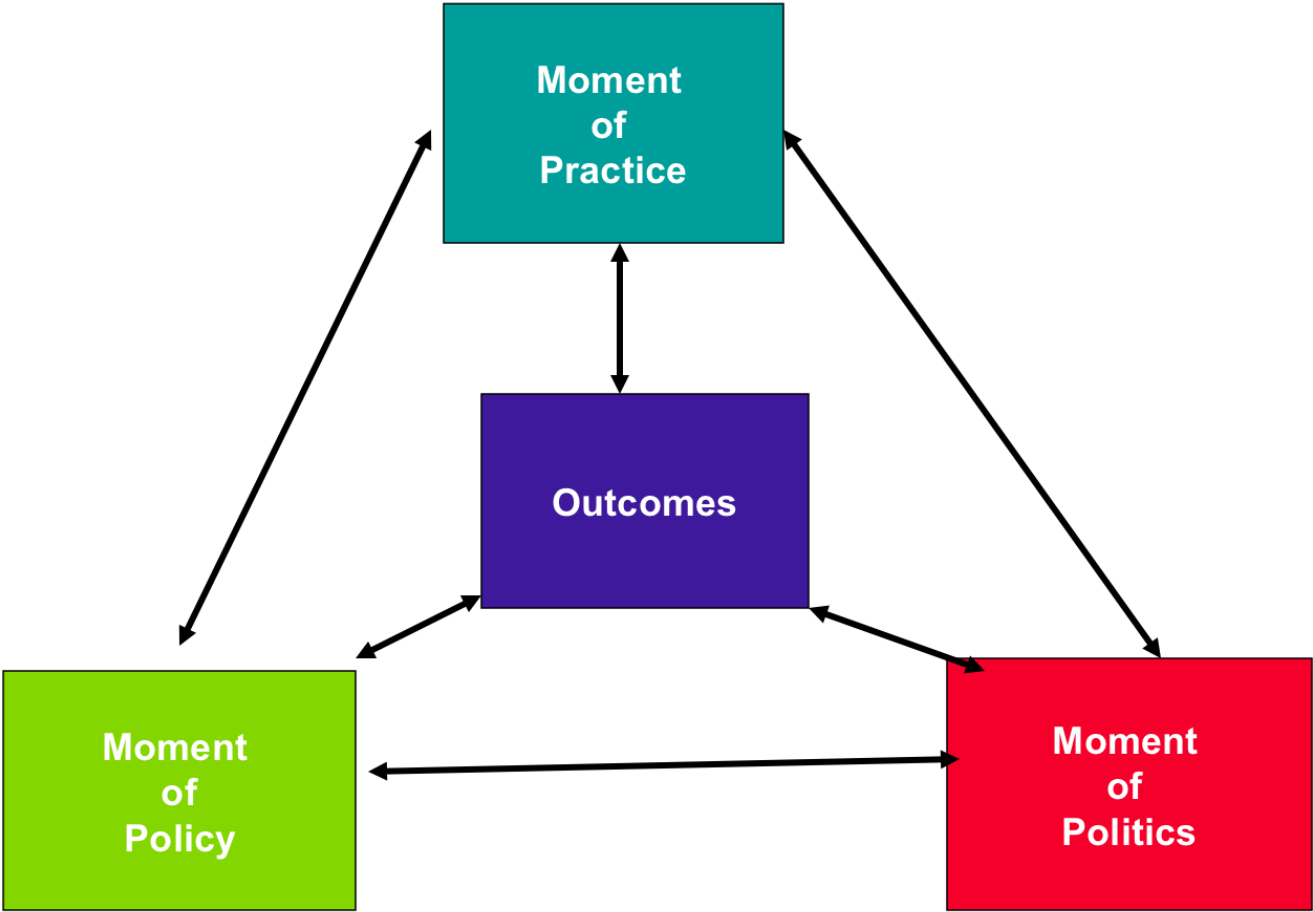
Conclusion

In constructing cases to be compared, we should be as interested in a zero-based analysis of how a policy works, in whose interests, why, etc, as a key means of framing it as a problem solving tool, and its effectiveness in doing that, and what we might be able to 'learn' from it, and also as an essential preliminary to asking those questions