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## Comparative History of Education

### William Brickman and the Study of Educational Flows, Transfers, and Circulations

*This article discusses William W. Brickman’s historical scholarship on the international circulation of educational ideas and practices by examining the ways Brickman wrote about John Dewey and his international significance as an educational thinker and reformer. The authors argue that Brickman’s scholarship was rooted in an “educational transfer” problematic that prioritizes diachronic, influence-oriented studies. The result is to situate Dewey as “an original author” and lose sight of the social and cultural formations that made Dewey’s ideas possible. While Brickman’s work makes occasional reference to the ways that Dewey’s ideas were localized and transformed around the globe, this remained a largely suggestive and undeveloped line of research for him—particularly in contrast the recent interest in the field of comparative education in understanding processes of indigenization, appropriation, and translation.*

The writing of history changes with time. Due to an increased interest in the historical experiences of diverse groups of people, including those marginalized and silenced in traditional historical narratives, as well as increased interest in the social and cultural dimensions of human experience across time, historical writing

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today looks very different than it did 50 or 100 years ago. In trying to capture these changes, Alan Munslow (1997) proposes that historical scholarship is no longer defined “by the established categories of analysis—economic structures, competing nationalisms, political and cultural revolutions, the march and opposition of ideas” (p. 124). Instead, he suggests, scholars today are much more likely to take an interest in “how societies interpret, imagine, create, control, regulate and dispose of knowledge” (p. 125). In one sense, the question of how societies organize and supervise knowledge has long been a mainstay among historians of education. We need only think, for example, of the oft-cited 1642 account of the English settlement of North America, *New England’s First Fruits*, which proudly records the founding of Harvard College, and whose claim that after basic necessities had been provided for “one of the next things we longed for, and looked after was to advance Learning, and perpetuate it to Posterity.” This document has long been drawn upon by historians to provide evidence for the ways that knowledge was viewed, valued, and parceled out in seventeenth-century Massachusetts Puritan society. Yet, as shown by the triumphalism of *New England’s First Fruits* and certain invocations of it in the scholarly literature (e.g., Belknap, 1784; Cubberley, 1919; though not Spring, 2005) scholarly attention to how societies administer knowledge can still be fully enclosed within a “march of progress” historical narrative. Nonetheless, within the history of education over the past 50 or 100 years there have still been noteworthy shifts in how historians approach the ways that societies interpret, control, and regulate knowledge. In this essay we examine William Brickman’s historical scholarship from the 1940s through the 1980s, focusing specifically on how Brickman undertook comparative historical scholarship on the flows, transfers, and circulations of educational knowledge and practices.

The history of what in more recent years has often been described as “educational transfer” was only one part of Brickman’s historical oeuvre. However, as is suggested by the title of his 1985 collection of essays, *Educational Roots and Routes in Western Europe*, an interest in the “transfer of scholarly and educational ideas and methods” (p. 4) was a central feature of much of his work. Since Brickman typically approached educational history with the international lens of a comparative education scholar, we think it appropriate that our discussion of his work as a historian centers on his approach to studying the international diffusion and circulation of educational thought—and specifically on the ways that Brickman wrote about John Dewey’s international significance. The ways that Dewey’s ideas were “moved” and “received” around the world has attracted considerable scholarship in recent years (see, e.g., Biesta & Miedema, 1996; Donoso, 2001; Nubiola, 2005; Schneider, 2000), thus making an examination of Brickman’s writings on Dewey a useful strategy for exploring how Brickman approached the comparative history of education and how we can place his work in relation to work undertaken in recent decades.

## Dewey and the question of influence

In his earliest writings about Dewey, Brickman (1949a) set out to trace the “influence” of Dewey on foreign educational systems by chronicling the spread of Dewey’s writings in foreign countries. Brickman’s *Guide to Research in Educational History* (1949b) devoted considerable attention to the difficulties and intricacies that historians face when they attempt to establish “influence.” He advised his student audience that such a project was to be avoided in term research papers and best undertaken as a dissertation research project in that it required “application of special and delicate techniques” (1949b, p. 137). In this methodological how-to guide, Brickman discusses doing research on Dewey in the context of explaining that the examination of an educator’s foreign travels could generate “serviceable leads for the beginning of the study of an influence” (1949b, p. 140). Brickman noted that after World War I, Dewey traveled extensively overseas, where he “spent varying amounts of time in these lands and conferred with school officials.” According to Brickman,

Here is a fruitful field for the determination of actual influence. The research worker will have to describe accurately the educational conditions prior to Dewey’s visit, the actual contacts between Dr. Dewey and the foreign educators, and the changes in the educational system that were attributable to the American educator and to no one else. (1949b, pp. 140–41)

As is evident from this methodological suggestion, the temporal sequence of events is an object of intense interest in influence-oriented studies of this nature. And, as Brickman’s own work indicates, texts as well as travels could be fit to this framework. Brickman’s general strategy for identifying and discussing the spread of Dewey’s ideas was to gather data from educational literature, including “translations of books and articles, professional reviews, discussions of ideas in professional and other publications, and references to theory and practice in miscellaneous sources” (Brickman, 1949b, p. 258). A diachronic, time-lapse perspective that attempts to chronologically trace the “flow” of Dewey into the “native” pedagogic literature of foreign educational systems is evidenced in all of Brickman’s historical accounts of John Dewey (e.g., Brickman, 1949b, 1964, 1985; Brickman & Leher, 1961). This perspective is also evident in Brickman’s efforts to discuss the global influence and spread of Dewey’s ideas. One of Brickman’s typical rhetorical stances was to begin by citing the first international translation of Dewey (which Brickman [1949a] claimed was a translation of Dewey into Czech in 1904, though other scholars have since noted that his *School and Society* essay was translated into Japanese in 1901 [Boydston and Andresen, 1969, p. 49]). In Brickman’s work this is then typically followed by a geographically and chronologically sorted overview of Dewey’s overseas visits, his scholarly writings on foreign education systems, and the translations of his works. In this respect, Brickman’s work can be properly considered “transfer scholarship” in that, in contrast to a strictly comparative method that focuses on the synchronous analysis of “cross-sections” that are temporally stabilized or “frozen”

(Werner & Zimmermann, 2006), Brickman paid explicit attention to sequences and chains of events unfolding in time.

One of us, Sobe (2009a), has recently published a critical examination of transfer research traditions in the field of comparative education. In Brickman's case—as in much other, more recent “transfer paradigm” scholarship—the use of a diachronic “chronological” frame to study the circulation of educational ideas and practices also means that the research tends to assume fixed points of “departure” and “arrival.” This frequently means, for example, that an innovation (be it the early-nineteenth-century Monitorial Methods associated with Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell, the Project Method associated with William H. Kilpatrick, or what has been referred to in various contexts since the 1990s as “Outcome-Based Education” [OBE]) is analyzed solely as departing from a coherent central point and arriving in different contexts as a pedagogic reform that is variously “received.” While this strategy can provide some profitable insights into how schooling changes over time, it risks obscuring the complexity of the connections and intercrossings that engender certain cultural forms and social patterns and not others. One thinks, for example, of the trend in colonial studies to depart from exclusive reliance on a mythical “center-periphery dynamic,” and instead to find ways to better account for the multiple networks of relations, as well as the multidirectional nature of those relations (Gruzinski, 2002; Stoler, 2006; Steinmetz, 2007). In Anglo-American comparative education scholarship the desire to model the departures and arrivals of educational transfers remains strong (Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Rappleye, 2006). Leaving aside questions of general theory in the social sciences, however, one can argue that the rigid frames of reference necessitated by a social science approach to modeling transfers do not perfectly serve historians' general preferences for complex/complexifying accounts, overdetermined explanations, and tentative conclusions.

In surveying the history of scholarship on the globalization of Dewey, Thomas Popkewitz (2005) remarks that the early intellectual history “places Dewey as the originator of thought to assess others' faithfulness or abuse of the ideas” (p. 8). Brickman's account of Dewey's influence in the Soviet Union worked in this mode by postulating a singular point of origin and examining the ways that Russians were true to or deviated from Deweyan notions. In explaining the spread of Dewey's ideas in the Soviet Union, Brickman noted that the revolution of 1917 “popularized Dewey's ideas” among Russian intellectuals who “regarded Dewey as the foreign thinker closest to the spirit of Marxism and Russian Communism” (Brickman, 1964, p. 147). However, once Dewey became involved in the political conflict between Trotsky and Stalin in the late 1930s, “the de-Deweyization of Soviet education proceeded at a rapid pace” (Brickman & Leher, 1961, p. 145). While this historical narrative acknowledges the interrelationships among Deweyan ideas, the Soviet political landscape, and the position and priorities of Russian intellectuals, Brickman's account can largely be read as a record of Russian faithfulness to and then rejection of Deweyan ideas. Notably, this is *not* a story about the “indigenization”

or “localization” that Dewey’s ideas underwent in the Soviet setting—something we will discuss in the following section.

Fully in step with the monumental significance in Western culture of what Michel Foucault labels the “author function,” Brickman inclines toward positioning John Dewey as a Proper Name, as “different from all other men,” as “the genial creator of work[s] in which he deposit[ed], with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations” (Foucault [1968]1998, p. 221). To borrow Foucault’s arguments, one can say that such attributions of “authorship,” while they pretend to evoke the indefinite proliferation of meaning, actually serve a regulative role that “impedes circulation and free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition” of discourses (Foucault [1968] 1998 p. 221). Clear evidence of the significance of treating Dewey as “an original author” comes in Brickman’s own ultimate, summative appraisal of Dewey’s global influence: “too many countries took too much too soon from his doctrines without enough reflection” (Brickman & Leher, 1961, p. 143). To locate the failure of Dewey’s ideas to fully “take root” around the globe in a deficiency of careful thought sidesteps the very question of what made “Dewey” attractive in the first place and simultaneously advances enthronement of a singular, unified, and correct Dewey as the proprietary font of modern, progressive education.

### **The question of “changing” Dewey**

One of the primary thrusts of transfer research in the field of comparative and international education over the past decade has been to theorize and empirically excavate the processes of “indigenization” or “transformation” by which the educational ideas and practices that move are changed in the new settings in which they arrive. Many scholars today would agree that educational fields are not empty spaces ready to be filled with received knowledge but rather are complex sites where knowledge and practices are resignified in distinct ways. Yet, all the same, there is an enduring tradition in the field of conceptualizing educational transfer through the binary of “transmittable/not transmittable” (Caruso, 2008, p. 833), as we touched on above. The “inviolability” of Dewey is one implication of this tradition; another implication—that ironically builds off the same underlying logic—is the idea that a set of “pure” or “intact” ideas depart from a coherent point of origin and are only transformed and “hybridized” afterward.

As noted above, for the most part Brickman’s scholarship on Dewey centered on the fidelity with which his ideas were received in foreign pedagogical literature and the extent to which they were popularly accepted and disseminated. Yet at other times Brickman evidences a sensitivity to the ways that Dewey was reworked and recoded in various pedagogical conversations around the globe. However, for the most part, this appears to have remained a merely suggestive and undeveloped line of research.

Marcelo Caruso (2008) notes that the global transmission of ideas through

books as a “media of diffusion” led to a “situation in which knowledge became possible without the need for direct communication with the distant object” (p. 832). Sensitivity to this is evident in Brickman’s (1949a) discussion of the text-based diffusion of Dewey into foreign contexts. Brickman argued that books and translations made it possible for intellectuals in Iraq, India, and Africa to experience Dewey’s American pragmatism and educational philosophy without any first-hand, direct contact with Dewey. Removing the requirement of direct contact introduces the possibility of interlocutors and mediators who might potentially play a pivotal role in “the John Dewey” that became available to particular people in particular settings. Though Brickman remarks on the curiosity that it was “a Belgian and a Chinese” who produced the earliest French translations of Dewey’s work, he does not explore what the possible implications of this might be (p. 261). In another publication Brickman (1961) remarked on the fact that French translations of Dewey were preceded by a translator’s introduction. He also noted (1949a) that Georg Kerschensteiner was instrumental in translating Dewey’s texts into German and, also, through Kerschensteiner’s own pedagogical writings, in extending Deweyan concepts into Germany and Turkey. Yet Brickman did not weigh in on what consequence or importance this might have had. Sobe (2005, 2008) has argued that Dewey’s translators and commentators can be considered an “envelope” that powerfully shaped the way the “contents” were read; and he has written on how Edouard Claparède’s essays on Dewey meaningfully informed the ways that Dewey was assembled in Central/East European countries such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the 1920s and 1930s.

Clearly, Brickman did pay attention to the “routes” by which Dewey’s texts traveled. In addition to the above examples, one can note his suggestion (Brickman, 1949a) that knowledge of Dewey in Brazil was likely the result of translations and pedagogical writings by Spanish intellectuals. (In contrast, more recent scholarship on the circulation and popularization of Dewey’s ideas in Brazil has emphasized the importance of both the Belgian pedagogue Omar Buyse’s writings on Dewey as well as the study at Teachers College, Columbia University by educators such as Anísio Teixeira [Warde, 2005].) However, on balance, what consequence these “routes” had for “changing” or localizing Dewey did not become, for Brickman, a central topic of inquiry.

### **Brickman, Dewey, and the march of modern progress**

At the outset, we noted that a triumphalist “march of progress” orientation can readily be attached to analyses of how societies control, regulate, and dispose of knowledge. Dewey himself can rather easily be worked into such accounts as one of the seminal educational prophets of modernity. It is thus critically important that historians explore the ways that Dewey and early-twentieth-century progressivism in education were part and parcel of modernization projects—though we would propose that the academic’s proper task is not to laud the “successes” that were

achieved and lament the failures and obstacles that were encountered, but rather to try and unpack the ideals, norms, and governing principles that structure human societies and the possibilities for what can and cannot be considered “reasonable” in particular places and times. Accordingly, key questions to ask about the global circulation of John Dewey’s educational ideas include questions about the concepts and ordering principles that “traveled” with Dewey (and/or with translations of his writings); questions about what was privileged and what was prohibited or embargoed; as well as—as alluded to in the previous section—questions about how these various and varied ideas were recoded and resignified.

Above we pointed to the inadequacy of locating a pure point of “origin” for John Dewey and of overemphasizing notions of “authorship,” yet this does not mean that we propose that Dewey’s ideas “float freely” as ideas. The particular contexts in which Deweyan thought was anchored must be taken into consideration, something that, paradoxically, is shortchanged by the race-to-the-origins impulse of certain strands of transfer research. To take Dewey’s ideas as only “hybridized” when they leave Hyde Park in Chicago or Morningside Heights in New York, or to take the “force” of authorial intent as only encountering other “forces” when it moves outside its creator’s direct control, is precisely the kind of emptying of history that Walter Benjamin (1968) warned against. It is, in Thomas Popkewitz’s words, to make Dewey appear “as a logical system of thoughts or ‘concepts’ that has no social mooring in the interpretations and possibilities of action” (Popkewitz, 2005, p. ix).

In his writings, Brickman does direct some attention to the broader sociocultural setting within which Dewey’s ideas were articulated and circulated. For example, he typically explained the global attraction to Dewey’s ideas in relation to political circumstances and the “spirit” of the times. He noted, for example that Dewey’s name had become “well known in pedagogical circles in Europe prior to World War I.” In the aftermath of the war, interest in Dewey took on new momentum, and Brickman proposed that “the spirit of postwar reform, which also affected education, was responsible for the spreading of Dewey’s doctrines to other parts of the world” (Brickman & Leher, 1961, p. 133). Other scholars have noted the significance of World War I as helping to effect a shift from Europe to America in the global authority for norms-making (de Grazia, 2005; Sobe, 2009b). And Brickman himself notes,

That Dewey’s thinking about education won adherents in Europe, Asia, and other areas was quite a phenomenon, since Americans, as a general rule, were not deemed worthy of serious consideration in cultural, intellectual and educational circles. (Brickman & Leher, 1961, p. 133)

The privileging of the “American” version of modernity warrants careful attention, as does the process by which Dewey himself became what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) refer to as a “conceptual persona.” Dewey was one of a crowd of early-twentieth-century educational thinkers of iconic status who peopled peda-

gogic literatures around the globe and around whom a common grounding for modernization projects could be based.

Thomas Popkewitz (2005) suggests that we treat Dewey's writing as embodying "a particular set of concepts and ways of reasoning about the world and the self that is not merely that of Dewey" (p. 6). While there is considerable valence in how Dewey is "viewed" across the globe, it is also evident that Dewey did not function as an empty signifier to whom any meaning whatsoever could be attached. Popkewitz suggests that we view Dewey's work as embodying three principal cultural theses: (1) the notion that the individual is an agent of change with "responsibility for personal and collective progress"; (2) the practice of ordering and calculating time—chiefly writing the future into the present—for the purpose of enacting that agency; and (3) the recasting of science as a method of daily living, less for ascertaining Truth than as a tool for enacting "plans of operation" (pp. 16–25). Agency, the taming of change and science are not, in Popkewitz's schema, "variations of a single theme." Rather, they enter into different configurations—cultural configurations that both relate collective identities with individuality and draw in other knowledges and cultural practices to shape modernity and the "modern" self. One can as legitimately speak of such "cultural configurations" in a particular American setting as in an overseas setting. Thus, the research challenge is to understand Dewey as always a particular (and variegated) local figure, and nowhere merely the simulacra of an original. Put differently: even Dewey is never just Dewey and no one else.

With this in mind, it is useful to return to Brickman's methodological command that the comparative historian of education interested in Dewey discern what changes in a given education system "were attributable to the American educator and to no one else." This seemed a daunting task at the beginning. Even were one convincingly to isolate a single, discrete Deweyan intervention, the question remains as to how one would disprove the counterfactual, in other words, the possibility that said change would have taken place without Dewey. Given the position we have elaborated above, it now seems an impossible task. It is our view that the intellectual agenda of scholars engaged in the comparative history of education should move well beyond questions of attribution and influence to instead make intercrossings, intersections, and entanglements (Sobe, 2009a) the chief object of inquiry. Proceeding along these lines would actually be a great tribute to William Brickman and his lifelong interest in the "roots" and "routes" of educational ideas, systems, and practices.

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