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## Imagining Educational Space and National Space

"A great variety of climate, languages, religions, political organizations and governments in the twenty-two cantons of the Helvetian confederation permits finding there institutions and systems of education of unlimited variety, which reproduce all possible known forms of education, whether ancient or modern, or composed of a mixture from former times and changes introduced in our day, whether directed by secular or religious corporations, whether lastly subordinated to government or independent of its action."  
(Jullien 1816/17, 43)

The spatial location of schooling is an enduring concern in the field of comparative education – something we see in the above quote from Marc-Antoine Jullien's "foundational" *Esquisse et Vues Préliminaires d'un ouvrage sur L'Éducation Comparée* (1816/17) as well as in Robert Cowen's "post-foundational" examination of changing notions of space, education and the nation that is under discussion here. In thinking about schools and space, a key consideration is how to articulate and conceptualize what affects and is affected by what. And, for most of its history, the field of comparative and international education has gotten this entirely wrong when it comes to thinking about the relation between schools and nations: the fatal flaw being to treat the nation-state as an explanatory independent variable from which most of the salient aspects of schools and school systems flow. In this brief article I discuss the ways that Robert Cowen's work helpfully lets us improve on (and perhaps even atone for) this transgression.

For Marc-Antoine Jullien, early-nineteenth-century Switzerland offered a tremendous natural laboratory because of the variety of its cantons and their unique historical contours and trajectories. At the same time – and notwithstanding the fact that Swiss nationalism may still remain a puzzle for many – Jullien's text also mapped out a vision of educational modernity wherein the "cantonal mind" would be replaced by a "Helvetian mind" (Sobe 2002). National progress and improvement and potentially even a cosmopolitan world community lay on the horizon for nineteenth-century education reformers and nascent social scientists. Yet, the variety and variability of particular, local educational systems and patterns of institutions remained the chief object of fascination of Jullien's "classical age" or Enlightenment episteme (Foucault 1971).

At issue then and now is the question of what and how context matters for schooling – and how we add a "national" dimension into the mix. While various logics can be marshalled to justify putting middle schools in Shanghai onto a table next to middle schools in Boston, and while we seem to inhabit a world where policymakers and education reformers increasingly seem to assume that lessons can be learned from anywhere, it is also clear that in such tables and transits the nation does anything but disappear. In Cowen's pitch-perfect explanation, we increasingly see the "reverse translation of a political category into a research-technical category" with a resultant black-boxing of the nation into a set of variables. In a similar spirit Lynn Fendler has recently written on the ways that "ghosts of the nation-state haunt educational histories when nations are treated as independent variables, frozen in time and exempt from critical investigation" (Fendler 2013, 227). The nation was a foundational element of comparative education scholarship as the field consolidated in the early twentieth

century. From Isaac Kandell's "forces and factors" as well as Michael Sadler's national "soil" idiom (Sobe/Kowalczyk 2014), the "nation" has haunted comparative education as a spectral presence. Ironically this has led to the contents of national education traditions being left examined and more unchallenged (Welch 2009) than the tradition (and critique) of methodological nationalism would actually seem to predict. The problem with black-boxing and the problem of treating the nation as-if an independent variable is that it is a fallacy to purport to "stabilize" the nation as possessing explanatory power when in fact the nation is something that needs to be explained. We shortchange educational research if we do not examine the ways that schools construct national identities, national imaginaries and national practices. Despite the field's avowal of professional expertise when it comes to matters "local" and "global," comparative and international education researchers still have considerable work to do to sort out the issue of context (Cowen 2006). With Jamie Kowalczyk (Sobe/Kowalczyk 2012, 2014), I have recently argued that one of the problems in the field is a tendency to artificially separate research objects from research contexts, to the detriment of fully understanding how both are imbricated in power and knowledge relations and in the mobilization of social norms, political rationalities and technologies of governance. In much contemporary comparative education scholarship, the identification of "the national context" is a preliminary stage-setting research operation that – like the specification of "economic context" and "social context" (and so on) – serves to identify domains of action and surfaces of intervention. At times "educational context" is operationalized through the implementation of a Russian nesting-doll approach of conceptualizing different contextual and spatial "levels" (e.g. local, provincial, national, regional, global) as concentric circles, each encompassing the next. As Saskia Sassen (2008) notes, the flawed assumption in this is that processes, discourses, and pressures necessarily pass through each scalar level when they are heading "up," "down," "in," or "out." Increasingly, it seems that we witness what cultural geographers refer to as scale-jumping and perhaps most notably the de-nationalization of national elites (Sassen 2008). One proposed solution (Sobe/Kowalczyk 2014) is to revision contexts ("national contexts" among them) as assemblages. Irregardless of whether a study is historical, contemporary or both, the task of the researcher is then to understand the nation as an entanglement. As part of identifying nations analytically, it is incumbent on researchers to examine the ways that schools and various educational apparatuses (whether they be international testing regimes, transnational corporations or global rankings projects) construct their own "environments" with a diffuse and heterogenous range of enabling and disabling consequences.

Cowen's emphasis on examining the ways that the nation is made visible and made invisible is an extremely welcome interjection into these ongoing discussions within the field of comparative and international education. In seizing on the shift of "compass words" into political spaces Cowen himself illuminates one of the ways that the nation lives on in studies of post-colonialism and post-socialism. However, I would caution to avoid any appearance of using nation and state in an interchangeable manner, especially given the broad "state" and "non-state" diffusion of governmentality and governance technologies, a trend that seems only to be accelerating. Cowen also notes that while the nation was originally dissected on the grounds of epistemic principles that carried their own implicit political principles, increasingly we see the nation being de-constructed and re-constructed by political policy agendas. Notwithstanding the indication from Marc-Antoine Jullien that these processes themselves also have a storied past, Cowen is absolutely correct that the educational "truths"

that "the nation" is mobilized to legitimate and de-legitimate need serious research. The cantons of Switzerland would be but one among hundreds of other unexceptional settings in which to conduct such work.

In sum, this piece has argued that comparative education researchers would do well to take up the intersection of national spaces and educational spaces as a set of relations and processes that takes different forms in different times and places. Explanatory power cannot be simplistically attributed to schooling ("the school makes the nation") nor can it be attributed to the national ("national characteristics shape the school"). Rather, we need to investigate the ways that educational spaces and national spaces are imagined as relating to one another and, accordingly, what truths, expectations, and possibilities are thus enabled and disabled.

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