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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on five basic concepts that exemplify the comparative study of higher education. It examines its contribution to the understanding of higher education: Comparative higher education is seen as the best means of examining one's own system, of understanding its cultural characteristics, of seeing alternatives, and of understanding commonalities and differences. Using a macrosociological approach, it seeks to explain similarities and differences by relating higher education to the society and culture in which it is embedded. It looks at the historical, common European root of universities and to the interrelationship between religious, political, economic, cultural, and social developments and the development of higher education. It examines higher education's place in national societies and cultures, and as a worldwide culture of its own. Despite differences in European and American higher education, similarities are seen in values and beliefs, institutional forms, scholarship, research, and teaching, and standards. It notes the value of comparative higher education for the self-education of academics and scholars, as well as for students in the field of higher education, arguing that an understanding of comparative higher education is integral to the concept of an educated academic. Contains 11 references. (CH)

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WHAT SORT OF COMPARATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH, WHAT FOR AND FOR WHOM? REFLECTIONS ON ITS HISTORICAL, SOCIETAL, DISCIPLINARY AND EDUCATIVE CONTEXT

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REFLECTIONS ON ITS HISTORICAL, SOCIETAL, DISCIPLINARY AND EDUCATIVE CONTEXT

This paper focuses on five points:

1.
Different purposes of comparative higher education. I focus on its contribution to the understanding of higher education. In that context, higher education research is basic research.

2.
The frame of reference of comparative higher education: explaining and understanding similarities and differences by relating higher education to the society and culture in which it is embedded. I plead for a macro-sociological approach in comparative higher education: comparative higher education as comparative sociology and cultural anthropology.

3.
The historical (vertical) dimension of comparative higher education. I argue that it should be combined with the predominant horizontal dimension. A comparative historical view reveals the common European roots of universities and the interrelationship between religious, political, economic, cultural and social developments and the development of higher education. Universities as a world wide export product of European-American civilization.

4.
From higher education as part and parcel of national societies and cultures to higher education as a world wide culture of its own (like transnational corporations)?: Challenges for comparative higher education research.

5.

The uses of comparative higher education for the self-education of academics in general and scholars as well as students in the field of higher education in particular.
I argue for comparative (higher) education as an integral part of the idea (concept) of an educated academic.

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ad 1.

It is obvious that comparative higher education as a field of inquiry serves several different purposes, has several patrons, beneficiaries and stakeholders. Several academic disciplines contribute to it. (1) Over the last decades, a world wide and transdisciplinary scientific community of higher education researchers has developed, interrelated with policy makers, administrators, managers, planners, consultants and higher education organizations, governments and international bodies and organizations. The growth of comparative higher education - how could it be otherwise - is closely connected with increasing internationlization, globalization and transnational networking in higher education itself. The state of the art in comparative higher education research has recently been analyzed and documented in several publications. I name only three which I have found to be particularly useful for our purposes:
1. The most recent study is a UNESCO-publication; it is more international, even global, than directly comparative: Jan Sadlak and Philip G. Altbach, eds. (1997): Higher Education Research at the Turn of the New Century. Paris: UNESCO. New York and London: Garland.
2. In December 1996, "Higher Education - the International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning" has published a special issue on the state of comparative research in higher education (vol. 32, no. 4, 1996); the guest editor of this issue is Ulrich Teichler.
3. In the last decade, policy studies have gained importance in comparative higher education. The following one originated at the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente in the Netherlands: Leo Goedegebuure and Frans van Vught, eds. (1994): Comparative Policy Studies in Higher Education. Utrecht: Uitgeverij Lemma. (2)

Almost everything has already been said in these publications. Taken together, they contain more information and food for thought than I can digest for the purpose of this short paper. So let me just try to offer a few reflections which might stimulate our discussion. It is obvious that many comparative studies are policy related and - directly or indirectly - contain advice to policy makers. Many are commissioned by governments or international organizations. International comparisons have turned out to be useful tools in national higher education reform debates: Those advocating reforms in their own country analyze and point to what other countries have done or are doing to cope with similar problems. Transnational cooperation in higher education also necessitates comparative studies. Comparative studies in higher education may serve to de-

emotionalize and rationalize policy controversies. But policy makers and pressure groups may also intrumentalize comparative studies for their purposes. That goes, of course, for the nexus between politics and the social sciences in general.

There seems to be a connection between the practical (i.e. policy) use of comparative studies and the funding of such studies: It goes without saying that "relevance" is important to get funding. But that is often understood - more often than not, I suspect - in the narrower sense of "practical relevance", not just by those who appropriate the money but also by the researchers themselves. Comparative higher education should contribute to improving higher education, solving its problems, stimulating and informing innovations - I contend that that is the creed of most of us, the workers in the vineyard of comparative higher education. Of course, there are those few outstanding and inspiring grand theorist in the field who pursue comparative research as basic research beyond the day, but the mainstream is practical relevance and applicability. (I would only be too glad if this statement could be falsified.) Maybe that for a couple of hundred specialized comparative higher education researchers only a few are needed for basic research and scholarship.

My argument, however, is that comparative higher education should also be about our own understanding (see below) of higher education. I know that sounds and maybe is trivial. Being part of the system, we all have a picture in the back of our minds of what the whole thing is about, what makes it tick, how it looks like, what its effects are and where it should go. But it is a picture of reality, not reality itself. There is, like in our understanding of all other walks of life, ideology in it. For the sake of our ability to act we probably cannot do without it. But - and this is my point - as enlightened individuals (this is, at any rate, what we would like to be and what constitutions of democracies assume us to be) we need to work on our own understanding of the system - higher education - we live and work in. This is where comparative higher education comes in: I think it is one of the best means

- to look at our own system from the distance,
- to get a deeper understanding of its characteristics and cultural relativities,
- to understand as not so selfevident what we have always taken for granted,
- to see that there are alternatives,
- to understand commonalities and differences.

Even though the old distinctions between basic and applied research are being challenged, become blurred and have to be revised or substituted (3), I would classify those comparative higher education studies as "basic" rather than "applied" which aim at contextual understanding and at providing insights ("knowledge") instead of just being useful tools in policy processes. Comparative research of this "basic" type would contribute to theories of higher education in the context of theories of society and culture. To say that we have too little of this theory-

building comparative research in higher education, does not in any way diminish the importance of problem-solving and policy-directed comparative studies. And after all: "There is nothing as practical as a good theory."

ad 2.

Comparative higher education of the more basic type mentioned above will only result in better understanding of similarities and differences if it succeeds in explaining them. (The terms "understanding" ("Verstehen") and "explaining" are used here in the sense of Max Weber's famous definition of sociology.) (4) Explaining differences between higher education in different countries cannot work if we only look at higher education itself (though higher education systems certainly develop their own inner dynamics). Even the most autonomous higher education institutions and systems are subsystems of their society (including its political and economic system) and their culture. That means: the "tertium comparationis" in comparing higher education in different countries is the society and culture of which higher education is a part. That in turn means for the methodology of comparative higher education that such comparisons will have to be based on the study of society and culture. Basically and in the long run, there is always some sort of a fit between higher education and its surrounding society and culture, though it is surprising for how long higher education institutions can succeed in resisting adaption to societal changes - at the risk of being bypassed and finally sinking into oblivion.

It follows from this line of thought that comparative studies in higher education have to include a macro-sociological dimension and approach. (5) That approach necessarily has to cover a wide range of societal factors (the political, economic and cultural system, social structure, demography etc.) which influence and to a certain extent determine higher education. The relevance of the cultural system for education in general and higher education in particular, obvious as it is, becomes even more obvious when it comes to higher education in "non-Western" cultures. This is where cultural anthropology becomes indispendable. Focussing on these dimensions of basic comparative studies in higher education may remind us that interdisciplinarity - one of our beautiful catchwords - (see reference 3) does not mean non-disciplinarity. (I know, of course, that you know. But when we look around we notice that in actual practice inter- or transdisciplinarity sometimes seems to mean simply to forget about disciplinary approaches and methods. That, I am sure, is bad for quality. When interdisciplinarity has become a virtue, let's see to it that disciplined disciplinary research does not become a vice.)

ad 3.

I am sometimes struck by the lack of historical dimension and awareness in higher education research in general and comparative studies in particular. Most comparative studies compare

horizontally but hardly vertically, not to speak of combining the two dimensions. It seems to me that the more applied comparative higher education is getting, the more is it becoming a-historical. The history of higher education and the mainstream of comparative higher education exist side by side. Only seldom do comparative projects make use of historical knowledge. (6) They form two separate scientific communities, and - with a few (and notable) exceptions - the two do not mix. By definition and from the beginning, higher education research is interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary, and its interdisciplinarity is often praised. But in actual practice it usually does not integrate historry. Why is that so? Certainly not because history is irrelevant to (comparative) higher education. I suggest that this state of affairs is no specialty of higher education research. The dominant type ("paradigm") of empirical social science research, especially in sociology - which after 1945 made its way from the United States around the world - was methodologically a-historical, and, parallel to that, the dominant methodological tradition of historical research had no use for the modern ways of empirical social science. This non-relationship was carried over into the emerging field of higher education research, possibly more so in the United States than in some European countries. In the last two decades, historical and social science have been moving toward eachother.(7) But that strong and important movement apparently has not yet really spilled over into comparative higher education research. The problems this research has tackled in the field of higher education development and reform since the sixties and, consequently, its dominantly applied mode usually did hardly touch on seemingly "impractical" historical questions.

But when we think of the role comparative higher education can and should play in analyzing and explaining the basic properties of higher education, the structures, functions, developments, patterns and problems of institutions and systems in their interdependence with society and culture, then historical analysis becomes indispensable: differences and similarities of higher education in different societies and cultures and at different times can only be explained properly if we come to understand higher education as the result of internal and external historical developments. I insist that only vertical and horizontal comparison together will give us the knowledge and insights we need to understand higher education. The combination of vertical and horizontal comparison is, of course, also a methodological challenge. When we undertake it to compare the present state, let's say, of American, British, French and German higher education we cannot possibly explain and understand differences and similarities by simply looking at the present situation. Instead, we have to see them as historically grown subsystem of their historically grown and interrelated societies if we really want to understand. When we know about the long way higher education has travelled in different countries we are in a position to perceive the present state in the light of historical continuity and change. If we do that we might not so easily fall victim to fashions and fads in modern higher education. There is a Russian proverb saying that often the new is just the old we have forgotten. That also applies to higher education: In our preoccupation with change and

innovation we may tend to forget that we stand "on the shoulders of giants" (Bernhard of Chartres in the 12th century) and that higher education has been innovative before.(The first charter of the University of Paris in 1215, granting it institutional autonomy, stated "reformatio in melius", reform to the better, as a leading idea.) The newest may not be so new after all. For our own understanding of higher education it might be helpful if we learn - by vertical and horizontal comparisons - to distinguish between what is really new and unprecedented and what has been there before and to understand that the new is always rooted in the old.

Long before the nation state there has been a European university system in the Middle Ages which, I suggest, was much more European than what we have in Europe today. It really can be seen as a more or less unified system, being characterized by one common language, similar structures and contents of teaching and studies, almost identical organization, and even a common "jus ubique docendi": the doctoral degree of any one of the universities conferred the the right to teach at all of them. Next to the church ("sacerdotium") and the Holy Roman Empire ("imperium") the university ("studium") was one of the basic institutions of Medieval Europe (Alexander of Roes, in the middle of the 13th century). (8) Comparative historical study reveals easily what present day European as well as American higher education owes to those medieval universities. Obviously, there is continuity amid change, but there is also a continuity of change itself. For a well balanced picture of higher education, comparative studies should consider the interrelationship between the two.

ad 4.

Comparative research is confronted with the phenomenon that higher education is national and at the same time increasingly international. On the one hand it is - see above - integrated in and pervaded by its historically grown surrounding society and culture. The structure of national higher education systems ist more or less determined by their respective political systems (isomorphism), they are subject to national and regional politics and policies. Last not least, the sources of funding are largely national. On the other hand we witness, above all, that scientific communities and their disciplinary cultures are becoming more and more transnational. In many disciplines the English language is on its way to become the lingua franca like Latin was until the end of the Middle Ages. This, I venture to say, is an important cultural change and a challenge for comparative research. (Just in brackets: comparative higher education should pay more attention to academic disciplines and their cultures. To a large extent, research on sciences is separated from higher education research, even though the combination of research and advanced education is the dinstinguishing feature of the university.)

Beyond transnationalization - or should we say: de-nationalization? - of research communities and -structures, higher education systems themselves seem to becoming more transnational - especially in Europe where interrelated processes of Europeanization are gaining momentum.

Higher education is part of those processes, partly proactively and partly by being affected by these changes and movements. The tremendous differences between systems of higher education within Europe, however, should not be underestimated. The question is what we want to and what we have to Europeanize - and what is going to happen anyway, what the effects of this will be and what of the cultural diversity and variety in European higher education we can or should preserve. Diversity is an asset, it is good for competition, it is colourful, and it is fun. Besides, one can learn from eachother. I don't see a unified European system of European higher education, neither as a vision nor as an upcoming reality or a nightmare. What really is developing in Europe is cooperation as well as competition, coordination and compatibility. (9) Comparative higher education research will have to play a role in these developments, and that means monitoring, documenting, analyzing, possibly advising and - hopefully - reflecting, critizising, bringing to mind and thereby contributing to understanding of what is going on.

Historically, the university and the college started out as European - we might also say Western - institutions. When I say Western, I have two things in mind: I think of the geographical and cultural origins in the Middle Ages as well as of transatlantic commonalities in higher education as they developed since Britain colonized North America. At the base of all diversity and differences in European-American higher education there are

- some common values and beliefs,
- some common institutional forms,
- some common ways of scholarship and research, teaching and studying and
- some common standards. (10)

This should be kept in mind when comparative studies look at present tendencies and factors of globalization in higher education. At first sight, globalization in this field on the one hand and the fact that higher education is part and parcel of its particular society and culture on the other hand, seem to be contradictory. Being part of a specific social and cultural system, an institution cannot simply be copied or transplanted into another system. But the world is full of examples of cultures which have adopted elements of other cultures and - of course - in the process of adoption changed these elements and, by doing that, they changed themselves. Cultural interpenetration, infiltration or exchange is a common phenomenon; take Christianity or capitalism or parlamentary democracy, just to name a few of the "big things". What happens is not a direct and detailed transplantation of an institution from one cultural and societal setting into another, but the adoption of a generalized set of principles, patterns, contents and institutional structures and procedures (which comes close to what Max Weber called the "ideal type") and their adaptation to and integration into the adopting society. This kind of transfer from one society and culture to another will only work if and when it is functional and advantagous for the receiving side, when it solves a problem or serves a purpose. This general

pattern also applies to higher education: a society may take over or adopt other ("foreign") institutional models or elements of higher education when that society has come to a point in its own development where there is a functional need for it and where and when the existing solutions don't work anymore in the light of changing environments of higher education.

What we are experiencing in world wide higher education in these years and what can already be established as a trend into the future goes a step further: it is not just that the basic model of the university, rooted in the West, has become universal. Globalization - if we call it that - in higher education goes beyond universalization of higher education: Through steadily intensifying institutionalized cooperation, communication, networking and exchange of persons and ideas, higher education seems to be on its way into a "world wide web". The higher their position in rankings, the more universities become "global players", also global competitors. These developments are cases for comparative higher education research, not only to find out exactly what is going on and in what direction, how and why and with what effects and side effects, but also to explain, review and interpret the facts in their historical, cultural and political context. This would be - and should be - a contribution of comparative research and scholarship to a more sophisticated macro-theory of higher education. (11)

I suggest that the closer this "world wide web" is knit, especially among the global players, the more a specific world wide culture of higher education comes into being, particularly as far as universities are concerned which combine research and teaching. This global culture of higher education may be seen as a kind of layer on top of national societies and cultures. It is rooted in national cultures, but it is developing its own dynamics which in turn are going to have repercussions on national cultures and on national higher education policies and strategies for reform. Though higher education institutions will continue to act locally and nationally, their integration as international players into this specific global culture is apt to loosen (but certainly not to cut) ties with their national societies. But these are never one-way processes: global and national developments in higher education interpenetrate.

What is the core of a global culture of higher education going to be - and, on the normative side, what do we think it should be? Is it Humboldt plus high tech or just high tech? Will it be able and willing to reflect on itself and on its interdependence with the rest of the world and let the world know? Will its thinkers only think when they get paid for it and what they get paid for? Will it "hold the line" which connects it with the historical roots of the university? Will it just be economically and technologically useful or will it be able and willing to maintain its critical function? And what about the role of comparative higher education scholarship and research in the context of a global higher education culture? Beyond the policy functions and the more technological uses of comparative higher education, I plead for the critical role scholarship and research in this field have to play in the self-reflection of higher education.

ad 5.

What good does theoretically oriented and historically founded comparative higher education do and for whom? Cui bono? The answer I suggest is simple, maybe too simple. It has to do with the idea of an educated person and the application of this idea to academics, administrators and students in higher education. I will not here and now reflect in depth on the educated person in general. It has all been said elsewhere. At any rate, becoming an educated person is a process of self-education. Basically, it has do do with understanding one's world - or at least having an approach to that understanding - and understanding oneself. And with relating that understanding to what one does. Applied to academia, this means: The highly competent top specialist may not really be an educated person if he or she is nothing but a specialist. Becoming an educated scholar, researcher, teacher or student in the field of higher education means to me: learning to understand one's workplace, the discipline, the institution and the system in its interrelationship with the world around it (the horizontal dimension) and to understand it as the result of historical developments (the vertical dimension). Becoming an educated persons in one's field, institution and system means furthermore: learning to step aside and seeing oneself and one's field from a distance, being able to reflect on one's role, being able to decide for oneself whether and where to adapt or to resist. (That is the autonomous person in David Riesman's "Lonely Crowd" of 1951.) Academics, administrators and students will be able to understand their world better if - beyond their personal experience - they aquire a systematic and in-depth knowledge about higher education in its horizontal as well as its vertical dimension. And this is where comparative higher education comes in: there is hardly a better way to the understanding of the institution and the system and its interdependence with society than by transnational and transcultural comparison. That is particularly important in an age of internationalization and globalization of higher education. Thus, the application of comparative theories of higher education - including their historical dimension - lies not least in their integration into the (self)education of the people in the world of higher education itself. That concerns not only scholars, researchers and teachers but also administrators, managers and leaders in the field (who usually may not have the time for it and have reasons to feel that they don't need it because they know all about it anyway). Of course, basic research - and I consider the theoretically oriented type of comparative higher education research discussed here to be basic - has one of its justifications in its contribution to knowledge. But who needs it, who can build on it, whom does it serve for what purpose? The people working in higher education themselves, those who teach, do research, those who manage and lead in that field, they - though not they alone - are addressees and "consumers" of comparative theories of higher education, they might profit from it for the sake of their own deeper understanding.

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