

Concluding Considerations: Approach to a Critical Laudation

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T. Neville Postlethwaite is going to be transferred to the position of Emeritus Professor. According to the German university tradition - which, however, has been fading out since the end of the seventies - this transfer consists in an "honourable discharge" from the performance of academic duties to be fulfilled by a German professor. It is true that it is linked with the continuation of the essential academic right to teach at his/her university. Nevertheless this retirement, "honourable" though it is, indicates a turning-point in a person's professional career which necessarily has an impact on his/her private life. Therefore *T. Neville Postlethwaite's* friends and colleagues who have committed themselves to edit this *Festschrift* deserve acknowledgement and gratitude.

When leaving his "chair" *T. Neville Postlethwaite* will find satisfaction in looking back to almost forty years of scholarly achievement and creativity. Educational research in general and comparative education in particular have been significantly enriched by his remarkable contributions to theory building. Moreover, his numerous empirical studies have given evidence of his successful efforts to combine conceptualisation and application. Together with *Torsten Husén* he has laid the ground for the worldwide reputation of the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IEA) with its pioneering activities and output. In addition to his cross-national surveys of educational achievement, his range of scholarly interest comprises empirical studies on educational planning with special regard to the quality of education as well as on curriculum development and evaluation.

In view of his comprehensive *oeuvre* and his undisputed place in the global community of educationists and social scientists one should be astonished at the fact that *T. Neville Postlethwaite's* position among the "professionally organised" comparative educationists in Germany has remained rather

indistinct. This observation needs to be considered all the more so, as he has taught at Hamburg University where the history of research and teaching in comparative education has been established by such prominent scholars as *Walter Merck* and *Gottfried Hausmann* and continued, in addition to T. Neville Postlethwaite himself, by *Klaus Schleicher* and *Hans-Peter Schäfer*. This is not the appropriate place to look for an in-depth explanation of this striking phenomenon.

It should be, however, legitimate to offer a tentative comment which leads to one of the basic issues comparative educationists have had to tackle throughout the twentieth century and into the present, whereby local, regional and national peculiarities need to be given special attention. This issue is rooted in the search for the optimum methodic approach to comparing national and cultural entities. Despite the great number of contributions comparative educationists have made in order to penetrate and illuminate its internal complexity, there is still the fundamental dichotomy between the *empiric* and *hermeneutic* paradigms. While the hermeneutist approaches his cognitive object by means of interpreting "texts" of different kinds (from "classical" verbal and pictural records to "modern" audio-visual documents) the empiricist examines facts, interrelations and trends on the base of evaluating quantitative ("hard") and qualitative ("soft") data. The intra-disciplinary debates among comparative educationists, mirroring preceding and parallel debates within the "superordinate" ranges of the humanities and social sciences, reveal that the "dispute on methods" opens the door to controversially perceived and articulated cognitive targets ("understanding" versus "explaining") and allocations concerning the place of comparative education in the research system (humanities, in particular history and philosophy, versus social sciences).

It is true that all these debates have paid necessary attention to identifying the *essentials* of the discipline in terms of targets, functions, contents and methods. Yet, in this context one might feel animated to extend T. Neville Postlethwaite's reference to the *pseudo* character of the "debate on the relative merits of quantitative versus qualitative studies" *within* the social sciences, to be quoted from his Preface to *The Encyclopedia of Comparative Education and National Systems of Education* (1988, p. XIX), to the "superordinate" ranges of the debates. As regards the "dispute on methods", may it suffice to remember the stimulating arguments given by *Dieter Berstecher* (1970, p. 40), *Saul B. Robinsohn* (1973, p. 325) and *Herman Röhrs* (1975, pp. 77-82) in "reconciling" the two fundamental methodic approaches. They emphasised their relative independence within their specific functional and systemic dimensions while still considering their categorical definition and practical application. It

is T. Neville Postlethwaite himself who approved of this solution in his Preface: "Today, there are still two major approaches in comparative education - the one using the empirical paradigm and the other using historical and hermeneutic approaches" (loc. cit.).

Acknowledgement and tolerance of "both positions" is one side of the coin. The other side is characterised by personal preferences and, consequently, by the choice of priorities by the researcher in his/her own work. It is this "secondary" level of professional relationship which seems to pave the way to T. Neville Postlethwaite's place in the community of *German* comparative educationists. While his performance as co-editor (together with *Torsten Husén*) of the *International Encyclopedia of Education* (1985, 2nd ed. 1994) testifies to his overall academic competence for comparative education, his dominant theme as researcher has been focused on continuously developing and refining the empiric paradigm for application in the areas mentioned above. These consisted mainly in his contributions to "standardising" conceptual and analytical foundations and procedures as well as measuring instruments in his own inquiries in and around IEA. This distinct commitment may have lowered his interest in the comparative studies which were completed by most of his German colleagues whose efforts have been primarily devoted to the hermeneutic approach and, within the social science dimension, to the preference of using qualitative data. This assumption may be reinforced, above all, by the discovery that references to German documents and authors are significantly underrepresented in Postlethwaite's publications.

To look for an explanation of this obvious "gap" one must not, however, get stuck in a one-sided appraisal, since the dominant attitude among the group of the "professionally organised" comparative educationists in Germany also gives insight into "segregational" features. It is the strong orientation of their investigations to the *historical* background of current phenomena which may have deepened this gap, as well as their striking engagement in comparative research on Soviet and East European education in a period in which access to empirical data, both quantitative and qualitative, was widely limited, if not prevented at all. Hungary, an early member country of IEA, held an exceptional place in this pattern, as T. Neville Postlethwaite's own analyses confirm in an exemplary way.

When I retrospect to the past twenty years it seems to me that the "gap" which I have made out, has not only been regrettable, but also unnecessary, because stronger communication and operation might have been of mutual benefit. Furthermore, here again we become aware of a "pseudo" problem, because the German "hermeneutists" had already long since included empirical

analyses in their investigations. They have realised that "the obvious danger in *not* using an empirical approach is that one is left in the realm of speculation about the relative effect of variables which are intercorrelated. Social scientists would argue that although their approach has its imperfections, it is more likely that progress can be made with a use of model (theory) testing than without it" (Postlethwaite 1988, loc. cit.). On the other hand IEA researchers, in their efforts to include intervening background conditions (socio-economic, political, cultural) in their explanatory considerations, have crossed the Rubicon to the hermeneutic paradigm to an increasing extent. Moreover, T. Neville Postlethwaite has made clear that "after all, the interpretation of the outcomes is dependent upon memory, self-observation and specific statement, and these can be very different from interpreter to interpreter. There the interpretation of data must be carried out cautiously, although there is no reason to do without it" (Postlethwaite 1993, p. 125). Finally, comparative educationists all over the world are becoming aware of a growing demand for the evaluation of their data as well as for their interpretations, expressed by national, supra-national and international agencies. Making use of all their knowledge, experiences and imaginations, they can do their best to live up to these demands in joint efforts, shared by empiricists *and* hermeneutists.

T. Neville Postlethwaite's entry into the status of Emeritus Professor is a good occasion to reflect on the place of comparative education within the research system and on its policy-oriented tasks in a world of increasing interrelations and communalities (Heyneman 1993). Linking these considerations, as tentatively conceived as they may be with an open and critical *laudation* seems to be appropriate, because T. Neville Postlethwaite's "honourable discharge from the performance of academic duties" does not mean any farewell. On the contrary let us hope that our distinguished colleague may use this exceptional form of retirement to continue his research for many years, for the benefit of educational theory and practice.

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