

Sabine Hornberg

Potential of the World Polity Approach and the Concept ‘Transnational Educational Spaces’ for the Analysis of New Developments in Education

Abstract

The Stanford scholars around John W. Meyer have, for many years, presented work within the theoretical frame of the world polity approach, a version of the neo-institutionalistic sociology of organizations that focuses on scientific aspects of social theory. These are treated according to a macro-perspective and with recourse to empirical data covering wide historical and geographical spaces. This article begins by outlining the empirical findings of Meyer and his colleagues on worldwide educational developments in order to make clear their research perspectives, interests, and objectives. Next, so as to categorize the interpretation of the educational dynamics that Meyer and his colleagues suggest, the theoretical assumptions underlying the world polity approach are sketched out. The argument then followed is that because of reference to the nation state as the central driving force for isomorphism and neglect of the economic dimension by the Stanford scholars new education opportunities brought about by processes of globalization and internationalization cannot be adequately conceptualized and analyzed under the umbrella of the world polity approach. The concept of transnational educational spaces (Adick, 2005; Hornberg, in press) appears as an opportunity to work on these developments and so is outlined. The article closes by hinting at the perspectives that drawing on the world polity approach and the concept of transnational educational spaces could offer conceptual and empirical work in education.

Keywords

globalization, world polity approach, transnationalism, transnational educational spaces

Potenziale des World Polity-Ansatzes und des Konzepts ‚Transnationale Bildungsräume‘ für die Analyse neuer Entwicklungen im Bildungswesen

Zusammenfassung

Die Stanforder Forscher um John W. Meyer stehen für Arbeiten auf der theoretischen Folie des world polity Ansatzes, einer Variante der neo-institutionalistischen Organisationssoziologie. Im Zentrum der Beiträge stehen sozialtheoretische Forschungsfragen, die im Rahmen einer Makroperspektive und mit Rekurs auf empirische, weite historische und geographische Räume umfassende Daten bearbeitet

werden. Im Folgenden werden empirische Befunde von Meyer et al. zu weltweiten Bildungsentwicklungen skizziert, ihre Forschungsperspektive, -interessen und -gegenstände sowie die grundlegenden theoretischen Prämissen des world polity Ansatzes umrissen. Das sodann verfolgte Argument lautet, dass der Rekurs auf den Nationalstaat als wirkungsmächtigstem Motor für weltweit isomorphe Entwicklungen und die Nichtberücksichtigung der ökonomischen Dimension in Erziehung und Bildung im Rahmen des world polity Ansatzes eine adäquate Konzeptualisierung und Analyse von neuen, im Zuge von Prozessen der Globalisierung und Internationalisierung aufkommenden Bildungsangeboten verhindert. Das Konzept transnationale Bildungsräume (Adick, 2005; Hornberg, in press) stellt eine Möglichkeit dar, diese Entwicklungen zu bearbeiten und wird vorgestellt. Der Beitrag schließt mit einem Ausblick auf Perspektiven für erziehungswissenschaftliche Arbeiten und Forschungen mit Bezug auf den world polity Ansatz und das Konzept transnationale Bildungsräume.

Schlagworte

Globalisierung, world polity Ansatz, Transnationalisierung, transnationale Bildungsräume

1. Introduction

The group of Stanford scientists working in concert with American sociologist John W. Meyer rank among the most prominent representatives of the world polity approach, a macro-phenomenological variant of the neo-institutionalistic sociology of organizations. Under this umbrella, Meyer and his colleagues have submitted, since the 1970s, macro-analytical studies on global developments, some of which focus on international developments in education. In Germany, this approach and its subjacent empirical studies have gained recent and increasing attention from those working within the field of sociology (Hasse & Krücken, 1999; Krücken, 2005; Wobbe, 2000). In educational science, this approach and associated studies have, for some time now, been incidentally picked up with respect to global developments in education (Adick, 1992, 2002, 2005; Hornberg, in press; Lenhardt, 1984, 1993; Lenhart, 2000; Schriewer, 1994).

In this article, I begin by summarizing the findings of Meyer and his colleagues on worldwide educational developments in general education. Within the world polity approach, these findings are interpreted as developments that have their roots in 17th-Century Europe, the Enlightenment, and the nation states, which have since developed into the dominating organizational form of territorially formed political systems. Next, I sketch out the theoretical assumptions underlying the world polity approach and identify developments in education worldwide, as well as in state-run general education, that cannot be conceptualized adequately by this approach. I not only discuss the reasons for this but also introduce, as a possible framework within which to work on this shortcoming, the concept of transnational educational spaces put forward by Adick (2005). This concept draws on theoretical assumptions that follow the conceptualization of “spaces” developed by

Faist (2000) and Pries (1996, 2001) within the context of the sociology of migration. Other than is traditionally the case in this field, and also in the pedagogy of migration, migration is not understood as a uni- or bi-directional process (between the areas of origin and arrival) but as a “genuine component of definitely continuous biographies” (Pries 2001, p. 49). I close the article by pointing to the potential that the world polity approach and the concept of transnational educational spaces has for conceptual work and research on international and nation-state border-transcending developments in education.

2. Empirical Findings under the Umbrella of the World Polity Approach

The central feature and particular strength of the world polity approach is the linking of theory and empiricism, which is reflected in numerous macro-analytical analyses of empirical phenomena, including those on global developments in education (Benavot, Chea, Kamens, Meyer, & Wong, 1991; Meyer, Kamens, & Benavot, 1992; Meyer & Ramirez, 2000; Meyer, Ramirez, Rubinson, & Boli-Bennett, 1977). The best-known publications of the Stanford scientists are the works on the initially in Central Europe and consecutively throughout the world enforced “mass education” principle in the period 1870 to 1980 (Boli & Ramirez, 1986; Boli, Ramirez, & Meyer, 1985; Ramirez & Meyer, 1980). The period between 1950 and 1970 yielded an enormous increase in global advocacy of education and a “world educational revolution,” as Meyer et al. (1977) put it. Today, all nations worldwide have – at least in programmatic form – state-run school systems, predominantly financed through public funding, with compulsory school attendance implemented at different times between 1850 and 1950 (Ramirez & Boli-Bennett, 1982).

The organizational structure of the school systems worldwide show similar features, namely, state-run administration of education, professional training of teachers, and an education system differentiated in terms of various levels of education and educational institutions. These education systems typically award governmentally authorized credentials in terms of certificates confirming school performance (Adick, 1992, pp. 17–124; Inkeles & Sirowy, 1983, pp. 303–333; Ramirez & Boli-Bennett, 1982). Also observable along with this worldwide rise of a general education system is a global extension of education in the field of tertiary/higher education (Ramirez & Riddle, 1991).

With respect to the exterior structures of education systems worldwide and the increasing participation in education globally, the Stanford scientists’ data reveal not only globally similar developments, particularly since 1945, but also the textual dimensions of school education. In 1992, these scientists published an anthology titled *School Knowledge for the Masses: World Models and National Primary Curricular Categories in the Twentieth Century* (Meyer, Kamens & Benavot, 1992; Benavot, 2002, p. 86; Ramirez, 1997, pp. 54–56). Here, they traced the fact that,

since 1945, all nations worldwide have adopted a global basic curriculum in elementary education, mostly lasting for six years. The curricula comprise lessons in one or more national languages, mathematics, science and social sciences, art, and physical and religious education. Furthermore, worldwide, similar amounts of time are dedicated to these subjects. From their data, Meyer et al. concluded that, since 1945, a kind of global basic curriculum has developed at the elementary school level, where national and/or regional specifics are considered less important, at least in terms of separately accounted subjects. The advocates of the world polity approach interpret their empirical findings regarding the development of the education system worldwide, especially since 1945, within a macro-perspective and by postulating the emergence and spread of similar, that is, isomorphic structures worldwide. In order to gain a better understanding of this interpretation, we need to take into account the theoretical assumptions underlying it.

3. Theoretical Assumptions Underlying the World Polity Approach

In 1977, John W. Meyer und Brian Rowan laid down, for the first time, the theoretical assumptions of the world polity approach (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). They drew on Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy. However, in contrast to Weber, Meyer and Rowan do not assume the efficient problem-solving strategies developed in the course of bureaucratic governance of organizations to be decisive for their legitimacy. Instead, they see these as the province of the formal rational structures, which taken alone are already authorizing organizations and bureaucratic governance – irrespective of whether these structures are characterized by efficiency or not (Hasse & Krücken, 1999, p. 13; Wobbe, 2000, p. 31).

The central concept underlying this interpretation, and introduced by Meyer et al., is concealed by the label “world polity.” The word “polity” derives from Anglo-Saxon political science and is often used when referring to “policy” or “politics.” The terms are used to differentiate the following areas of nation-state politics: *policy* refers to public acting and the contents of politics; *politics* stands for the process of forming the political will and decision-making procedures; *polity* applies to the political institutional system, which is determined by the constitution, the legal system, and tradition. Institutionally, polity is, for example, reflected in governments, parliaments, courts, offices, corporations, and schools. The basic principles of forming the political will are realized through institutions such as elections, fundamental rights, parties, and organizations. The political institutional system (polity) regulates the content (policy) and progress (politics) of politics (Rohe, 1994, pp. 61–68).

All three terms derive etymologically from the Greek “polis,” which in ancient Greece stood for the organized citizenship constituted and governed through all political and economically independent, free, and equal male citizens of a district.

The protagonists of the world polity approach follow the aforementioned meaning of the term polity, that is, the institutional transformation of the constitution, the legal system, and the tradition it indicates. However, instead of taking the common use in political science for single communities, the Stanford scholars use the term “world polity” to refer to a global citizenship shaped by a broad cultural system developed and embedded in Western societies and globally reflected (Boli & Thomas, 1997, p. 171; Fiala & Lanford, 1987, p. 315). Hence, the term *world polity* refers to community-spanning cultural and structural patterns.

With reference to Durkheim, the protagonists of the world polity approach suppose that these community-spanning cultural and structural patterns derive from transformations of Western pre-modern societies into modern societies. In the course of these transformations, work-sharing societies developed out of segmented societies consisting of families and clans. In segmented societies, social positions, duties, and individual chances are determined by ascription. In work-sharing societies, ascription is replaced by personally achievable individual performances contributed in a fair-minded contest that serves as the vehicle by which to position the members of a society (Durkheim, 1984, original 1934).

Against this background, the central assumption underlying the world polity approach is spelled out: in the course of the change from pre-modern to modern societies, and embedded in the Enlightenment, conceptions of society developed whereby certain myths were adopted (Boli, Ramirez & Meyer, 1985, pp. 158–161). These myths form the core of the world polity and the (since then) globally dominating cultural system – the “world culture” (Boli & Thomas, 1997, p. 173).

Within the world polity approach, the term “myth” is used for “simple and non-disputable causal explanations in complex and confusing situations”¹ (Hasse & Krücken, 1999, p. 67). These conceptions of society or myths are based on the following ideas of symbolically transformed and no-longer disputed structures and organizations (Ramirez, 1997, p. 49): “The Myth of the Individual, of the Nation as an Aggregation of Individuals, of Childhood Socialization and Continuity over the Life Course, of Progress, and of the State as the Guardian of the Nation.”

Under the world polity approach, these myths serve as a driving force for a still-running Western process of rationalization wherein “certain structural forms are emerging and authorized while others lose legitimation” (Hasse & Krücken, 1999, p. 32). According to Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez (1997, pp. 144–181), these central structural forms are:

1. Nation states, which have their historic roots in the European 17th Century and which have, since then, developed into the dominating organizational form of territorially formed political systems. The number of nation states worldwide increased from 65 in 1945 to 192 today;
2. Formal organizations as fundamental units of modern societies; and
3. Individuals acting rationally and autonomously.

1 This and other translations from German into English have been made by the author of this article.

These three structural forms copy the myths introduced at the level of global society representing anticipations of their environment to which they “establish conformational and structural similarities” (Wobbe, 2000, p. 32). This process leads to a worldwide adaptation of institutionalized values – to isomorphism, that is, similar structural patterns worldwide despite divergent social, economic, and political situations (Wobbe, 2000, pp. 29–40). This isomorphism characterizes the world culture (Boli & Thomas, 1997, pp. 171–190) and the world society, which are based on principles and models reflecting the world polity.

The three terms world society, world culture, and world polity are vital for understanding the world polity approach. *World society* is defined as a system that generates values by collectively transferred authority; Meyer had already introduced this term at the beginning of the 1980s (Meyer, 1980, p. 111). The later-introduced, and today central, term world polity (eponymous for this approach) indicates “a global corporative system of social organisation” (Wobbe, 2000, p. 37). It derives from the above-characterized myths that are symbolically transformed into continuously modified structures, norms, and rules (Boli, et al. 1985, pp. 158–161; Ramirez, 1997, p. 49).

In regard to the term *world culture*, the authors conceptualize the global prevalence of the Western paradigm of rationalization (Boli & Thomas, 1997, p. 173): “When we speak of culture as global, we mean that definitions, principles and purposes are cognitively constructed in similar ways throughout the world” (Boli & Thomas, 1997, pp. 171–190). Because of these universal cognitive structural patterns, it is assumed that individuals act as supporters and mediators of “scripts” (Meyer et al., 1997, p. 150) “... the many individuals both inside and outside the state who engage in state formation and policy formation are enactors of scripts rather more than they are self-directed actors”. During the course of a continuous social process of rationalization, structures are established that, in turn, form globally isomorphic, although constantly differentiated, configurations. These structures increase their own legitimacy as well as that of the predominant myths.

From the perspective of the *world polity*, the national (i.e., state-run) education systems developed in Europe in line with the change from pre-modern to modern societies have, on the basis of the above-named myths, and especially since World War 2, become more and more alike, that is, isomorphic. The central structures supporting this process are nation states and, also increasingly since 1945, international governmental and non-governmental organizations, with the latter gaining more and more influence as carriers and supporters of a global culture (Boli & Thomas, 1997, pp. 172 ff.).

It is the world polity approach that protagonists credit with having led to the development of a conception and a definition of world society at a time when, in social science, national societies represented the dominant reference framework for analyses of social developments. An exception in this respect is Immanuel Wallerstein’s world system approach, which he began working on before Meyer and colleagues began their work on the world polity approach. Since then, the discourse on world society has increased; among the important contributing theories

are those of Niklas Luhmann on world society and Juergen Habermas' contribution on de-nationalization. Also of substantial note are the discussions of theories and terms applied to the debate on globalization and assembled in *Edition Zweite Moderne*, launched by Ulrich Beck at the end of the 1990s.

Criticism of the submitted education-related sociological studies of Meyer et al. has been expressed with respect to the pursued macro-perspective of their studies. Jürgen Schriewer (1999) and his colleagues in particular have put forward the criticism that, under the umbrella of the world polity approach, different national intrasocial processes of system formation do not receive adequate consideration (Hopmann, 1993). Another criticism refers to the main basic assumption underlying the world polity approach. This assumption supposes a one-dimensional dynamic of globally spreading Western cultural and structural patterns (Adick, 1992, pp. 124 ff.; Hasse & Krücken, 1999, pp. 37 ff.).

Adick (1992) rejects the notion of Meyer and colleagues that the modern school represents a "European model." In her opinion (Adick, 1992, pp. 181 ff.), which she supports through her historical analyses of developments in education in West Africa, in respect to these the notion of the modern school as a product of colonial heritage has to be rejected and the modern school characterized as a global model (pp. 181ff.). Furthermore, Adick (1992, p. 115) as well as Lenhardt (1993) had earlier, at the beginning of the 1990s, criticized the disregard of economic and political processes and balances of power within the world polity approach (for an elaboration on this point, see also Adick, 2009, pp. 279–285).

In respect of the argument followed here, I now take up the following two critiques on the world polity approach: the neglect of the economic dimension, and the notion of the nation state as the most powerful structure in the world polity approach. The Stanford scholars Boli and Thomas (1997) do concede that the gain in the importance of international and supranational organizations could be accompanied by an incalculable alteration of the nation state and its efficacy. Of interest here are developments taking place in worldwide education for which the theoretical assumptions underlying the world polity approach and the empirical findings gained under this umbrella are proving fruitful for analyses, but which also bear elements that cannot be grasped adequately within this framework.

Such developments have been characterized as "innovative answers" to internationalization and globalization, and they manifest themselves in "new ideas and models emerging transnationally, i.e., beyond national and cultural boundaries and outside of international organizations or scientific communities or crosswise to them" (Adick, 2009, p. 286). Examples of such developments in education are transnational organizations that offer their own courses, certificates, and the like, and for which the consumers pay themselves, that is privately. These provisions are particularly evident worldwide not only in the field of tertiary education, but also in general education. An example of the latter is the globally established international schools and the organizations associated with them. Since World War 2, in particular, these learning opportunities have become an increasingly available option in general education, and are sometimes even evident in state-run general education

systems. International schools and the organizations associated with them, such as the International Baccalaureate Office (IBO), develop and supply their own curricula and teaching materials. The International Baccalaureate even offers a university entrance examination that is accepted by most universities worldwide.

For those seeking to analyze the importance and relevance of such offers in general education, the concept ‘transnational educational spaces’ proves useful, as Hornberg (in press) shows with respect to the international schools and their associated organizations. Hornberg refers to concepts relating to transnational spaces that have been spelled out since the early 1990s in the German-language sociology of migration and to the concept ‘transnational educational spaces’ (Adick, 2005). In the next section, I outline the central terms, underlying assumptions, and contours of these approaches.

4. Transnational Spaces

Social scientists Ludger Pries and Thomas Faist consider the phenomena of transnationalism and transnational and social developments in terms of “transmigration” (Pries, 2001, p. 9). Pries (2001) considers this kind of migration to be “a modern type of a nomadic way of life [that gives rise to] transnational social spaces,” or to “transnational spaces,” as Faist (2000) puts it. Such spaces can extend across nations or continents and are constituted through the transmigrants’ conduct of life. Under the umbrella of the transnational spaces approach, migration is no longer understood “as a singular or twofold changeover between two sites (areas of origin and arrival), but as a genuine component of definitely continuous biographies” (Pries, 2001, p. 49.)

Although Faist (2000, p. 14) emphasizes the fact that states are not always identical with nation states, their national territories, and governments, both he (2000, p. 13) and Pries (2001, p. 18) pay heed to a discourse initiated at the beginning of the 1990 as a result of ethnographic research by Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (1992). The first contours of a transnational perspective on migration appeared in the course of their focusing on so-far unconsidered “social areas” created by migrants who link the nation of their origin with the nation of their residence (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992, p. 81). However, Faist and Pries substitute the term “social area” for the term “space,” with Pries (2001, p. 53) defining this expression as follows:

We programmatically suggest, to understand *transnational social spaces* as a kind of pluri-local “interrelations” (Elias, 1986). Thus, *transnational social spaces* are relatively stable condensed configurations of social daily routines, symbolism and artefacts, allocated on various sites or spread between multiple extended areas. *Transnational social spaces* emerge together with transmigrants (and transnational companies); both determine each other.

In this context, the term space is not used in a conventional physical meaning, as in the sense of a location (e.g., town or country), but in the sense of relatively stable, national borders exceeding relationships between protagonists. Both Faist and Pries pick up on the term social spaces according to the sense introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1982, 1985). The concept of transnational spaces put forward here is, other than that which relates to the world polity approach, an approach of median range. It allows us to recognize the transnational relationships that exist alongside the government level (Faist, 2000, p. 14; Kleger, 1997, pp. 288–292), namely, those that have accompanying consequences for national actions and organizations (the systemic level) and for autonomous individuals (the social-life level). Participation in transnational processes is possible without geographic mobility of people, such as via internet, provided that, within the context of such communication processes social closeness develops despite geographic distance. Transnational spaces are characterized by a certain density and steadiness; not every migration process leads to the emergence of transnational spaces. This perspective on migration is included in the conceptualization of transnational educational spaces that follows.

5. Transnational Educational Spaces

In the German-language educational science literature, only a few articles have taken up the concept of transnational spaces (Gogolin & Pries, 2004). Adick (2005, pp. 262–266) conceptualizes transnational educational spaces by linking three previously separate but parallel discourses (Adick, 2005): socialization in transnational spaces, transnational convergences in education, and transnational education.

Socialization in transnational spaces refers to the approaches spelled out by Faist and Pries that were developed against the background of a sociological perspective on migration. Educational science studies located in that sub-area would, for example, consider the question of to what extent multilingualism serves as a resource for transmigrants and/or transnational networks (Fürstenau, 2004)?

The term *transnational convergences in education* is represented through worldwide isomorphic developments in education, as outlined above in relation to the world polity approach. These transnational convergences are, at the same time, a prerequisite for and the result of transnational educational spaces. This is because participation in transnational educational spaces relies, to a certain extent, on the connectivity and translatability of educational processes, learning experiences, curricula contents, certificates, and competencies (Adick, 2005, p. 263).

Transnational education takes into account the economic dimension of education. This term encompasses learning opportunities such as distance (online) courses, which are offered, in addition to other provision, by internationally operating educational organizations such as technical colleges, universities, and private service providers. UNESCO and the Council of Europe label such offerings

as *transnational* learning opportunities. Weber (2004) classifies them as one of the most advanced forms of deregulation in tertiary education. In January 2002, UNESCO and Council of Europe drafted a *Code of Good Practice for the Provision of Transnational Education*. The code defined transnational education as follows:

All types of higher education study programme, or set of course study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the educational system of a state different from the state in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national system. (Council of Europe, 2002)

According to this definition, transnational education takes place only in tertiary education. However, a conception of this term that expands on that provided by UNESCO and the Council of Europe means that we can also take into account developments in the field of general education, as I observed earlier, and that can thus be exemplified by the international schools and their associated organizations (Hornberg, in press).

So far, educational science has only just begun to consider transnational educational spaces and subsumed advancements. At the centre of these approaches stand transnational interrelations positioned adjacent to and below levels of nation-state societies. The definition of space introduced in these concepts differs from others usually applied in sociology and the pedagogy of migration in that it comprises “social and symbolic relationships of protagonists in and between territories and locations” (Faist, 2000, p. 15). Within the conception of transnational educational spaces, this reference extends the theoretical dealings and empirical research associated with socialization in transnational social spaces.

The primary feature of transnational educational spaces is thus the transnational social space. A second feature of transnational educational spaces is global convergence in education, as identified by the protagonists of the neo-institutional world polity approach. Transnational convergences are the prerequisite for transnational educational opportunities which can be both profit- and non-profit-oriented offerings. They can be labeled as transnational education if they are border-crossing and are in some ways privately (co-)financed.

Within the framework of the world polity approach, this new dimension of education in the processes of globalization and internationalization is not considered because of the assumed one-dimensional top-down process of diffusion of cultural structural patterns, particularly by the most powerful structure according to this approach – the nation state. Meyer and colleagues have not anticipated the potential change in the importance of the nation state alongside the emergence of transnational educational spaces. This lack is explained last but not least by the Stanford scholars failing to consider the economic dimension of education, which is fundamental to the third central feature of transnational educational spaces – transnational education.

6. Perspectives

Within the German-language communities, the world polity approach offers potential for undertaking work in educational science that has, unlike the English context (Baker & LeTendre, 2005; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), rarely been considered (Caruso, 2008; Schriewer, 2000). The strength of this potential lies in the opportunity to combine theoretically led abstraction with empirical studies, a combination that is rarely found in either German- or English-speaking contexts. A second strength of the world polity approach is its theoretical heterogeneity; it could, for example, be worthwhile to consider processes of globalization in the educational sphere alongside the world system theory outlined by Luhmann (Lang-Wojtasik, 2008). The concept ‘transnational educational spaces’, as premised by Adick (2005), not only draws on the world polity approach but also allows recognition of nation-state border-transcending dimensions in the educational sphere.

Work on such developments is only just being taken up, but the fact that it is now being addressed suggests a stronger recognition of the medium- and micro-levels in education than that accorded by Meyer and colleagues. The strength of the concept of transnational educational spaces has yet to be validated, but it could prove instructive in view of dimensions occurring in the processes of globalization that need theoretical and empirical elaboration from a perspective that has only recently been considered.

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Sabine Hornberg, Prof. Dr., Inhaberin des Lehrstuhls für Allgemeine Pädagogik,
Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Universität Bayreuth
E-Mail: Sabine.Hornberg@uni-bayreuth.de