

Response to Noah Sobe's "Rethinking 'Cosmopolitanism' as an Analytic for the Comparative Study of Globalization and Education"

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The Fall 2009 edition of *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (CICE) (Volume 12, Issue 1) bridges the real and imagined distance between two all too often disparate fields within educational scholarship – philosophy and comparative education. The discipline of philosophy most fruitfully influences my own research pursuits in comparative education through its effects on my understanding of research and on my role as a researcher. Philosopher of education Robert Bullough (2006) lists educationalists who similarly have “turned toward the humanities for fresh questions and critical insights into established practices, trying to make better sense of what they were witnessing and experiencing as educators and scholars” (p. 5). Terrence McLaughlin suggests that “a comparative approach to education needs a philosophical dimension and that the concerns and techniques of philosophy have an important contributory role to play in the development and flourishing of comparative education” (Halstead & McLaughlin, 2004, p. 467). In re-reading the articles in this issue, I am reminded of the strengths and limits of philosophy in comparative education as well as some of the misconceptions that surround this intellectual discipline. An incredulity among some social scientists about philosophy’s relevance to global affairs and the human condition continues to marginalize philosophy in comparative education research. Thus, this issue contributes to philosophy being understood in Wittgensteinian fashion as an activity, rather than as a body of doctrine or ideology. In utilizing philosophy this way, the authors in this issue respond to Alasdair MacIntyre’s call to “confront questions that have so far gone unasked, just because they are not questions answerable from within any one discipline” (2006, p. 12).

The Fall 2009 issue of CICE shines a spotlight on the philosophy of cosmopolitanism and its relationship to education and comparative education. As contributor Noah Sobe concludes, “There is both danger and promise in cosmopolitanisms. And there is much more about cosmopolitanisms that comparative and international education research can tell us.” I would like to offer two possibilities for what cosmopolitanisms can tell us about comparative and international education research, as a springboard into my response inspired by Sobe’s article. First, from my perspective, rooted in justice and peace studies, I am intrigued by several authors’ assessments of cosmopolitanism as a cognitive or reason-based framework. In other words, the cosmopolitan person will use reason to be autonomous, have self-responsibility, procure agency, plan life rationally, while respecting diversity and difference. I am not convinced that it is predominantly reason that drives the embodiment and enactment of a cosmopolitan mode of living. I am less persuaded of reason’s impact by observations of my students, whether they are in the fifth grade, in their fifth semester of college, or departing on their fifth humanitarian or peace work assignment to a conflict zone. Does the cosmopolitan person use reason to organize difference, to self-actualize, and to grapple with human agency? It seems that in many cases morality, ethics, emotional dissonance, and religion trump the call of reason as the normative framework directing action and inaction on global issues of poverty, educational development, or human rights.

Second, and more directly in response to Sobe's article, I am confident that cosmopolitanisms will continue to affect traditional methodological models of comparative education and other educational research that uphold a static version of the field site, such as a school or nation-state, as the primary unit of analysis, while discounting the movement of knowledge, identities, and people over campus and country borders. McLaughlin (2004) notes that the idea and practice of comparison needs a philosophical dimension in order to develop rich theoretical frameworks and substantiate methodological choices. Seemingly on queue, Sobe offers a philosophical inquiry on how existent cosmopolitanisms can be utilized as analytic categories, a strategy for researchers to explore the ways that "solidarities are formed, identities are developed, and principles of inclusion and exclusion are elaborated amidst local and global assemblages" (p. 6).

Sobe's article offers a "who's who" of significant voices in the dialogue between cosmopolitanism and comparative education. His intention for citing such a cache of theorists and researchers is explicit – "to locate the present project in scholarly circles" (p. 7). More importantly, however, Sobe works to "loosen cosmopolitanism" from the possessive grip of Enlightenment philosophers and the underlying inference that cosmopolitanism is solely a Kantian project, when it can rather be understood and employed as a historical category across temporal and spatial perimeters. He then discusses the use of "vernacular cosmopolitanisms" for investigating two instances of the role of schooling in the production of the cosmopolitan child – the first in present day United States and the second in pre-World War II Yugoslavia.

Sobe marks a visionary signpost at the beginning of a path for considering alternatives to traditional paradigms of area studies in light of globalization's bestowments of "multi-layered geographies" that circumvent standard notions of territorial cartography. Heeding the arrows forward, I am inspired to balance Sobe's meta-relational view of cosmopolitanisms and comparative education with a more nuanced unpacking of two aspects of his article. Specifically, I extrapolate on how the work of Arjun Appadurai (2000), whom Sobe quotes briefly, can concretely influence the creation of a new "world-generating optic" in a comparative education research project (p. 8). I do this in light of my research in post-Yugoslav countries (Wisler, 2008), introducing readers to another "vernacular cosmopolitanism" from this region of the Balkans.

Cosmopolitanisms can work to re-guide attention from the debate of case studies versus cross-national studies to the need for a regionally historical and cosmopolitan research perspective. Citing Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo (2005), Sobe asserts that the term "transnationalism" is "inadequate" when deliberating one's identity and positions amidst local and global communities. Considering methodological analysis in cases of nation-state dissolution, and where ethnic and religious identities transcend nation-state lines, the unfitness of not only the term but also the physical scope of "transnationalism" persists. For example, the nation-state as the determined unit of analysis in both case studies and cross-national studies is deceptive when considering that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was until recently part of a greater whole, namely the Yugoslavia that Sobe refers to, and strongly associated with a region, the Balkans. My own study of the Balkans – which included study of the region's languages – afforded me fluency in its issues, but admittedly from the perspective of how the region was perceived and taught in U.S. higher education. Appadurai (2000) expresses his concern with this phenomenon in relation to area studies:

much traditional thinking about "areas" has been driven by conceptions of geographical, civilisational, and cultural coherence that rely on some sort of trait list – of values, languages, material practices, ecological adaptations, marriage

patterns, and the like. However sophisticated these approaches, they all tend to see “areas” as relatively immobile aggregates of traits, with more or less durable historical boundaries and with a unity composed of more or less enduring properties. These assumptions have often been further telescoped backward through the lens of contemporary U.S. security-driven images of the world and, to a lesser extent, through colonial and postcolonial conceptions of national and regional identity. (p. 7)

He continues to comment on how the current construction of area studies conveys a false sense of permanence among spatial, topographic, and societies organizations, when they are merely fabrications of how “culture” is conceived by the West. These associational inventions stem from past geo-political fear and security manufactured during the Cold War (and now during the “War on Terror”); their temperance “was soon forgotten” and fixtures solidified without question or doubt (p. 7).

Appadurai’s (2000) scrutiny struck a chord, or perhaps discord, in me as I recognized the contradiction inherent in my research endeavors and language training. Both were, on the one hand, funded due to the prevailing “lens of contemporary U.S. security-driven images of the world” (p. 7). On the other hand, they were simultaneously attempts to problematize exactly the trait-based approach focusing on a predestined violence and ethnic politics that has dominated Balkans studies. Specifically for my research, I spent a semester as a participant observer in one interdisciplinary post-graduate higher education program (IP) in Sarajevo. I also visited several other programs and met with their students and professors, specifically in Ljubljana, Slovenia; Skopje, Macedonia; Zagreb, Croatia; and Belgrade, Serbia. Moreover, I interviewed and talked to professors and students from throughout the post-Yugoslav region, whom I met at conferences and events, including in Copenhagen, Denmark; Schlaining, Austria; Marburg, Germany; and Dubrovnik, Croatia. Thus, the IP in Sarajevo within which I spent the most time could be considered more traditionally as my “field site,” but because I only visited other universities and programs for brief periods, I do not conceptualize this research as “multi-sited.” I had intentionally chosen the entire region encompassing the former country of Yugoslavia as my geographical and geopolitical context because I thought that pre-selecting one or more of the now seven independent countries would discount the region’s very recent past as one country, the legacy of educational and intellectual roots of the now-dissolved Yugoslavia, and the intellectual cooperation that transcends the countries’ current borders. Despite that informed choice, I had failed to see what seemed like the necessary problematization of the field site concept. Many questions lingered: should I pursue this research to Albania, a close neighbor and long-time thorn on the Yugoslav rose? And to Denmark, Malaysia and the U.S., where so many of the individuals I got to know sought intellectual and physical refuge during the recent wars? Should I stray as far as headquarters of the piggybanks of many of the interdisciplinary higher education programs I was researching?

Three concerns enveloped these questions. First, the traditional delineation of the field site upholds the realist, static construction of the nation-state in a globalizing world, and does not account for Sobe’s “vernacular cosmopolitanisms.” (My preliminary use of the nation-state category was undoubtedly a residue from the criteria of my funding agencies, which set stipulations on my research expenses in particular countries.) Second, my original constitution of what was once Yugoslavia did not make sense as a region today on the ground, in light of the high-speed transference of knowledge, movement of peoples, Europeanization, and the political and economic power of the worldwide Yugoslav diaspora. Third, although I originally comforted

myself with an assurance that the universities and programs together structured my field site, my confidence waned when I realized that the idea of the “university” was a façade; in reality, the school is a construction that merely contained individuals, thoughts, images and desires all in trans-national, trans-cultural motion. It was only as I began on-site fieldwork that I also began to question my conceptualization of the field site, as it began to resist the geographical localization in which I conceived it – that is, the countries historically once part of the federation called Yugoslavia.

Although I had perceived illogicality in excluding any one of the former-Yugoslav countries from my research inquiry, I did not foresee the permeable borders over which my inquiry seeped. I had constructed my field site through cartographical referencing about which Sobe warns us; in short, this geographical lens had blinded my otherwise transdisciplinary vision. Although realistic, my field site was not as neat as writers of methodology textbooks make it out to be. Appadurai (1996) characterizes what I felt, saw, and experienced in post-Yugoslav higher education as “a world of flows.” He writes: “the various flows we see are not coeval, convergent, isomorphic, or spatially consistent. They are in...relations of disjuncture” (1996, p. 5). Elsewhere he explains these various flows within five “-scapes” – ethnoscapés, mediascapés, technoscapés, finanscapés, and ideoscapés:

The suffix *-scape* allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes....These terms with the common suffix *-scape* also indicate that these are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situated-ness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements...and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods and families. (p. 33)

The conceptualization of a *-scape* resonates with Sobe’s concern with “new, often non-territorial configurations [that] bring people, knowledge, institutions, and objects together in novel and sometimes surprising assemblages;” these configurations need to be accounted for in the comparative education researcher’s methodological choices and analytical categories.

It was certainly not my intention to be in the field scrutinizing what seemed to be one of the last remaining straightforward concepts of fieldwork, namely the field site. As a novice researcher, I clutched clarity and simplicity when it came my way, so I was concerned with how I would acknowledge the flows of knowledge and people over the site’s borders. However, I was able to creatively deal with this discord and in so doing am able to contribute the idea of *fieldscape* in lieu of field site to the dialogue between philosophy and comparative education, and a cosmopolitan-inspired comparative education methodology. Drawing on Appadurai’s (1996, 2000) work, I acknowledge my research in the post-Yugoslav states as emanating from what I call a *fieldscape*. Although easily critiqued as a mere semantic difference, the conceptual difference between a field site and a *fieldscape* is significant in response to Sobe’s call for use of “vernacular cosmopolitanisms.” “The academic imagination” and local epistemologies do not stop at a classroom door, a university gate, a country’s border crossing, or a continent’s shores (Appadurai, 2000, p. 6). Rather, the idea of the *fieldscape*, as the landscape of post-Yugoslav higher education, is more conducive to conceptualizing the cosmopolitan flow of knowledge, people, and ideas across the borders of academic disciplines, universities, and countries. Conceptualizing the field site as *fieldscape* allayed me of my aforementioned concerns and has allowed me to understand this

educational research as fluid as Appadurai suggests. Similar to a “vernacular cosmopolitanism,” it is something that will look differently dependent on the angle of historical, linguistic, political, or disciplinary vision and thus contributes one part to the imagined world of the Balkans.

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