

# BOOK REVIEW

**British Scholars of Comparative Education: Examining the Work and Influence of Notable 19th and 20th Century Comparativists.** By David Phillips (Ed.) (2020), 178 pages. ISBN: 9780367250270. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.

For students and early career researchers exploring comparative and international education for a course, a career or a project, this book spanning over 170 years of the history of the field is invaluable. Long before some British politicians began to talk about 'Global Britain', it is evident that the group of eleven scholars and policy makers covered in this volume had demonstrated powerfully the value of understanding better '*other schools and ours*' (King, E. J., 1958). The group whose lives and work are thoughtfully analysed here travelled widely, and in some cases long before it was so easy to do so. They examined countries as different as India and Russia, Japan and Belgium, Germany and France, small states and large – and many more. Their purpose was not so much to describe systems as to understand contexts and cultures.

What makes this edited volume so special is that the nine commentators on the group of British comparativists are themselves critical analysts of the history and development of comparative education. Their lens on the group is hugely valuable as they are able to look across the very considerable productivity of the group and identify some generative themes that contributed to the emerging field of comparative education.

It is valuable that all of the chapters pay attention to the early stages of these different biographies. This allows the reader to see the influence of schooling and particularly of the subjects such as the classics and other languages that several of them followed from school into university. But also evident in their lives was the influence of travel, already mentioned above.

It is intriguing to consider how did this hugely diverse group of scholars and policy makers achieve their impact. Was it through their publications which in most cases were prodigious? Probably not. In most cases, I doubt if most members of the British Association of International and Comparative Education (BAICE) will have bought even one or two of the very large number of publications associated with this group. In my case I bought just two of their publications some fifty years ago, and I do not believe I have used them in my own work yet.

Impact through an enabling institutional environment may be a much more frequent modality of influence. All of these individuals were associated with a particular institution or institutions, and it was through these that they were able to influence younger scholars and graduate students. In my own case, it was because of one of their links to the Comparative Education Society of Europe (CESE) that I decided to attend a CESE conference in France for the first time. That led on to several significant developments. In other cases, it is clear that around some of these scholars a kindergarten of younger scholars formed, often pursuing research connected to that of the enabling catalyst. Clearly, the provision of travel funds or of even quite small research funding can also lead to new work by a next generation of scholars.

This institutional development associated with these individuals is perhaps the way they most made their mark. Societies and associations for the study of comparative (and international) education were directly linked to several of these individuals, as were journals of comparative education, and the connected conferences. Book series was another of the institutional developments associated with members of this group. These modalities drew many hundreds, even thousands, of younger people into orbits where many of the ideas and theories of the group became accessible. Unlike their publications which may sit unread on shelves or go out of print, the conferences and journals continue to spark debates many decades after their founders had helped set them alight.

This is not to say that there are not particular ideas or views that derive from these eleven individuals, and sometimes because they strike the right chord, they become part of the canon. This is uncommon but in the case of Michael Sadler ‘A mundane talk at a minor meeting in Guildford, Surrey, on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1900 has somewhat surprisingly achieved the status of a core text in comparative inquiry’ (Phillips 2020, p. 25). The key sentence from this talk, which is often utilised to warn against the dangers of policy transfer in education, is reproduced below; but to make the point about impact and influence, it should be recalled that another British comparativist, Philip Foster, who moved from London to Chicago, also wrote a hugely memorable article called ‘the vocational school fallacy’. This was not the result of years of research and writing:

Funny about the ‘vocational school fallacy’ – I wrote it in a few days as a “spin-off” from my own major interest in education, class formation and stratification in LDCs. You never can tell what’s going to sell as the ad men say! (Foster to King, personal communication in King & Martin 2002, p.25).

This edited collection is subtitled: *Examining the work and influence of notable 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century comparativists*; and that is precisely what it achieves. It illustrates from the ‘great lives’ of this group a very considerable richness of insight into the influence and impact of individuals responsible in large part for creating the field of comparative and international education in the United Kingdom.

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world... and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant. (Sadler quoted in Phillips 2020, p. 27).

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## References

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- King, K. & Martin, C. (2002). ‘The vocational school fallacy revisited: Education, aspiration and work in Ghana, 1959-2000. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 22(1), pp. 5-26.
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