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ETHNOGRAPHY AND COMPARATIVE EDUCATION:  
SOME CONTEMPORARY TRENDS AND CRITICAL ISSUES

ETNOGRAFIA E EDUCAZIONE COMPARATA:  
ALCUNE TENDENZE CONTEMPORANEE E QUESTIONI CRITICHE

*The paper attempts a brief analysis of two of the areas in which ethnographic research can make today an important contribution to comparative education. Ethnography can not only help to outline a descriptive picture of what contemporary education is around the world. Ethnography can also work (both in terms of the “alternative” data it can gather, and of the insights it can inspire in debates on comparative education, via its peculiar approach to knowledge and its rich and diverse epistemological tradition) as a tool to help comparative education to solve some of its contemporary dilemmas.*

*The paper will shortly outline two of such “problem areas” in which ethnography is actually helping to give a new definition to aspects of comparative education. The first to be addressed is that on the controversial role of world culture theory in comparative education. The second is the debate on the relationship of comparative education to a contemporary trend in educational policy, which is based on the “spectacular” use of benchmarks and statistics.*

*In both cases, postmodern versions of ethnography are able to help to “deconstruct” problematic aspects of the discussed issues (which many scholars see as “threats” to the integrity and credibility of comparative education), and show to comparative researchers promising directions to follow in the complex scenery of the study of contemporary education.*

L'articolo propone una sintetica analisi di come l'approccio etnografico possa fornire oggi un contributo importante al rinnovamento dell'Educazione Comparata. L'etnografia infatti non solo può contribuire a delineare un quadro descrittivo di quel che l'educazione è diventata nel mondo contemporaneo. L'etnografia può anche funzionare (sia nei termini dei dati “alternativi” che essa può raccogliere, sia nei termini degli *insight* che può ispirare nei dibattiti sull'Educazione Comparata grazie al suo peculiare approccio alla conoscenza e alla sua ricca e varia tradizione epistemologica) come strumento per aiutare l'Educazione Comparata a risolvere alcuni dei suoi più importanti dilemmi contemporanei.

L'articolo delinea brevemente due di tali “aree problematiche” nelle quali l'etnografia sta attualmente fornendo importanti contributi. Il primo a essere trattato sarà quello del ruolo controverso della *world culture theory* nell'Educazione Comparata. Il secondo è il dibattito sulla relazione dell'Educazione Comparata con il trend contemporaneo che vede le politiche educative sempre più legate all'uso “spettacolare” di *benchmark* e statistiche.

In entrambi i casi, versioni postmoderne dell'etnografia possono contribuire a “decostruire” (soprattutto in senso metodologico) aspetti controversi dei problemi che qui si discutono (che molti studiosi vedono come minacce all'integrità e credibilità dell'Educazione Comparata), e possono mostrare ai ricercatori comparatisti promettenti direzioni da seguire nel complesso scenario dello studio dell'educazione contemporanea.

*Key words: Ethnography of Education; Comparative Education; World Culture Theory; Education Policy; Governance; Society of the Spectacle; Empire.*

Parole chiave: Etnografia dell'educazione; Educazione Comparata; World Culture Theory; Politiche educative; Governance; Società dello spettacolo; Impero.



## *Introduction*

In this paper I would like to make a brief analysis of two of the areas in which ethnographic and qualitative research can make today an important contribution to comparative education. Ethnography can not only (e.g. “global ethnography”) help to outline a descriptive picture of what education is around the world (Anderson-Levitt 2012). Ethnography can also work (both in terms of the “alternative” data it can gather, and of the insights it can inspire in debates on comparative education, via its peculiar approach to knowledge and its rich and diverse epistemological tradition) as a tool to help comparative education to solve some of its contemporary dilemmas (Paolone 2009).

In this paper in particular I will shortly outline two of such “problem areas” in which ethnography is actually helping to give a new definition to aspects of comparative education. The first debate I will address is that on the controversial role of world culture theory in comparative education. The second is the debate on the relationship of comparative education to a contemporary trend in educational policy, which is based on the “spectacular” use of benchmarks and statistics.

I use here the word “ethnography” to cite research approaches (mainly based on empirical, qualitative methods such as *participant observation*, the use of *cultural shock* to stimulate the researcher’s intuitions, the systematic writing of a diary containing the data observed in the field, etc.) that are partially taken from fieldwork methods that (since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) have been refined by anthropologists and subsequently adopted by educationalists (Paolone 2012). We will not give a “generalist” description of this methodology as there is no global ethnographic method, a sort of “one for all” ethnographic approach that can be applied to all fields and uses, and deduced from a single handbook.

Rather, there are academic traditions of study on certain subjects and geographical areas, to which certain ethnographic methodological approaches are linked (due to the fact that they are rooted in “local” traditions, in epistemic schools, etc.). In ethnography, in fact, the methodology is each time linked to a different conceptual and epistemological framework (pertinent to the object which is being studied), which contributes to its nature and its design. We could therefore say that each type of field has its own ethnographic methodology. This is also true for the “critical” and “post-modernist” approaches that we will mention in the following pages.

Since the 1960s, the ethnographic approaches have progressively gained importance in educational research, and have played an increasingly crucial role in comparative education (Masemann 1990, Carney 2010, Paolone 2009, 2016c).

In the beginning, ethnography was mainly used as one of the many possible approaches to comparative research. In this sense, one of the classic approaches has been that of comparative multi-local ethnographic research (one of the first outstanding examples of this is the Manchester/Salford ethnographic campaign of 1962-1971) (Paolone 2012).

Even today, research of this kind is being conducted (Webb et al. 2004; Troman

and Jeffrey 2007) with new methods (which proceed “philologically” from tradition but also use new technologies, etc.) (Paolone 2009).

But as we will see in the following pages, today ethnography (in its most advanced forms, influenced by postmodernism -see for example Carney 2010, Paolone 2016- and therefore different from the “classical” approaches we have talked about so far) and its results, are no longer used to just do “naïve” multi-local comparisons, but they are rather used as a tool to critically reconsider some contemporary trends in comparative education.

Let us now briefly report two of the “problem areas” in which ethnography is helping to do such a re-definition.

### *Ethnography Vs. world culture theory*

The “world culture theory”, and its potential applications in the field of comparative education have been around at least since the end of the ‘70s (Meyer and Rowan 1977). However, not only is this an approach that continues to have many followers globally (for some of the reasons that we will see in the following pages), but it has also been – and still is – the subject of controversy and polemic, especially from scholars inspired by postmodern criticism, and in this sense it continues to fuel some of the significant debates in the major journals in the field of study.

World culture scholars such as J. Meyer and F. Ramirez claim that the idea of school came from a common origin, and that globally, schools get more similar as time goes by. These theorists affirm that a form of schooling (which is homogeneous all over the world) has spread globally as part of a cultural model of the modern nation-state, which also includes more or less homogeneous forms of government, public health and other institutions (Meyer et al. 1997). World culture theorists claim that such world model of compulsory, ubiquitous education was born in the Old Continent as part of the process of state-building. As the new nations arose, and particularly after the Second World War, as part of the process of de-colonization, Countries all over the planet tended to follow the same models. However, the theorists of world culture do not believe that a common European-based model has spread throughout the world once and for all. Rather, during the twentieth century, Countries have introduced in their education systems reforms that tend to be similar. Compared to the past, theorists of world culture see today a growing trend in the similarity of educational policies and practices throughout the world, although some variable local characteristics tend to persist (Chabbot and Ramirez 2000).

The world culture theory (and the neo-institutionalist approach to which it is closely tied) is clearly an example of what V. Rust (1991) has defined as “grand-narratives”, and has suffered over time various criticisms from scholars linked to postmodern discourse. On the other hand, the emblematic defence that R. Hayhoe (2000) formulated for world culture in her anti-postmodernist reaction, contributes to highlight the symbolic status of the world culture theory in contemporary de-

bates. According to Hayhoe -who defended the theory from critical attacks- this theory stood out among the “modern” grand-narratives because of its moral engagement. This theory stands out also because of its serious concern for the themes of equity, participation and distribution of resources, for the identification of policies and measures able to guarantee both a more complete participation of the oppressed groups in the opportunities provided by education, and a more equitable and mutually beneficial role for the peripheral Countries of the world system. It was an attempt to take the values that defined the Enlightenment and situate them within a critical understanding of modernity, to recognize the distortions arising from the jagged profile of iniquitous capitalist development and to carry out reforms in the sense of greater justice and inclusion<sup>1</sup>.

But world culture theory has been also the object of criticism and, more recently, new controversies – this time in a critical sense – were fueled by scholars who are followers of the ethnographic method, who have mainly criticized the neo-institutionalist claim that world school systems would inevitably tend toward harmonization and homogenization. Much of the comparative literature based on ethnographic research, in fact, indicates divergence instead. K. Anderson-Levitt (2003) suggests that, although educational historians are better placed than ethnographers to identify long-term divergences or convergences, nevertheless ethnographers do study processes over relatively long periods. They can report on what happened to the educational practices and ideas in the period of months or years after they were “imported” in peripheral countries from the “leading” countries. They can also report whether the different reform processes are convergent or divergent in specific places. With these aims in mind, one can use ethnographic case studies collected from various places around the world to sift through the questions raised by the world culture theory. Such studies are ethnographic or, more in general, qualitative and try to give field descriptions of particular schools, districts and ministries of education, systematically comparing them to the policies that international agencies support globally.

In essence, ethnographers use the empirical data from the “real life” to challenge the world culture theory. In this way, they can for instance show that in local schools, within ministries but also among global reformers such as the World Bank and Unesco, politics is not as homogeneous as the world culture theory is claiming.

What seems to emerge from field studies is that in the “local settings” (such as individual schools) actors sometimes resist and always transform the official models proposed to them<sup>2</sup>. Sometimes local actors choose on their own initiative to be inspired by “global” models, but by making an idiosyncratic selection of the only parts of the model that they think are useful to “import”, and modifying them as they like, with

<sup>1</sup> Hayhoe was partially quoting the speech by C.A. Torres of 1998, entitled: *Democracy, Education and Multiculturalism: Dilemmas of Citizenship in a Global World*, as an example of the elaboration of a more valid and extended concept of citizenship, built on classical definitions although enriched through the integration of elements taken from feminism, post-colonialism, critical theory, race studies and the new social movements (Torres 1998).

<sup>2</sup> In this sense some ethnographic data seem to confirm, at a local level, the model “transfer-translation-transformation” proposed by R. Cowen (2010), see for instance Paolone (2018).

results which are divergent if compared to the original (Palomba and Paolone 2011). Moreover, the theorists of world culture underestimate the role played by power, sometimes confusing coercion with voluntary adoption by the populations concerned. Nevertheless, researching the world over, the theorists of world culture have noticed a crucial aspect that educational ethnographers tend to overlook when they focus too much on the local: the global perspective reveals models that condition educators in local settings. Therefore, if we analyze this debate, the group of scholars edited by Anderson-Levitt (2003) somehow mediates between the terms of the controversy, embracing many points of view of the world culture theory, trying to integrate them with what they know about the locally lived cultures of the school.

Other attacks on world culture theory were later carried out by scholars who believed that the approach practiced by the group around Anderson-Levitt had, all in all, been accommodating towards neo-institutionalists. S. Carney, J. Rappleye and I. Silova (2012) have accused some scholars, who are followers of the world culture theory, of having surreptitiously supported the theses that significant and progressive convergences exist between societies (and educational systems) and that these changes are the result of consensual cultural processes (p. 373) by passing off untested hypotheses as confirmed empirical discoveries (p. 376). They also question the approaches used within the world culture theory, especially the continuous dedication to quantitative analysis, the neglect of the study of micro contexts and the extension of the image of shared meanings through transnational and horizontal work that only allows types of explanation that the critics define as *subsumptive*. Scholars criticized by Carney, Rappleye and Silova suggest an image of homogeneity and then project this image on the poorest non-western and non-democratic countries. Even the best recent researches of this kind, the critics claim, tend towards width, rather than towards the critical depth necessary to seriously validate these hypotheses.

In reality, the critics claim, this vision promoted by the theorists of “world culture” is rather a sort of apodictic programmatic model, which ends up manipulating consciences, contributing itself to instill on a global level the conviction that there is convergence between educational systems and that this happens through the voluntary acceptance by the interested parties, rather than through manipulation (economic, symbolic, mediatic) by the “strong world powers”<sup>3</sup> (p. 377).

One of the inspirations behind these attacks on neo-institutionalist theories is certainly R.Cowen’s thought (2010), which emphasises the translation and transformation that educational ideas and practices undergo when they are transferred from one context to another.

<sup>3</sup> This criticism (which here is directed in particular to the theme of the presumed convergence of the formative systems), in reality, is transversal also to other sectors of the social sciences and humanities, where a tendency to connive is denounced between the traditional Eurocentric study approaches, colonialist violence and the subordination of alternative epistemologies. In this sense, the theoretical insights hitherto marginalized, produced by scholars and intellectuals of peripheral regions, especially on the issues of decolonization, re-colonization and unfair world power relations, should be carefully examined and enhanced for their ability to give new impetus to knowledge, equity and justice. This movement, which was inspired, among others, by the writings of R. Connell, is called Southern Turn and is one of the most important contemporary incarnations of post-colonial criticism (Connell 2007).

In this sense, ethnography plays a crucial role as a tool to verify and control, through field research, the idiosyncratic effects produced by what Cowen calls “translation” and “transformation”, at the local level.

In fact, and as already mentioned, another important area from which this widespread criticism of neo-institutionalism seems to draw, is constituted by various post-modern instances, as outlined, among others, by V. Rust (1991).

Firstly, the desire to deconstruct Eurocentric grand-narratives.

Secondly, the need to give a voice to groups that have so far been relegated to a role of subordination (the subordination of postmodernists is a very broad category that ranges from the discrimination of gender to that of post-colonial contexts).

Thirdly, the need to draw inspiration in critical reflection on comparative education, not only from the repertoire and contributions of the human and social sciences, but also from those of art and art criticism.

In this sense, in his articulated polemic against the world culture theory, S. Carney (2010, 134-136)<sup>4</sup> makes explicit reference to baroque art<sup>5</sup> as a source of inspiration for an ethnographic approach that knows how to take due account of the diversity and richness of local idiosyncratic manifestations, which otherwise a rigid research methodology based on the canons of Western grand-narratives would inevitably flatten and neglect, ending up by surreptitiously homologating to the usual Eurocentric models even the “local” ethnographic data.

But Carney also introduces other instruments that, in line with postmodern syncretism, make reference to the symbolic and mediatic, and have also been used in art criticism, drawing inspiration from the situationism and the theories of J. Baudrillard (Carney 2010).

Aspects of this approach are shared, as we will see below, also by other scholars in an attempt to understand the most recent developments in comparative education, reading it also through the critical paradigm of the “society of the spectacle”.

### *Comparative education, governance, society of the spectacle*

Another area in which the ethnographic and qualitative approaches can play an important role is that of criticism of the use of comparison as a way of governance.

Today, some scholars claim, the new frontier of comparative education would be a critical approach towards the ubiquitous use of international benchmarks and indicators, by various sectors of the new global and national governance<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> But see also: MacLure 2006.

<sup>5</sup> In his turn, A. Nóvoa uses, as an alternative to historical criticism, methodological cues taken from literary criticism and comparative literature. (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See also: Pereyra, Miguel A., Hans-Georg Kotthoff, and Robert Cowen (eds). 2011. op. cit. This topic was also explored at the Comparative education society in Europe (Cese) XXV Congress “Empires, Postcoloniality, and Interculturality: Comparative Education Between Past, Post, and Present” held at the University of Salamanca in 2012, which sought, among other things, to explore at the level of comparative education certain suggestions introduced by Hardt and Negri in their theorisation of the impending advent of a new “empire” (Hardt and Negri 2000).

In this sense, the statement of P. Broadfoot (2000) stands out, according to which the growing international diffusion of the use of indicators, in recent years, marks perhaps the most powerful and insidious development to date in the process of world domination by a particular educational model.

Today, international benchmarks and comparative studies seem to be utilised as a remedy to the crisis of political legitimacy that seems to be a constant element of democratic regimes, and the field of education policy is no exception. Today there is a global trend that perceives the comparison (especially in its “applied” versions) (Paolone 2016a) as the method that will find the evidence of scientific truth, and therefore will legitimize political action.

In the contemporary world, therefore, on the one hand politicians are looking for international educational indicators that allow them to build educational projects, legitimated by a sort of global comparative trend. On the other hand, comparison is increasingly used by scholars and bureaucrats alike, to increase their repertoire of symbolic instruments. In such context comparative education is used by many as a pretext to attract funds, and to link the need to evaluate national policies with reference to global hierarchies and scales.

The result (some exponents of this critical approach claim) is a “soft” comparison which, while boasting “applicative” credentials, lacks solid theoretical and methodological foundations. Studies conducted and published by organizations such as the International association for the evaluation of educational achievement-Iea or the Programme for international student assessment-Pisa, show this construction of knowledge and politics<sup>7</sup>. These organizations are of great importance today, as the studies they sponsor tend to shape political agendas, exerting strong influences on education worldwide (Crossley 2002). Among the consequences of such researches there is the verdict on good or bad educational systems and the necessary solutions. Furthermore, the findings and results of such studies are usually divulged by the mass media by creating in the public opinion (by stressing that the findings are comparative and international) the demand for urgent decisions, following lines of action that seem essential and inevitable.

In this era of proclaimed globalization and transnationalism, curiously, education would seem to be looked at through a global perspective and a national perspective at the same time, since there is a widespread belief that education is one of the rare fields where national sovereignty is still actually “in control”. One of the paradoxical consequences of this is that education, an institution which is imagined (Anderson 1991) as being mainly national, is in fact being governed by using international indicators and benchmarks. In this sense (Sisson and Marginson 2001) benchmarking would provide an approach to achieve international coordination (which today is considered essential by many) without weakening the “integrity” of the nation-state, since the input to coordination (and therefore to the renunciation to portions of national sovereignty)

<sup>7</sup> This topic was discussed in the Cese conference “PISA Under Examination. Changing Knowledge, Changing Tests and Changing Schools”, in La Palma, in November 2009 (Pereyra et al. 2011).

does not come from other states, or from a traditional political power, but from a sort of anonymous, aseptic and international “demiurge”, constituted precisely by the indicators and benchmarks.

These current trends would indicate an imminent turning point for comparative educational research that could lead either to the impoverishment of the sector, reducing it to a “mode of governance” (which would therefore fall under the hypothetical “applicative” profile of comparative education that some authors are trying to outline) (Paolone 2016a) or, on the contrary, to its renewal through the use of more sophisticated intellectual tools (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003).

Hoping for the second hypothesis, and trying to combine some Foucauldian suggestions with situationism – thus taking up some ideas from Hardt and Negri (2000), Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) conceptualize the idea of spectacle within a social context in which time and space, reality and history are read as symbols. They can therefore be studied using anthropological epistemology and research methods (including ethnography). Although there is no single control core, the society of the spectacle operates as if there were such central control points. In this social context, there is an excess of mirrors that create the illusion of many images, which in reality always reflect the same way of thinking (which S. Carney discusses by using the metaphor of the fractal, and which he identifies somehow with aspects of J. Baudrillard’s “code”) (2010). In such a context, the “foucauldian surveillance” and the “situationist spectacle” are not incompatible facts. Monitoring is carried out by exposing to public opinion a spectacular display of statistics and benchmarks, whose aim is that of watching over individuals and performance. The spectacle is subject to surveillance rules (surveys, audits, etc.) that define its form and elements, creating an interpretative framework. All this is aimed against the collective forms of sociality, and at the same time it imposes a new mass sociality, a new uniformity of action and thought which, according to Hardt and Negri (2000), is one of the characteristics of the “imperial” tendency of the globalized World. Policy is influenced (and in a sense constructed) through systematic exposure to surveys, questionnaires and other data collection tools, which are believed to have the capacity to assess and reflect public opinion. This endless production and divulgation of surveys leads to a sort of “instantaneous” democracy, a regime of urgency that provokes a permanent need for self-justification. If this sort of media coverage of political life reduces politics to a public spectacle hampering critical discussions (Hagenbüchle 2001), Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal (2003) claim that, using comparative data as *de facto* policies, an international spectacle is being created, a spectacle that disturbingly influences the development of a new public perspective on education, and consequently, of new educational policies.

This form of governance works almost as if it was a “smoke bomb” that actually keeps the eyes of public opinion away from the new machinery of power. The crucial point is legitimization. If we consider, as an example, the so-called “democratic deficit” of the EU and the debates aiming at fixing it, we see that the questions, that are being raised in the actual political life, do not lead to an improvement in the quality of democratic decisions, but instead tend to find a solution by doing even more inter-



national comparison, benchmarking, exchange of good practices, etc., in the logic of governance. In this way, the rhetoric of transparency gets distorted and transfigured into a form of action that increases the opacity of institutions and of other social actors, which in this way lack a visible face (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003, 428).

Such European example is emblematic, as it unveils which sorts of strategies are used today for diverting the debate from the Enlightenment tradition of government (dominated, among others, by the principle of representation), and placing it at the level of governance, with its apparatus of anonymous benchmarks and indicators. Political formulation and government action are no longer problems of direct decisions made by citizens, representatives and politicians. Politics is constructed, legitimized and finally implemented through new means, aimed at finding the most beneficial or efficient solution. A logic of perpetual comparison legitimates a policy that is built around a rhetoric of identity and diversity, but which leads to relatively homogeneous solutions in the various contexts of application. This is the paradox of current educational approaches, and this is why their use in political and academic debates should be carefully analyzed (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003, 428).

This form of governance seems to aim in the same direction as some world culture theory scholars do, when they promote a vision of the world where institutions, including school systems, tend “inevitably” towards a homogeneous form. Here too, then, the ethnographic approach, with its ability to report the actual diversity of reality, and its epistemological ability to focus on specificity and divergence<sup>8</sup>, can help comparative education to resist the involution of becoming a “soft” tool of the anonymous governance.

## *Conclusions*

Today therefore comparability is not only promoted as a way of knowledge or legitimization, but mainly as a way of governance. Comparative research, regardless of its more academic conclusions or recommendations, now has an impact on the “real world”, particularly in that sense.

If the real reason for comparative analysis is not to act on public opinion for the purposes of governance through the use of indicators and benchmarks (a practice that can be traced back to the theme of “applied” comparative education), but rather lies in the fact that comparative education allows an interpretation of reality, which goes beyond the historicity of each individual case (one of the traditional tasks of “academic” comparative education), then this theme becomes central in terms of the contemporary destiny of the field of study.

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, it is interesting to consider the concept of “situated knowledge”, a productive argument, in the sense that it has helped researchers who have an interest in what is empirical to find a language through which to recognize that all knowledge is the product of “some place”, in contrast to the positivist tradition of pretending that knowledge can take place in a sort of “nowhere” (Haraway 1991).

In this sense, Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal seem to take up somehow Cowen's<sup>9</sup> constant invitation to distinguish "applied" and "academic" comparative education, developing it in their own way, and stating that, if in the current situation comparative education -understood as a mere instrument of governance- threatens to circulate ideas that lack social roots or structural location, then it is necessary to historicize comparative approaches to contextualize concepts, reformulating the relations between space and time in comparative research. The latter task would be relevant to "academic" comparative education, while the "applied" one is engaged in the spectacular display of benchmarks and statistics (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003, 431).

Some of the cultural and methodological references proposed for this purpose (although the scholars I am referring to, follow different approaches in comparative education) are similar to those suggested by Carney (2010, 125-142), and are part of the tools of the contemporary transnationalist approach. In addition to the aforementioned recourse to aspects of situationism, all these authors seem to agree on the categories proposed by A. Appadurai (1996). In this sense, the element of interest is the clearly articulated description of the way in which space should be represented in contemporary research. In his book "Modernity at large" (1996), Appadurai suggests that in order to conceptualize the new role that space and the nation have in the global era, it is convenient to adopt the concept of "scape" (ethnoscape, mediascape, polycscape, etc.) that formulates an alternative definition of space, which is not fixed to a typical "landscape". Imagination is now central to any form of agency, and is itself a social fact, a key component in the new global order. This concept is detached from a geographical landscape, but it is placed in imaginary and virtual flows through which communities are created (Anderson 1991). These ideas invite us to look at a space that is not limited to its physical margins.

In this sense, one of the focuses of postmodern ethnography is the way in which social spaces are constructed, not as geographical concepts, but as discourses that produce identity.

In summary, we speak of a conceptualization of space that can capture virtual spaces (imaginary and geographical at the same time) moving away from a sensory perspective, that is, from the perspective of a space that can be fixed, surrounded by borders and materially touched (Carney and Rapple, 2011).

The scholars mentioned so far, share this general approach. But Carney's critical originality goes even further when he refers to some categories by J. Baudrillard, where he states that Western culture systematically tends to remove from the world everything that is different from itself, and that the fractal (geometric figure characterized by the repetition to infinity of the same motif) would constitute the most advanced stage of Western development itself (Carney 2010, 135). In this sense, the systematic use of "educational governance of indicators" is pushing the system towards the infinite replication of itself. On the other hand, following Baudrillard's lesson, the "seduction" and the "mischievous" use of signs could provide the best opportunities to

<sup>9</sup> R. Cowen has discussed this problem at least since the 1970s. See for instance: Cowen 2006.

dissent, opposing the march of instrumental Western modernity, through the celebration of appearance rather than the pursuit of meaning. By celebrating appearance and replacing the progressive “disenchantment” of the world (promoted by science) with the preservation of what has instead managed to preserve itself secret and mysterious, scholars can actively engage in challenging this progression of the West towards the elimination of what is “other” and “different”. Ethnography can be an effective tool for approaching such “secret and mysterious” aspects of reality, indigestible to the logic of benchmarks and indicators. This should be also an ethnography informed by the “non-scientific” values (yet powerfully expressive and evocative, able to adequately represent complex and intricate forms and able to make us rediscover the sense of wonder and discovery) of “Baroque” art (Carney 2010, 136-137). In this sense, it could be one of the methodological incarnations of the critical premises contained in Baudrillard’s ideas, an incarnation capable of opening, for comparative education, a liberating gap in the suffocating barrier of the progressive homologation by which the panorama of education is represented (and governed) today.

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