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Education as Cultural Frame

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Introduction

The chapters of this book address the dramatic historical and contemporary expansion of education around the world. They cover the long-term rise of compulsory education, the international institutions that arise to support education, and the variation among countries and world regions in the process. They approach the problems with an admirable mix of often-innovative qualitative and quantitative methods.

The book is theoretically eclectic, but unifying themes underlie much of its argumentation and evidence. First, educational expansion reflects a general cultural process, organized at global, regional, international, and national levels. Beyond the global influences discussed in the literature, the chapters here call special attention to the significance of world cultural regions.

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Second, the various supranational processes supporting educational expansion are structured around linkages between countries and between countries and organs of regional and global society. The patterns of expansion are created around network relationships between countries—and between countries and regional and global society.

Third, all the linkages transmit broad cultural forces more than narrowly economic ones. This takes on a great deal of force against a modern literature that tends anachronistically to emphasize economic drivers, meanings, and effects. In contrast, the chapters of this book emphasize the universalistic and compulsory character of educational expansion as targeted on broad (and religious) notions of the public good.

In these comments I review the general question and some of the issues addressed in the chapters here. I discuss the global expansion of education in general, the problem of the weak relation between differentiated economies and integrated education, and the odd quality of compulsion in the nominally free society. I conclude with comments on regional and cultural variation, and reflections on possible effects of the weakening of the hegemony of the liberal world order in which the expansion of education has been rooted.

The Phenomenon at Issue: Integrated Education in a Differentiated Economy and Global Society

The rise of education as a central institution is a dramatic element in the development and spread of modernity. Much is known descriptively about this change, which is in the taken-for-granted background of this book. I review the matter, which frames the studies here. Because contemporary people take education for granted, many questions about its expansion remain unexplained: more attention is given to cases where expansion does not happen than to the massive numbers of cases and situations in which it does. Because academics also take education and its expansion for granted, analyses of modern society (e.g. as an "economy") are distorted: Baker (2014) usefully addresses the matter by calling

contemporary society the "schooled society," rather than generally modern, or capitalist, or free, or democratic.

The expansion of education has been a striking feature of the entire post-Enlightenment period. It characterized the Western world in the nineteenth century, and more peripheral regions in the first half of the twentieth century. The rate of growth increased dramatically in the liberal era after World War II and intensified even more in the neoliberal period since the 1980s (compare Ruggie 1982 and Ruggie 1998). Rapid growth came to characterize every country in the world.

Most research on the overall expansion, as outlined above, stresses the global character of the diffusion. A striking contribution of the studies here is to call attention to its regional and cultural structuration and variation, as it moved beyond its Western core. An interesting and important question raised is whether such variation may increase with the weakening of the hegemony of the West and the rise of alternative regional and cultural areas.

Several features of the overall global expansion call for attention; they lie in the background of the studies here:

1. Expansion covers a wide span of life and its dimensions. It occurs across age levels, consuming substantial parts of the typical individual life course. Primary school enrollments grew steadily over the past two centuries, and then rapidly after the war, becoming practically universal (Meyer et al. 1992). Beyond an elementary school focus, mass secondary school became common, and in many countries, universal (Barro and Lee 2015). Higher education grew exponentially, and by now more than a third of young people in the world experience its blessings (Schofer and Meyer 2005).

Expansion has also been endemic apart from the normal educational cycle. Lifelong learning became standard in both policy and practice (Jakobi 2009). Preschool enrollments grew rapidly (Wotipka et al. 2017). Clear school-like arrangements expanded in noneducational settings (Scott and Meyer 1991). And beyond education in established national settings, emphases on and practices for education in irregular forms developed dramatically—education for refugees, the disabled, the marginal, the immigrant, and the inhabitant of conflictful societies (Lerch and Buckner 2018). Even the very beginning and end of life became

targets of school-like instruction, with prenatal education and education for death arising as doctrines, programs, and possibilities.

Further, the agendas of education expanded to cover more and more dimensions of life. In higher education, fields covered move from a few matters of rather sacred significance down into more and more aspects of mundane life (Frank and Meyer 2020). Farming, forestry, and mining move into the university, as do many aspects of business life. Practical matters of engineering become relevant, and the university student can study the proper design of the kitchen or the toilet. In mass education, similarly, details of proper social life and interaction are now included, along with the niceties of high language and literature. Overall, it is difficult to think of dimensions of life that are not now schooled (Baker 2014).

2. Education had, and has, mostly universalistic meanings in its claims and its practical diffusion, and takes common forms around the world. Throughout its history, the idea of the university was commonly held across Christendom. It is now established across the whole world society (Frank and Meyer 2020). So universities could be assessed in general—and are now ranked as "world-class" in a surprisingly unitary way (Shin and Kehm 2012). Similarly, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) rankings on the subjects of mass education imply common conceptions of what education is.

In practice, this means that university curricula, evolving in Western Christendom and expanding around the world, have strikingly common features (Frank and Meyer 2020; Frank and Gabler 2006). Originally, theology and law (canon and civil) were central defining elements of what it meant to be a university, along with medicine and philosophy (of lower standing). With secularization, expansion, and diffusion around the world, philosophy expanded and differentiated to include the humanities and sciences. In the twentieth century—especially its last half—the social sciences expanded rapidly (Drori and Moon 2006). In all these cases, expansion was worldwide, so it is possible for any intellectual to read and understand the catalogue of courses for any university anywhere else (Frank and Meyer 2020). In contrast, the university's organizational structure varies sharply in tune with national political arrangements and is often opaque to outsiders (Clark 1983).

The same principle holds with mass education. Curricula and curricular change show strikingly common elements around the world, which explains why the fashionable tests can be employed on a widespread basis (Benavot et al. 1991; Kamens and McNeely 2010). Curricular patterns and plans can be communicated everywhere and discussed in international fora (Rosenmund 2006). Thirty percent of an elementary school curriculum would be devoted to national language(s). Foreign language (usually English, if that is not a national language) makes up an additional element. Mathematics might be fifteen percent (now increasingly including computer science), and science perhaps ten. Social science, shifting over the decades from history and geography toward civics and social studies, and sometimes including religion or moral education, might be another ten percent (Wong 1991). Art and music would usually be included. Occasionally practical training—for example, in hygiene—would be involved. The larger point is that essentially everything involved could be understood and probably enacted by a reasonably experienced educator anywhere in the world.

Obviously, when we move from institutionalized curricular patterns down to the specifics of practice, there are major disconnections. The term decoupling is used to reflect the great gaps between high policy, often attuned to global standards, and practice (Bromley and Powell 2012). The pretenses of the historical or contemporary university to universality are always at some distance from what can be approved or carried out in practice (e.g. Clark 2006). And in mass education, the claims of high curricular policy are likely to be very distant from the mundane capabilities of local teachers and students. In any case, a contemporary teacher, discussing major environmental or social problems, is unlikely to go into detail explaining to the students the sins of their parents, and indeed may identify more with these parents than with policymakers far off in the national capital. But up and down the line from policy to local practice almost all the participants aspire to notions of education as a high and universal enterprise. There are many claims to being different, but not to lie outside the global cultural canopy. Almost everywhere, it is intended that education be "for credit" and that its credits be widely accepted.

Interpreting Expansion from the Wrong End of the Telescope: The Economistic View

Education is now so firmly institutionalized that contemporary people take it for granted as a central and defining component of the life course. And given that contemporary society is reflexively analyzed in economic terms, education is seen as an economic commodity, variously profitable for the individual (lifetime income) and society (gross domestic product). Unfortunately, intellectual analysts of this situation take the same view, seeing education as produced and expanded by economic forces and as providing principally valuable effects. This is certainly now true of educational effects, as contemporary societies make it so by definition. They create certificational rules rewarding schooling, and build valued roles out of the knowledge legitimated by education. Serious performances by political or economic elites are properly made on the advice of penumbras of consultants following in the train of the nominal decisionmaker. Even ordinary people, assuming the modern posture of actorhood, require schooled advice of occupational, psychological, physical, mental, and familial therapists. The result is that education, whatever its utility, is valued and rewarded: it is a matter of political and cultural construction, and difficult to assess as a matter of narrowly "economic" value.

Beyond the constructed effects of education, a main thrust of the studies in this book is that the rise of education is a political and cultural matter more than a narrowly economic one. Even with all the economizing ideology in the field, economic development is not the core driving force, and the studies here provide a valuable corrective (see also Meyer et al. 1992; Schofer and Meyer 2005; and Ramirez and Boli 1987). The major international organizations supporting educational expansion focus on broad cultural development, though with regional variations (Chaps. 1, 5–8). Educational development itself historically has Western cultural roots and its forward movement varies with cultural contexts (Chaps. 1, 2, 5, and 9).

These processes reach down into the details of real life. Parents, for example, routinely prepare their children to participate in the cognitive development enterprises that are educationally central (Schaub 2010).

An older world, in which children are to be obedient and quiet, tends to disappear. Similarly, contemporary society is seen as an occupational arena for which education is crucial and required as an entry point, so that educational success is the central source of success and social status in life (Shavit et al. 2007).

All the rationalized social structure of a modern society tends now to be assessed in terms of a unified value scheme, heavily organized around a common currency. There is a tendency to think of it all, and measure it all, as if it were an economy. So people have "jobs," and go to "work" and "earn a living." They are entrants in a "labor market," and their individual and aggregate behavior can be assessed in terms of "productivity." Their behavior adds up to a national "gross domestic product." And with global integration it now adds up to a "world economic product." None of this language makes much substantive sense in describing modern professionalized occupational systems, far from what was once considered labor.

But it all tends to be seen as somehow economic in character, with nineteenth-century mental models of society as made up of producers of shoes and potatoes who engage in market exchanges around competitive prices. This poorly fits the contemporary developed world, and it makes less and less sense in the Third World. But it is the institutionalized fiction of the global public culture and its analysts.

In practice, modern societies are dominated, not by agricultural or industrial production, but by what is called the "service sector." Occupational positions are in mass and higher education, medical care, child care, recreation, social welfare, research, administration, and above all else all sorts of governmental activity. Most of this activity cannot reasonably be seen in classic terms as economic labor, jobs, work, or productivity. It is often seen as somehow professional, and this category of roles is central and rapidly expanding in most countries of the world. The definitions of work involved rely heavily on education. If, in the culture of modernity, an important but invisible "nothing" must be done, it is especially important that a properly schooled and certified person does it.

The contemporary misinterpretation of education as economic in origin and consequence leads to mistaken historical interpretations, as if economic forces lay behind the long-term explosion of schooling. But actual historical research dismisses such anachronistic theories, and the

studies in this book are true to the broad historical record. Both mass and elite education spread outward from the world's cultural core, but not particularly from economic centers. For instance, the great center of the industrial revolution—the United Kingdom—was by no means central in the spread of either elite or mass education. And within this polity, protestant Scotland was more advanced than England. Both looked up, in terms of public education, to Prussia (Smith 2021), by no means an economic center.

The long history of higher education starts with the medieval religious system, and religious aspects of the polity, not with economic arrangements. Education was, and in good part remains to this day, a secular parallel to religious salvation. In the nineteenth century, further secularization linked education to expanding individual citizenship, and nation-building exercises created further secular parallels between religion and nation-states (Ramirez and Boli 1987). Links between education and the economy really developed only, and modestly, in the early twentieth century, with the rise of business schools, of schooled managerialism, and modern rationalized organization (Moon and Wotipka 2006; Bromley and Meyer 2015). Only after World War II did this system expand into the contemporary scene in which the profane world of business is legitimated enough, and rationalized enough, to become securely linked to elevated schooling. Beyond the United States, failures of the first half the twentieth century exposed a weakened Europe to an American cultural invasion with its liberal (and later neoliberal) linkage of the private to the public good (Djelic 1998).

In the same postwar period, liberal dominance expanded to much of the noncommunist world, and with it educational systems were rapidly founded and grew. They were linked, both in ideology and in practice, to economic forces and economic growth. During the early part of this period, mass education came to be seen as central to economic productivity (Harbison and Myers 1964), and international organizations like the World Bank celebrated the linkage, as the chapters here note. Higher education was seen much more skeptically from an economic perspective, and growth was regarded with suspicion (e.g. Collins 1979; Boudon 1973). But with neoliberalism, and the valuation of the educationally

produced "knowledge society" higher education itself was redefined as a core source of economic growth (Stehr 1994; Nowotny et al. 2001).

The studies here develop a picture of education as having Western cultural roots and diffusing variably around the world, aided and hindered by cultural, not principally economic forces. This is a valuable contribution to a distorted literature.

The Human Right to Be Compelled to Go to School

The chapters of this book return again and again to a very distinctive and revealing feature of mass education around the world: it arises, expands, and diffuses not only as a general and standardized or unified value or practice, but as a compulsory institution (Chaps. 1–3, 9). All members of society of a certain age are required to participate. Early on, this is justified as in the collective good of religious society seen as a religious polity. With secularization, the ground shifted and it became an obligation of citizenship. Over the last two centuries, this obligation linked to citizenship remains, but in addition education increasingly is formulated as an individual right—first, a right of citizenship within the charismatic nation-state, and then (with the Education for All movement) a right of all human persons, and thus a claim against the whole world (Chabbott 2003).

The compulsory character of mass education indicates the extent to which education should be seen as both an individual and a collective good: it is the one basic right that is also an obligation. Further, it is seen as linked to universalistic cultural membership in modern society, not principally its differentiated role structure. This main theme of this book is thus reinforced by the standardized ubiquity, not only of education, but of *compulsory* education.

We can contrast this situation against several alternatives, each of which appears in partial form in education around the world.

1. A first alternative would be one in which education was a valued enterprise, and led to success in some domains, but not required of

everyone. This arrangement is common in agrarian societies and empires. The idea is that elites, or at least some political and religious elites, require education in core cultural elements and activities. Other elites, including economic ones, do not. And the masses of people, involved in rural or urban labor, certainly do not.

Education around the modern world runs beyond this model. Elites of various sorts certainly get more education than ordinary people, and the schooling involved varies from elite to elite—the requirements are less strict for business elites than professional ones. But the distinctive educational features of the contemporary model are that basic education is prescribed for everyone, and that even elites must pass through it. A schooled baseline of membership in society is thus generated. The distinctive world of compulsory education is a general world model, required of practically all: explaining the spread of this system is a focal theme of this book.

A basic theme of Western Christendom emphasizes that every proper member of the community has a soul requiring salvation, and thus that everyone should be baptized. Even infants could, via surrogates, thus acquire the faith—as part of the moral community seen as a congregation, not the restricted elite "society." With the Enlightenment "discovery of society," the whole principle is secularized in mass education and extended to all. The link to the nation-state means that the furthest and most marginal people must be educationally incorporated with zeal—the former peasants must become Frenchmen (Weber 1976). An old empire would not have worried so much about weak peripherals.

The chapters of this book, thus, focus less on the expansion of education as a practical enrollment matter, and attend to the expansion of the principle of compulsion. In authoritarian contexts, the compulsion is to produce conforming participation: in liberal ones, democratic participation. From the point of view of Foucault (1991), the two are very similar strategies of social control (Miller and Rose 2008). The same view is held by Friedenberg (1965), who sees the compulsory American secondary school as close to a prison of democracy. It is indeed a striking thing that contemporary societies, valuing the freedom of the individual, imprison the young who have done nothing wrong. It seems that the Western notion of original sin, extended even to infants and requiring their special

salvation through baptism, extends rather directly to compulsory education: ignorance is sin, secularized.

2. A second alternative to sweeping standardized compulsory education would be to tie education closely to the differentiated roles making up the modern society. This can be done by linking schooling to social origins, under the assumption that the young will enter society in the roles of their parents. One can imagine rules formalizing such arrangements. Historically, such patterns, formalized or not, are quite common, and education has been very differentially allocated to different social strata. Thus American states created distinct schools—or no schools—for black people. And in many contexts, rural children have very different educational rights and resources than urban ones. Similarly, historically, male and female students had different prospects.

The advocates of compulsory education historically attacked such arrangements in preference for democratic or undemocratic equality. Most of these patterns, seen as discriminatory, are treated in the contemporary world as unacceptable, and they are the object of much reform. Individual rights principles are globally established, and nationally rooted (in principle if not in practice). The human rights movement gives great attention to rights dimensions related to education (Elliott 2007, 2011, 2014; Stacy 2009; Lauren 2011), and the Education for All movement enters into the various contemporary lists of Millennium or Sustainable Development Goals.

3. A distinct alternative educational model relates variable schooling opportunities to the prospective future of the young person, rather than social background. This is less of a violation of egalitarian principles, though it often sorts students out in the same unequal way. Systems of this kind sort students depending on their prospects or choices: those going on to the university get academic training, while others may be prepared for apprentice training and working-class roles. These sorts of systems have been strong in the Germanic countries. They are historically admired as efficient, and criticized as inegalitarian—and given the global dominance of democratic ideologies, have tended to weaken over time in preference for comprehensive standardized compulsory education (Benavot 1983).

4. A special note must be made about the strange history of education for males and females. In many historical contexts, there is no explanatory problem. Schooling relates to forms of public status and authority that are reserved for males—clerical roles, and legal ones, in the West, for example. Arrangements of such sorts are common: gender roles link to educational differentiation. An evolved system with separate and usually unequal schooling for male and female students—often with somewhat differentiated curricula given the distinctive roles for which males and females are to be prepared—still might make a kind of functional sense.

A further evolution, with essentially similar training but in segregated schools, now characterizes a few parts of the Islamic world. But common forms of education, everywhere, are now integrated and coeducational, and have been for many years. This seems normal to moderns. But it is very odd, seen from economistic and functional points of view: if men and women are to play quite different occupational and familial roles in society—a normal understanding over the last two centuries—why are they schooled in such similar ways? Tyack and Hansot (1992) forcefully raise this question in their discussion of coeducation in historical American society. It is not well answered in the subsequent literature.

The answer is clearly that basic education is about membership in the modern society, seen as a sort of religious-like community. It is not about the particular roles people will play—jobs they will have, their distinct child-care roles, and so on throughout the differentiated society.

Over and over, the chapters here show this central point: the core role of compulsion, the cultural rather than economic or organizational character of global and regional policy structures, and the globally and regionally standardized character of the schooling impulse.

Institutions of Education as Supranational and Global

As an empirical matter, the spread of education is a world process. Some of this is a matter of international compulsion, with colonial domination creating (and restricting) schooling, or with postcolonial pressures from

world institutions. Much more has a voluntaristic quality, as national states see education as central to their own coherence. The theory or ideology of the modern nation-state makes education important: mass education as constructing, on the run, citizens out of people disparate in religion, ethnicity, and culture; universities as creating and staffing the apparatuses of a nation-state. With both mass and elite education, mimetic copying of standard forms was crucial.

First, constructing a national culture is a difficult business, and so is creating professionalized elites. Available forms, reflecting arrangements that have worked elsewhere, are of great use. None of us, for example, would be able to invent a nominally relevant local cultural template for a national system of criminal law. And while local educators might be able to create curricula adapted to a few specific aspects of the local ecology, they cannot create doctoral training programs out of whole cloth, or secondary school curricula for biology.

Second, given the weakness of most national status, and fragmentation of national cultural systems, legitimacy is a main problem. Highly developed educational forms in successful developed societies are much more likely to seem legitimate than particular structures with subgroup legitimacy in a fragmented Third World country. Students and parents are likely to have special respect for linguistic and cultural material validated in the global cores. In contrast, there can be great inconsistency and conflict in an attempt to formulate a definitive national language. It is easier to agree on what is English than on what is to be the official local language.

There is much direct copying, country to country, around the world, that reflects the old hierarchies of the colonial system (but note Chap. 2 and elsewhere), and the newer ones of current global stratification. The studies here suggest network relations structured by region, cultural background, and development level (Chaps. 1, 2, and 5–9). Future research could examine, beyond state-to-state linkages, the effects of professional networks. These have elaborated enormously in recent decades, and over and above national influences integrate world ideologies of what it means to teach history or biology in mass or higher education. A good First-World university could, with little difficulty, generate complete curricula for a needy Third World one: some of them, it seems, do.

Thus, the models put forward in world centers—established aid programs from leading countries, professional communities, and so on—are likely to serve as models for policy if not practice, in weaker contexts.

Beyond nation-to-nation ties, policies legitimated in major international organizations are likely to have even more official standing. The studies in this book give special attention to such fora: country ties may reflect common immersion in international organizational communities. These are of great interest in codifying the world educational culture that helps drive expansion everywhere.

The studies here suggest that some international organizations focus on economic development as a core purpose of education. As one might expect, the World Bank thinks in this way. But the major observation (Chaps. 5 and 9) is that even the international organizations focused on development give much attention to education as a matter of broad individual and cultural development, not training for particular (e.g. economic or occupational) roles. And the regional organizations studied here focus even more on cultural matters—in partial reaction to a liberal and Western global culture (Chaps. 7 and 8). Interestingly, these organizations, while in part reactive, seem not to formulate core aspects of mass or elite education as unacceptable. They advocate difference, but not direct opposition.

Conclusion

The studies here address the global diffusion of education—a dramatic worldwide change. They address the long-term and worldwide character of the change, and the international organizations that now manage and promote it. These are principally modern, though the old colonial empires provided some structuration (the current effects of which appear empirically to be moderate). They especially attend to the network of international relationships along which education diffused historically. Chains of power and culture formulated patterns that still operate, now in part through regional organizations.

Along the way, the studies show, the pattern of diffusion changes, and diffusion changes the pattern. Originally Western, what we now call

education (both mass and elite) spreads depending on cultural areas of the world—faster in closer peripheries, slower in more separate and independent ones. Over time, the regional differences crystallize with distinctive regional organizations—a focus of several chapters here (particularly Chaps. 7 and 8).

Looking to a future in which the liberal Western-centered global order is less hegemonic, we might speculate that along with continued diffusion of global standardization, sharper oppositions might arise. Models around the world might be formulated in explicit codifications of criticism of global models as Western, Christian, and/or American, and reflecting hegemony rather than universal understandings. As such forms of consciousness spread, we may expect a slowing of global diffusion, perhaps accompanied by the intensification of regional ones. The studies of this book certainly suggest that network patterns, which obviously drive diffusion, can also change or transform it.

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