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## CHAPTER IX

### MADE TO BE BROKEN – UNIVERSAL THEORIES AS IDEAL TYPES

Ruth Hayhoe

In honor of the upcoming conference on “Exploring Leadership and Learning Theories in Asia,” it is my pleasure to write a few pages on the provocative question of whether or not theories are universal. Rather than addressing this question directly, I would like to share thoughts from my own intellectual journey, as I struggled to find resources in comparative education theory that would make possible an understanding of China’s educational development over the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

My doctoral work was done at the University of London, Institute of Education between 1979 and 1984, a period when several universalist narratives or metanarratives of Western thought dominated sociological theory. On the one side were the theorists of modernization, Parsons (1966) and Eisenstadt (1971) in sociology, Inkeles and Smith (1974) in the application of that sociological frame to education, not to mention such human capital theorists as Harbison and Myers (1965). Parsons’ *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* provided a framework for understanding the political, economic, social and cultural systems and how they interacted – with the economy seen as the motor of change and culture as the stabilizing force that brought about equilibrium in the change process. The underlying assumptions were that all societies needed to move along this progressive trajectory towards

more “modern” forms, and education could be a significant force in the “catch-up” game that was encouraged in the “developing” societies.

In my field of comparative education, this rather conservative Western universalist narrative was increasingly challenged by an alternative explanation of social change, also rooted in European intellectual thought, Marxist dialectical materialism. Subsequently, neo-Marxist frames took shape in the form of dependency theory spawned by such Latin American economists as Andre Gundar Frank (1969) and world system theory, rooted in history and led by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980). These provided an alternative version of universalism, suggesting that all developing and peripheral societies would be constrained by the world capitalist system and forced into patterns of underdevelopment or distorted development by economic forces outside of their control. Education would serve to legitimize these exploitative patterns and make them appear normal and inevitable. Martin Carnoy’s *Education as Cultural Imperialism* (1974) began the rich educational literature, stimulated by dependency theory and world system theory which remains a dominant paradigm in comparative education studies, and which has spawned many excellent critical studies.

In recent decades, postmodern, postcolonial and anti-colonial theories have put forward more fragmented and relativistic approaches, which tend to deny the possibility of universal theories, and build critical perspectives from historical and contextual specifics. While I have considerable appreciation for the new openness and immense sense of intellectual possibility in these approaches, I nevertheless have some reservations about full blown relativism and the possibility that there is no shared discourse left for reasoned discussion and debate, building on a common and shared humanity. What I would like to suggest in this brief paper is a possible solution to this dilemma. It can be found in the work of Max Weber, and in the ways in which Weber’s sociological method was applied to Comparative Education, and particularly the comparative study of values in education, by Brian Holmes. Both Weber and Holmes adhered to critical dualism in their epistemological commitments, including the view that scholarship must be neutral and cannot support particular value positions. Nevertheless, much can be learned from them about how universal theories may be tested in specific contexts, and how distinctive value complexes may be taken into account in educational research without abandoning the possibility of forms of reasoned communication based on a common humanity.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber embraced Marx's universalist explanation of economic change and its consequences for social and political life in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, yet he also identified a set of values associated with Protestant Christianity that made for rather different societal patterns in Northern Europe than those of Southern Europe, which were shaped by Roman Catholicism. Values and beliefs were, thus, given more importance than the epiphenomenal status accorded them in classical Marxism, and Marxist theory was used in a tentative and exploratory way, more as an ideal type than a proven theory.

Parallels with this approach can be found in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Dependency theory had achieved a universalist status parallel to classical Marxism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. How was the rise of East Asia to be explained, when the global factors seen as responsible for the "development of underdevelopment" or "severely distorted development" in the case of Latin America and other parts of the developing world, remained in place? How was it that Japan and the four Asian tigers were able to achieve such remarkable economic success that a thesis about a coming Asian century had begun to form by the millennial year? Weber had been convinced that Confucianism and its values of world affirmation were antithetical to the development of capitalism (Hayhoe, 1992), yet a number of East Asian scholars developed a rather persuasive argument around the connections between the Confucian ethic and the spirit of capitalism in a tentative effort at explanation. Building further on this, the hypothesis of the "developmental state" took form, giving political shape to cultural values that had been identified (Dore, 1987). The fact that such transitional socialist states as China and Vietnam have begun to look more and more like the rest of East Asia in their development profiles, added further weight to this interesting argument around distinctive value complexes.

These historical examples from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries suggest that the application of purportedly universal theories in a tentative, exploratory and critical way may be quite a fruitful exercise. They might be seen as ideal types, made to be broken, with the phenomena that elude explanation as most interesting, when theory is applied in concrete historical analysis. Furthermore, the focus on values is of particular relevance to scholars in the field of education. I will, therefore, move to the contribution of Brian Holmes and a somewhat different use of ideal types in the context of comparative education theory in the second half of this brief essay.

As noted earlier, Brian was conservative in his political views and, like Max Weber, committed to a position of scholarly neutrality with regard to educational or political values. He was, nevertheless, deeply interested in both religious and philosophical values, and convinced of their importance and tendency to persist. Thus, while he preferred to place his work within functionalist rather than Marxist sociology, he was fascinated by the role of Parsons' "cultural system" and its contribution not only to equilibrium but also to the persistence of patterns of "no change" in a rising tide of economically or technologically induced change. Holmes' (1981) use of a Platonic ideal type to sketch out deep rooted values relating to society, knowledge and the human person in continental Europe, and then his effort to construct a parallel Deweyan ideal type of the reflective individual in a changing environment for the USA and a Marxist ideal type of a planned egalitarian society for the USSR, as an approach to broad comparative reflection on educational policy stimulated considerable discussion in the 1980s. Much later, I came to see how a Confucian ideal type of persisting values associated with the human person, knowledge and society in East Asia could help to interpret some of the paradoxes of educational development in that region.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth centuries, East Asia experienced four distinctive forms of colonialism, that of Britain in HK and Singapore, Portugal in Macao, France in Vietnam, and Japan in Korea and Taiwan. There were also the strikingly different economic and political systems that emerged in the tensions of the Cold War, with China and Vietnam adhering to the socialist road, while Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Macao following the capitalist road. Yet, human capital theory seemed to "work" in both capitalist and socialist systems, with educational investment leading to rapid economic development. Postcolonial legacies seemed to stimulate vibrant responses rooted in local culture, rather than leaving behind permanent scars of dependency. There were also remarkable parallels between the kinds of neo-colonial or social imperialist (to use a Chinese phrase) influences imposed on China by the Soviet Union, and on Korea and Japan by the USA. In both cases, however, the assertion of educational patterns rooted in local and national culture brought about successful resistance. Out of all of this, seems to have come the concept of "Confucian heritage societies," with a remarkable convergence in the learning patterns and the shapes of school and community organization in the eight very different societies

that have been identified: Japan, Korea, Mainland China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore, Hong Kong and Macao (Hayhoe, 2008).

When social psychologist, Harold Stevenson (1992), began his extensive longitudinal studies of the learning of mathematics and language in American and East Asian schools, he began with Sendai in Japan and Taipei in Taiwan - later adding Beijing. The educational patterns he identified, in terms of family support for schooling, teacher student relationships, ideas on the role of the teacher, pedagogical practices and the integration of school with community, actually ring true for all of the above Confucian heritage societies. Parallel studies done by psychologists, Watson and Biggs (1989) in Hong Kong, have produced similar findings.

I would, thus, conclude that the persistence of theories used in educational research that claim to be universal provides for stimulating critical analysis and reflection across similar and different societies. As long as the theories are applied critically and tentatively, with attention given to cultural and social phenomena that do not “fit” expectations, they may facilitate fruitful dialogue across societies, regions and even continents. Following Max Weber and Brian Holmes, we might regard them as ideal types that are made to be broken (Hayhoe, 2007).

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