The rapid growth of comparative education as a formal discipline can be measured by the ever-increasing number of departments and study centers now devoted to this subject. Where formerly only a few universities were seriously interested, today every sizable institution of higher learning offers at least one course 1). In addition, requests pour in from countless agencies to provide programs, studies, and manpower for a great variety of projects related to education abroad. That there are all too few persons well enough equipped for these assignments is painfully evident. The question arises: Just what is the proper equipment? Certainly it is related to comparative education as a scholarly discipline.

In this essay I shall discuss two aspects of comparative education as a scholarly discipline, namely pertinent historical backgrounds and contemporary influences. I shall then inquire into future possibilities as the subject uses content and methods derived from other disciplines.

I

Doubtless the pioneers of comparative education before World War II had little conception of the sprawling field of study their subject was to become. They concentrated on several purposes: defining the peculiar nature of national educational institutions; determining the relationship of these institutions to their respective cultures; comparing these relationships with one another; and seeking to discover universal principles which would govern the operation of educational systems everywhere. Unfortunately these purposes could not successfully be reconciled with a prevailing relativism, which insisted that educational institutions were specific functions of unique cultures. The result was a less ambitious compromise that, even if educational institutions could not be transferred from country to country, we could nonetheless profit by exchanging general ideas or principles.

During the social-conscious 1930's it was natural for the few scholars in this field to accentuate the social and cultural benefits of comparative education.

1) The abundance, if not the quality, of American academic interest in comparative education never ceases to amaze foreign scholars. See Franz Hilker, Vergleichende Pädagogik, München, Max Hueber Verlag, 1962.
By studying varied educational systems more systematically they thought it might be possible to justify a number of propositions which would have important practical consequences, propositions such as:

(a) Democratic systems of education are better than totalitarian ones;
(b) Centralization of educational organization has undesirable consequences for educational freedom; or (c) Public education contributes more than private education to national unity. Whether or not they were right in this expectation, they at least believed that comparative education could contribute materially to systematic theory and practice in all aspects of education. They stealthily cited the broad, cosmopolitan background that could be acquired thereby.

Unfortunately American educators as a whole paid little attention to this early work in comparative education. After World War II, programs of democratization and educational rehabilitation in Germany and Japan proved how inept we were in transferring ideas and institutions from one country to another. Having overlooked or disregarded all the cautions of the theorists, we entered upon a course of mismanagement and misunderstanding that did little to improve our reputation as educators on the international scene.

Today comparative education is a widely respected field of educational research. Fresh ideas, new departments, different methods spring up continually, and the subject has advanced beyond the generality of its earlier studies. Some specialists now advocate a philosophical approach in terms of such schools as empiricism, Cartesianism, pragmatism, and


4) The Proceedings of the Annual Conferences on Comparative Education (begun in 1954) and the Comparative Education Review (begun in 1957) are two publications which handle problems in comparative education rigorously and critically.