Historical Perspectives on Educational Policy and Political Cultures

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Introduction

This chapter explicates a core assumption of our collaborative project: 

This history of educational development and policies within a country will affect the way new ideas are received from outside and are incorporated into national and local discussions within that country. We look at history as a critical component of culture because it creates collective memories and “mental models” (Senge, 1990) that frame the opportunities for new ideas to enter political discussions. We do not examine events as historians, who are committed to teasing out the details of what actually happened, and how they affected participants. Our more sociological view is that “[h]istory reveals not only change but continuity. Social structures and cultures possess a resilience that fosters ideologies of stability and preservation” (Warwick & Williams, 1980, p. 333). History and events in the past have been formed not only by broad social or economic trends, but also by the preferences of often powerful groups and individuals who then determine how others react. Culture is the crucial variable that shapes how the powerful view their own interests, and how those possessed of fewer resources respond to leaders and events over which they individually have less control.
Two Lenses: Global and Local

As suggested by this perspective, a sociological-historical approach to understanding policy discussions must incorporate two distinct lenses. A global perspective acknowledges that there are historical trends affecting large, minimally connected groups of people that do not fit the definition of a political culture as offered in the previous chapter, and which they may not be aware of until the trend is almost past. Nobody, for example, predicted that Spinoza and Locke would, in the mid-seventeenth century, help to create the Enlightenment that changed the shape of Western thought, any more than an “Arab Spring” was accurately predicted for 2011. Historians and sociologists can, retrospectively, “see” the origins and develop explanations for why broad and sweeping changes emerge in what seems to be an almost spontaneous way.

Conversely, a local perspective views global events and paradigms as a force that becomes distorted and dulled when filtered through the meaning and perspectives that a more tightly knit group develops to interpret them. This view emphasizes the role of localized cultural interpretations that can cause disruptions and shape future decisions. These local interpretations can create significant barriers to the simple flow of new ideas in “epistemic communities” of policy conversations. As we put it in chapter one, it is the view that the international tide of ideas meets the rocky shore of local realities. Eventually the rocks will change their shape, but the process can be quite gradual.

Globalization and “New Public Management”

Globalization can be understood as an intricate pattern of connections in economics and the labor market, where local events can have global repercussions and supranational forces in turn can relentlessly pressure local political and economic structures. Globalization has led to the emergence of more than fifty thousand transnational companies that are only loyal to their shareholders and therefore able to impel governments to shape their financial policies according to the logic of the market, as well as the emergence of a global financial market with its complex web through and across national economies that allows problems in one country to rapidly affect a region—which rapidly affects the world.

Globalization is more than an economic phenomenon; it is culturally infectious in ways that manifest its presence in all but the most remote regions in the world. The revolution in communication allows ideas and trends that once took years or even decades to disseminate from