

Toppling Statues and the Defenestration of Comparative Education

by *Erwin H. Epstein*

In his recent book, *A Short History of Relations Between Peoples: How the World Began to Move Beyond Tribalism*, John Ellis explains that for most of recorded history neighboring communal groups viewed each other with apprehension if not outright fear or hate. As such, a charge of racism made no sense, since the loathing of others was near-universal. By contrast, a widespread idea in our own relatively recent era has ignored the history of tribalism. This oversight has become a new orthodoxy, characterized as critical race theory that regards the human family as a single entity, ignoring the real-world history of tribalism. It claims that up until the modern age racial harmony was the standard. Against the history of tribalism, this theory contends that racist Europeans broke that harmony—albeit a harmony that never really existed—and that, with communal harmony now fractured, everyone is a “racist.”¹

Racism and Decoloniality

Concomitant with racial theory is the concept of decoloniality, the process of defying the rules and hierarchies imposed by colonial hegemony, especially as this process relates to knowledge and data. Emphasis is given to indigenous/“racial” perspectives and identities as these seek to “decolonize” scientific teaching and knowledge generation. As such, decoloniality has special resonance in areas of schooling. It has become a new orthodoxy that has captivated a wide range of educational institutions, from early-child education to universities and a variety of academic associations.

Economist Roland Fryer provides an illuminating anecdote:

a student [asked] if racial disparities are due to systemic racism or differences in work ethic. He happens to be black from a disadvantaged background, and he earnestly wondered why, in his neighborhood growing up, it seemed to him that black immigrants worked harder than

American-born blacks. A white woman a couple of rows behind him called him a “white supremacist.”²

The new orthodoxy has turned words like “race,” “racist,” and “racism” into metonyms, their transformed meanings weaponized to assault traditional concepts. The pervasiveness of decoloniality at all levels of education is of special concern. Consider the job description for an open rank faculty position in secondary social studies education at one of America’s most prestigious schools of Education, Teachers College, Columbia University: “We are seeking a candidate who researches and teaches *against* master/colonizing narratives” (emphasis added).³

By insisting that instructors condemn rather than rationally explore such narratives, Teachers College deprives students of the experience gained by engaging in balanced analysis. Here the University seeks indoctrination rather than intellectual engagement. And the students, prospective social studies teachers, will in turn indoctrinate their primary and secondary-school pupils, expanding the pervasiveness of decolonial ideology throughout the educational system.

Decoloniality in Comparative Education

Among education faculty, those involved in international teaching and research are uniquely susceptible to decolonialist ideology. Colonialism, after all, is a world-wide phenomenon in view

of the hegemony of metropolises over indigenous peoples. No academic field is more engaged in international teaching and research than comparative education, a hybrid academic area that applies the theories and methods of all the social sciences and history to understanding international issues of education.⁴ As a hybrid that combines the social sciences and history, its practitioners come from a variety of disciplines and are often members of one or another of the academic associations that represent their areas of specialization—especially anthropology, economics, political science, psychology, sociology, and history—as they focus on the comparative study of education.

Just as practitioners of other academic fields have done, comparativists of education have formed scholarly associations. These are mostly national or regional in scope, with currently 46 such groups represented in a global umbrella organization, the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES).⁵ The first and largest of the WCCES constituent associations is the U.S.-based Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), with a membership of about 4,000 comparativists from around the world.⁶ CIES, with its large membership and flagship journal, the *Comparative Education Review*, exerts a disproportionate influence on the field.

As a field that draws on the social sciences and history, many if not most comparativists of education identify themselves as anthropologists, econo-

mists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, or historians, but also as specialists of one or another region of the world (that is, as Africanists, Asianists, Latin Americanists, etc.). As such, they often belong to organizations that are disciplinary (such as the American Sociological Association) and/or regional (such as the Latin American Studies Association). Many of these organizations have embraced radical leftist political ideologies, such as the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement (BDS) and the anti-Zionist movement. Among such organizations to do so are the American Anthropological Association, the American Sociological Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Political Science Association, the American Studies Association, and the Middle East Studies Association. It is therefore not surprising that many comparativists of education have incorporated radical movements in their own scholarship.

The leftist turn of so many academic associations is antithetical to reasoned scholarship. The term “studies” in their titles may not accurately reflect their focus, which emphasizes advocacy of specific positions rather than impartial study and evaluation. Daniel Diermeier, the chancellor of Vanderbilt University, contends that academic associations, like higher education institutions generally, “thrive on the free and open exchange of ideas [and] must join the growing number of universities embracing the core principle of insti-

tutional neutrality and refraining from taking positions on political and social issues.”⁷

As advanced by *The Chicago Canon on Free Inquiry and Expression*, which describes the intellectual posture of the University of Chicago, unless an issue relates directly to the university’s core mission, the institution must desist from taking public positions on controversial matters. Chicago’s orientation of academic neutrality is being increasingly adopted by North American universities—not so much, however, by scholarly associations.

“Toppling Statues” of Notable Comparativists of Education

A conspicuous example regarding comparative education is a recent article in the journal *Compare*, the journal of the British Association of International and Comparative Education—among the field’s most prominent organizations—in which Robin Shields and Julia Paulson excoriate traditional accounts of comparative education but focus especially on works by Edward Vickers and me, viewing us along with many others as racist. The title of Shields’ and Paulson’s article is “Toppling Statues? Complicity, Whiteness and Reckoning in Comparative and International Education”.⁸ The article claims that “lionized” comparativists are among “statues” metaphorically erected by contemporary practitioners of racist coloniality. Shields and Paulson

identify some of the most traditionally acclaimed comparativists described notably as “statues” in two books: *North American Scholars of Comparative Education*, edited by Erwin H. Epstein,⁹ and *British Scholars of Comparative Education*, edited by David Phillips.¹⁰ We discover in this way that the comparativists who are the books’ focus are representative of *racist white maleness*, regardless of their true race or gender. They include such outstanding *female* figures as Gail Kelly, Heidi Ross, Mary Jean Bowman, and Margaret Sutherland.

Not content with illogically depicting comparativists about whom the chapters are written, Shields and Paulson turn words into spears as they speciously portray the writers of these books’ chapters, notwithstanding their gender, as “*exclusively* white and male authors” [emphasis added]. Who then are these “racist sculptors” of the “statues” metaphorically erected by so-called contemporary practitioners of racist coloniality that Shields and Paulson seek to “topple”?

As shown in the “notable comparativists” books, the complicitous “sculptors,” besides David Phillips and me, include prominent authors such as Vandra Masemann, who “sculpted” the “statue” of Gail Kelly; Irving Epstein, who erected the “sculpture” of Heidi Ross; David Plank, who crafted the monument to Mary Jean Bowman; and David Phillips, who “sculpted” the statue of Margaret Sutherland. Among the many other builders of “statues” to hon-

or “racist white males” in these books are such well-known scholars as Regina Cortina, Liping Bu, David Post, Stephen Heyneman, Robert Lawson, John Weidman, Karen Mundy, Robert Cowen, Michele Schweisfurth, Keith Watson, and Michael Crossley. These are all presumed collaborators in the colonial project to impose “whiteness as an (often unspoken) organizing principle of Comparative and International Education.”

What is Shields and Paulson’s motive for wanting to topple statues of “lionized” comparativists? It is “to help open an empty space in which a *less polarized* and more open discussion of the history of our field may be reconstructed” [emphasis added]. In other words, the authors claim that the real history of our field has been deliberately concealed to hide a conspiracy of coloniality perpetrated by “an academy [comparative and international education] defined by white patriarchy.” Contrary to their claim of wanting to close the space between “colonialist conspirators” and de-colonialists, Shields and Paulson magnify the polarization between the two sides by their unbalanced narrative, the real purpose of which is to bring an end to normative comparative education.

Shields and Paulson resort to an assortment of tricks in their quest to “topple statues.” To show that the “statues” are of “notables’ [who] are overwhelmingly white men, who are elevated and ‘lionized’ through largely celebratory narratives of their personal and pro-

fessional lives,” they give as an example Robert Cowen’s chapter on Nicholas Hans in the British “notables” book. One might expect Shields and Paulson to condemn Cowen for his elevation of Hans’ “statue.” Instead, they criticize Cowen for doing the opposite—for describing “Hans’ treatment of race in this book as ‘embarrassingly bad.’” The problem for Shields and Paulson is that Cowen portrayed Hans’ treatment of race as being not *bad enough*. Alexander Riley’s characterization of contemporary sociology applies equally well to what comparative education will become if Shields and Paulson have their way.

The sociology that attracted me to this field is no more. That now almost entirely extinct variety of sociology approached complex and contested questions with an open-ended and objective rigor, prepared to consider all reasonable hypotheses and all evidence prior to carefully presenting arguments.

All questions about human life are now equations of victims and victimizers and the mechanisms by which the powerful oppress the powerless. No alternative explanatory models for the empirical outcomes we see in the world are entertained or even acknowledged as legitimate. All evidence that cannot be adequately twisted to fit the storyline is ignored.¹¹

Another of Shields and Paulson’s tricks relates to the way they portray the current field of comparative and international education—and the statues-building “notables” books in particular—as promoting “geographically unequal global systems.” They contend that the “discipline,” exemplified by the

“notables” book series, “has regularly concerned itself with ‘non-Western actors and the shape of non-Western political and cultural structures’ but not with ‘the significance and value of what might be termed non-Western thought.’”

How do Shields and Paulson demonstrate the Western bias against the global South supposedly inherent in this Oxford book series? It is by showing that the volumes in the series are all about the global North—the first on North American scholars, the second on British scholars, and “a third volume focused on European lions is planned.” However, contrary to their claim that the third volume, just published, is on scholars of the global North, that volume is specifically on notable *Latin American* comparativists and therefore clearly on the global South.¹² So much for Shields and Paulson’s contention that normative comparative education conspires to conceal intellectual memory of global North predation.

One of their more egregious tricks is to embrace an extreme form of anti-positivist contextualism, claiming a link between normative comparative and international education to structural racism and colonialism. They do this by tying the field to “the development of statistical techniques fundamental to much modern research—most prominently correlations and significance testing—[as] deeply entwined with eugenics and racial pseudo-science of the early twentieth century.” Just think of this: for Shields and Paulson, compar-

ativists who use statistical testing approaches are reprobates whose methods of control are akin to selective breeding of humans to improve the populations' genetic composition!

Shields and Paulson's use of tricks to advance their inane take down of normative comparative education is perhaps not so surprising when one considers their relative ignorance of the field.

While related fields have increasingly engaged with issues of race and coloniality, CIE [comparative and international education] has largely embraced a colour-blind ideology, arguably becoming a leafy suburb where such issues can be ignored. While dismissing the discussion of racism in the history of the field, CIE celebrates uncritical histories of its predominantly white, male founding fathers, repeating well-rehearsed narratives of the field. These venerations of CIE's history are somewhat unexpected given *its relative youth* and variegated intellectual origins [emphasis added].

Two points: First, a casual glance through the pages of the major comparative education journals reveals nothing of the sort, once it is understood that Shields and Paulson persistently use the words "race" and "whiteness" as circumlocutions. Their purpose is to inflame, not to inform, to incite rather than to engage in reasoned analysis. Contrary to what they would have us believe, there is no shortage of research on hegemonic power relationships arising from the depredations of colonialism in the annals of the field, as Edward Vickers and I have shown in a recent article titled "Trashing Tradition" in the

journal *Comparative Education*.¹³ Shields and Paulson could have used a less brazen word like "subaltern" to more accurately describe content in much of the field's literature. "Race," in its original meaning and when not used as a weaponized trope, is the psychologically biased disposition to view skin color as representing superiority/inferiority; "subaltern," by contrast, refers to groups denied access to hegemonic power, a sociological concept. To grasp the difference between "race" and "subaltern" and Shields and Paulson's warped and insistent use of the former is to understand their contrivance of another trick to conceal their attempt to defenestrate normative comparative education.

Second, referring to comparative education as a relatively youthful field is another sign of Shields and Paulson's ignorance. "Relative youth" compared to what? Tracing the field's eighteenth century origin to Louis-René de Caradeuc de la Chalotais of France reveals that comparative education precedes by generations the origins of, say, sociology (beginning with Auguste Comte) or anthropology (originating with Franz Boaz).¹⁴ If this allusion to the field's relative youth is not made from historical ignorance, it is then nothing more than a shrill incitement to degrade normative comparative education. If the latter, then it should be counted as another item in Shields and Paulson's bag of tricks.

Resurrecting the “Statues”

Fortunately, Shields and Paulson are not the only assessors of the Oxford series on “notables.” Contrast their critique with what Robert Cowen, one of the most celebrated comparativists of our time, has written about the North American Notables book.

Overall, the book can be warmly welcomed as a major contribution to our history and welcomed for its accounts of the careers of some distinguished comparative educationists. Paradoxically, it is these two characteristics—the aim of the project (an historical story) and the form of the project (biographical chapters)—that mean that this book cannot just be praised and put on the bookshelf. The book may have to be looked at quite a few times for all its implications to be absorbed. It contributes, in a very complex way, to a multiple-generation conversation.

A pleasant bonus of this text, and a probable side-effect of other texts within the series, is that the problem of history—history in the field of study and history of the field of study—is being revitalized.¹⁵

As for the British Notables book, another prominent comparativist, Kenneth King, wrote:

What makes this edited volume so special is that the nine commentators on the group of British comparativists are themselves critical analysts of the history and development of comparative education. Their lens on the group is hugely valuable as they are able to look across the very considerable productivity of the group and identify some generative themes that contributed to the emerging field of comparative education.¹⁶

These reviews refute Shields and Paulson’s vituperative narrative. Still, praise for the “notables” volumes is one thing, but what about these books’ practical value? On two occasions in the recent past, the CIES Teaching Comparative and International Special Interest Group presented its coveted annual Innovative Curriculum Development Award in large part based on the instructors’ groundbreaking use of the North American Notables book. The 2024 award was given to Bernhard Streitweiser, who used the volume as a basis for his comparative education class at George Washington University, and three years earlier the annual award was presented to Martha Merrill for her innovative use of the North American Notables book in her comparative education course at Kent State University. If the presumed statues were toppled, they were evidently resurrected stronger than ever by innovators in CIES.

Shields and Paulson rampaged through their article like drunken surgeons recklessly eviscerating their patient on the operating table. How could their defamatory screed be accepted for publication in one of the field’s most prestigious journals? How could this shameless paper make it through peer review? What was the editorial board’s thinking? And how could the British Association of International and Comparative Education allow its flagship journal to produce such rubbish?

Looking closely at the article review process, the answer becomes clear. Julia Paulson, the paper’s co-author is also

the co-editor of the journal *Compare* in which their article appeared! I was editor of the *Comparative Education Review*, the flagship journal of the CIES, for ten years, during which I had an unspoken rule: neither the editor nor the associate and assistant editors were permitted to publish their work as featured articles in that journal. The emphasis on objectivity was sacrosanct.

By contrast, “Toppling Statues” exudes bias and dogmatism. In the words of Bret Stephens, “When people argue that education is the answer to bigotry, they often forget that bigotry is a moral failing, not an intellectual one—and few people are more dangerous than educated bigots.”¹⁷

Conclusion

For Shields and Paulson’s decolonialist ideology, the application of merit to judge the worth of scholarship in modern society is nothing more than a subterfuge for white advantage, as opposed to the precept that people are judged on their natural and achieved abilities. This perspective holds that the modernized Western world, from which the concept of merit in the form of contest social mobility, which has served as an integral foundation of Western education, has played a deceitful role in keeping non-Western peoples deprived of power and higher status.¹⁸ This ideology explains how a white woman can call a black man a “white racist,” Teachers College at Columbia University can openly advertise a teaching position for someone to teach not about but *against*

“master/colonizing narratives,” and Shields and Paulson can so blatantly use duplicitous tricks to defenestrate traditional comparative education. That decoloniality has become embedded in the work of leading NGOs and international donor organizations, such as Plan International, Care, Open Society, the Ford Foundation, Oxfam, and Médecins Sans Frontières,¹⁹ indicates how globally disparate this ideology has become and the consequent growing need to raise an alarm to its perils.

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2. Roland Fryer, “The Economics of Political Correctness”, *The Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2024: A15.
3. Posted October 7, 2022.
4. The term “comparative and international education” is often used to describe this field. Yet comparative education and international education are separate though closely related areas. My focus is on the former, i.e., comparative education. For an explanation of the differences and similarities of these fields, see Erwin H. Epstein, “Why Comparative and International Education? Reflections on the Conflation of Names” in *Teaching Comparative Education: Trends and Issues Informing Practice*, edited by P. K. Kubow and A. H. Blosser (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2016).
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 18. Adrian Wooldridge, *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World* (NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2021).
 19. See Asier Malax-Echevarria and Pablo Vommaro, "Decolonization and Cooperation," An Introductory Course of the Network of Postgraduate Studies in Social Sciences, CLASCO, January 17, 2025 to March 3, 2025.