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Book Review

Katharina Sass
Politics of Comprehensive School Reforms: Cleavages and Coalitions
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
2022, 318 pp.

After World War II, politicians and policymakers across Europe was aware of the limitations that marked their educational systems. Generally, these provided the vast majority of the population with a basic primary education, and a small minority with a secondary education that prepared children for higher education. Still in the 1940s and 1950s, about 80 or 90 percent of school aged children only attended primary schools. This was, however, about to change. Whether fueled by notions of equality or economic growth, educational systems were reformed in order to increase the average number of school years, and to increase access to secondary as well as higher education (Zymek 2000).

A marked feature of the postwar period was attempts to create a unified school for all children, regardless of talent or social background. Instead of the traditional segmented school systems, where only a privileged few were allowed to attend *gymnasier* in Sweden, *lecei classici* in Italy or *Gymnasien* in Germany, visions of a comprehensive school for all children were voiced and at times implemented. Examples of such efforts include the three-year middle school introduced in Italy in 1962 for all children aged 11–14 regardless of social background or ability (Williams 1971), the attempts to introduce comprehensive schools in the Republic of Ireland in 1963 (Clarke 2010), and Belgium in 1971 (Henkens 2004), and the experiments with so-called middle schools in the Netherlands 1973–74 (Greveling, Amsing and Dekker 2015). In the case of Germany and the Nordics, several important studies have also been published (e.g., Leschinsky and Mayer 1999; Phillips 2000; Wiborg 2010; Wiborg 2009; Román, Hallsén, Nordin and Ringarp 2015),

Whether these comprehensive school reforms remain under-studied is consequently debatable. As an international field of research, the amount of work done on the politics, policy-making and impact of comprehensive schooling is impressive. Katharina Sass' book is nevertheless a welcome contribution. Focusing on the cases of Norway and West Germany, it explores the intriguing question of why a segmented parallel school system was abolished in Norway, while such efforts remained limited in West Germany.

Answering this question, *Politics of Comprehensive School Reforms* clearly illustrates the strengths of a comparative perspective. While the national histories of the success and failure of comprehensive school reform is thoroughly studied, this book clearly shows that international comparisons has the potential to shed new light on national trajectories. Applying Stein Rokkan's cleavage theory, which highlights long-standing polarized political conflicts, and the power resource theory promoted by Gøsta Esping-Andersen et al., Sass provides an in-depth analysis of the political conflicts and struggles that has encircled the question of comprehensive schools.

In chapter 2, Sass provides the reader with a very useful historical overview of her two cases. Here we learn more about the history of schooling in Norway and West Germany leading up to the postwar reform period that is explored in this book. In chapter 3, the reader is introduced to the main historical actors involved in educational politics in respective country. These include the political parties, teachers' organizations and other actors, including the employers' association, councils and committees, and the protestant and the catholic churches. While this comparison show many similarities between the political playing fields of Norway and Western Germany, it nevertheless indicates some differences, not the least the comparable strength of the political left and primary school teachers in Norway.

If chapter 3 deals with the actors of comprehensive school reform, chapter 4 examines the political conflicts that surrounded comprehensive school reforms. These included the conflicts around the first introduction of so-called youth schools in Norway, and the introduction of integrated comprehensive schools in North Rhine-Westphalia. This analysis shows an important difference between the two countries: it was first in the 1970s, that the Norwegian conservatives became a clear opponent to comprehensive school reforms, while such antagonistic forces had existed in Germany throughout the postwar era.

In chapter 5, Sass deepens this analysis by identifying five points of conflict that affected educational politics: religion, centralization, language, anti-communism, and gender. The result is a rich and convincing analysis of both similarities and differences between Norway and West Germany that also raises further questions regarding postwar educational politics, and the role of religion, language and anti-communism across European countries.

Sass summarizes the results of her comparative and historical analysis in chapter 6. Her conclusion is that the comprehensive reforms in Norway was the result of several favourable historical conditions. These included prewar school reforms, the strengths of Social Democrats and primary school teachers, the lack of conservative opposition until the 1970s, and how conflicts over language, centralization, gender and religion benefitted the agenda of the Norwegian Social Democrats. These findings are certainly interesting: instead of explaining the stark differences between the two school systems with stark differences between politics in Norway and West Germany, Sass is able to show how a range of differences together enabled comprehensive school reform in Norway.

In sum: Sass's book is an impressive piece of research. In the introduction, she states that comparative historical research on the development of school systems remains limited. I would say that there are good reasons for this. Conducting comparative historical research requires not only a distinct conceptual framework but also a truly extensive knowledge of the historical cases involved, if the result is not to be an all-too simplified analysis of two cases described in more detail and in more nuance elsewhere. This book is, however, the result of such an extensive knowledge that enables Sass to make a convincing addition to the literature on comprehensive schooling.

As such, this book is also of a broader public interest. In our current political

climate, where publications in line with a conservative educational discourse present imaginative and reductionist arguments about the role of progressive education, constructivists, left-wing educationalists and postmodernism in the rise of comprehensive schooling, the rich historical account of this book is certainly a sight for sore eyes. It is for sure not a cure for such politically, rather than empirically, based historical narratives, but it can hopefully function as some kind of palliative.

I do also hope that Sass's book can offer a stimulus for further research into the complex history of comprehensive schooling. Apart from additional comparative studies, I would especially hope to see further work on the local level along the promising lines of Román, Hallsén, Nordin and Ringarp (2015) and Melin (2022).

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