



Beyond school: transnational differentiation and the shifting form of education in world society

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ABSTRACT

In 2014 the European Commission introduced a reform of its previous funding efforts in the realm of education, which grouped them together under a single banner, baptised 'Erasmus+'. The programme offers financial support for projects of transnational networks that are capable of gathering, even if only temporarily, a plurality of organisations, educational and non-educational alike, around a once-only objective, that is not expected to be repeated. Thus far sociologists and anthropologists have dealt with this topic mainly through the lens of individual mobility and identity. While such a conceptual prism allows for important questions on the construction of meaning and changes in social status, it falls short both empirically and theoretically when it comes to understanding how this reformed action programme constitutes a distinct formalisation of education, deviating from the morphogenesis of the national school system. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Niklas Luhmann, this article argues for understanding such Europeanisation of education as a means for growth by internal disjunction. That is: as an internal differentiation of the global education system, which surpasses the limits the former developed in reference to the nation-state, thus resettling and dramatically expanding the limits of what counts as meaningful education.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the funding programme by which the European Union implements its lifelong learning policies and argues that it signals the differentiation of a distinct, transnational education space, which cannot be adequately understood when observed as the mere repetition of national patterns on a higher scale.

During the last decades, the European Commission has introduced several reforms that sought to streamline its growing range of funding programmes in the domain of education. The various funding schemes previously populating its Euro-pantheon (Erasmus, Comenius, Grundtvig, da Vinci) were gradually integrated into a single, comprehensive programme, offering financial support for learning activities both inside and outside of formal education. Today, the European Union's current catch-all financing instrument, baptised 'Erasmus+' in 2014, further breaks down sectoral boundaries, while expanding its

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reach to youth work and even sports. It now funds a wide array of educational activities that range far beyond the institutional limits of school education. The programme offers financial support for projects of transnational networks that are capable of gathering, even if only temporarily, a plurality of organisations, educational and non-educational alike, around a once-only objective, that is not expected to be repeated.

Thus far sociologists and anthropologists have observed the implications of Europe's funding efforts mainly through the lens of individual mobility and identity (inter alia Favell 2008; Fligstein 2008; Papatsiba 2006; Van Mol 2014). While such a conceptual prism allows for important questions on the construction of meaning and changes in social status, it falls short both empirically and theoretically when it comes to grasping how the programme strips away the institutional traits of formal education and reshapes new forms, different from school education. In line with authors who began to understand the Europeanisation of education primarily as part of the crystallisation of a new and distinctive European space (Nóvoa and Lawn 2002; Dale and Robertson 2009), this article offers a theoretical conceptualisation of this reformed action programme and suggests that it constitutes a distinct formalisation of education. The question the article seeks to answer, is what such differentiation entails: what makes the European approach different from mass education via school?

Rather than as a temporary exceptional situation that affects above all the individual participants and their life course, I will denote the ensemble of these educational projects as a form of *transnational education* and investigate how it mirrors, therefore simultaneously mimics and opposes, the morphogenesis of the national school system.¹ In order to demonstrate how such education differs from and appears incongruent with the national conception of education as schooling, I will rely on the theoretical framework of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann.

My argumentation will proceed in three steps. In the first section, I show how Luhmannian system theory understands education as the articulation of a remarkably stable form, which differentiates between instruction and selection. I then indicate by which ensemble of specifications this form obtains its recognisable shape of school education (II). The next section describes how transnational education deviates from that form by bringing into play different re-specifications to establish itself. Transnational education thus appears as a strategy whereby the global education system adds new possibilities for itself, beyond those already present in its national configuration. In line with the tenets of Luhmann's oeuvre, I propose to understand this Europeanisation of education as a means for 'growth by internal disjunction' (Luhmann 1982b, 231). That is: as an internal differentiation of the education system in a global society (Luhmann 1997b), which surpasses the limits the latter developed in reference to the nation-state, thus resettling and dramatically expanding the boundaries of what is considered meaningful education (III). In the last section, I will outline how such an evolution relates to a larger, education-transcending evolution that favours social over collective memory (IV).

I. The form of (school) education

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how transnational education constitutes a form of education that deviates from what most sociology is prepared to recognize as

education. In order to make that point, the current section will present in brief how systems theory understands school education. This overview prepares a point of comparison for the next section – a benchmark, one could say, against which the differences of transnational education can become visible. If this section elaborates to some extent on how Luhmann theorises the morphogenesis of modern (school) education, that is because the transnational education I will describe in the next section takes a shape that, although tackling the same problem of reference, appears as its exact opposite – as if it were its inverted mirror reflection, of sorts.

Although notoriously complex and often exceedingly abstract, Luhmann's sociology of education – if not his sociology *tout court* – gains some clarity when its elaboration starts from the historical observation that, in more than one respect, bolsters his entire oeuvre. This observation refers to the occurrence of a semantic upheaval, characterising western Europe since the eighteenth century, whereby a remarkable number of concepts that were used to understand the world and society began to receive a new meaning or were replaced by new ones. In the period between 1750 and 1850, premodern vocabulary slowly transformed into what we now recognise as our modern usage and precisely for this reason it has been described by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck (2002, 1–20) as the 'saddle period'. Old notions such as the state, democracy, freedom or indeed education all gradually shook off the natural constants that had hitherto determined their experience, in favour of new meanings that were capable of expressing a variable, still undetermined, perspective on the future (*cf.* Koselleck 2004). The historicising of the past and the denaturalisation of society went hand in hand. No longer considered as determined by a natural, essential and therefore *invariable* origin, but instead by its own contingent history, society could understand and describe itself as the *variable* outcome of a historical process, leading into a still open future.

The end of substantialist, 'old European' semantics that legitimised the state of affairs by referring to their nature or essence, Luhmann's (1995, 71) analysis of modernity contends, is accompanied by the emergence of functional domains, which had to establish their own legitimacy and internal organisation. For law, it is seen in the demise of natural law, which attributed invariable rights as granted by nature, and in the concomitant emergence of positive, man-made and hence changeable law. In science, empiricism replaces blind faith in the nature of things as declared by religious authority. In politics, the slow rise of democratic suffrage indicates how the exercise of power is no longer determined or legitimised by an indisputable order believed natural but replaced by variable understandings of self-determination. Similar observations can be made for art. Aesthetic pleasure comes to depend on novelty and originality. Correspondingly, the principles of *mimesis* or *imitatio*, the task of faithfully replicating nature, lose importance. It is precisely the concomitance of these two evolutions, a de-naturalisation of society's most central semantics and a structural preference for self-organisation, that allows us to abridge the central issue of Luhmann's systems theory. For how can such systems realise their own unity, when that unity can no longer be understood as nature or a shared origin? How do systems come to be, when no other reason or motivation can be given – except their own?

The unity of the education system

In the ambit of education, these general remarks find their application in the denaturalisation of pedagogical semantics and the emergence of school systems throughout Europe, later gradually expanding into a global phenomenon. The former expressed itself as the retreat of the pedagogical convictions that understood education as guiding the child's development towards the perfection it strives for by nature through the prevention of corruption or moral decay. New educational semantics, gaining ground in the eighteenth century, gradually lost their reference to nature and eventually led to the conviction that children should be educated without any regard for their origin. So, here too, the question arises of how such education can establish itself when the child's natural dispositions no longer serve as its invariable foundation. The question here too is then how 'education brings about its own unity' (Luhmann 1992, 109).

Luhmann's answer to that question points to the distinctive ambition of modern education to change persons, rather than accompany them to their natural perfection. It is this intention that symbolises the unity of the crystallising education system and ultimately sets it apart from mere socialisation.² Luhmann indeed draws a firm distinction between the inevitable and continuous processes of socialisation on the one hand and education on the other. The former maintains too strong ties with its immediate context and is hence unfit to convey knowledge beyond its social origin and thus also to organise itself systematically. The shift from context-dependent socialisation to intentional education thus corresponds to the well-known evolution by which education is transferred from the household to schools. This move from endo- to exo-socialisation, as Ernest Gellner (1983) dubbed it, does not of course mean that intentional socialisation cannot develop in the household or elsewhere outside of the context of school education. What Luhmann does claim, however, is that historically such socialisation lacked the capacity to organise itself into a system that transcends its 'local' significance (Luhmann 2004b, 117). As I shall argue in the next sections, precisely on this point transnational education seems to be different.

For our current argument, however, the primary importance of the pedagogical intention is that it unavoidably brings its own outcome in sight. Ever since education is understood as intentional change (instead of mere moral vigilance over what was deemed the child's good nature), its outcome can be compared to initial intentions and thus invariably results in an evaluation of its success – or lack thereof, of course, since pedagogical intentions obviously do not guarantee pedagogical success. On the contrary, the intention to educate leads straight into the difficulty that Luhmann and Schorr (2000) have indicated as its technological deficit. With this unusual terminology, they sought to point out how precisely the educational intention inevitably raises questions about its effectiveness. According to systems theory, the pupil's mind is situated beyond education's reach, based on a strict division between communicative and mental processes, constituting each other's environment. The ambition of educational communication to effectively change the pupil's consciousness thus appears as the aspiration to reach beyond its own communicative limits, in the perspective of systems theory. Precisely this structural impossibility makes school education possible: its distinctive traits are all meant to tackle the structural impossibility of its ambitions. Systematic education is, as Luhmann summarises, the 'evolutionarily improbable (from the point of view of socialisation actually impossible,

randomly successful) achievement', that is enabled rather than obstructed by its structural deficit (Luhmann 2004c, 97).

The 'intentionalisation of socialisation' (Luhmann 2004c, 94) inevitably brings the evaluation of pedagogical outcomes to the fore. In school education, the pupil's career appears inextricably bound to the evaluation of his or her results. Precisely for this reason, Giancarlo Corsi (1996) has pointed to the pedagogical intention as the unity of the difference between *instruction* and *selection* and designates this distinction as the *form* of the education system. For the education system, 'selection and instruction cannot be separated and every attempt to attenuate the pressure of selection can only result in increased uncertainty regarding the planning of the instruction' (Corsi 1996, 93). With the notion of form, neither the invariable essence nor the goal nor the cause of all educational processes is expressed. It rather summarises this necessary double perspective by which the education system observes the world and thus constructs itself: it amounts at once to developing the potential change of each pupil and the thus created necessity of subsequently evaluating the success of the pedagogical intervention.

The specificity of classroom interaction

As a symbolic generalisation the modern pedagogical intention lacks specificity. Its blank form does not yet specify what educational communication will ensue (Luhmann 1992, 113). Briefly, it is a self-realised indeterminacy, which determines nothing yet but the possibility of its own perpetuation. In the tradition of systems theory, generalisation therefore goes along with *re-specification* (Luhmann 1995, 14).³ Luhmann distinguished four ways in which the education system specifies its generalised intention into a determined form: a) the pupil as the centre of the pedagogical intention; b) his or her asymmetrical relationship with a professional teacher, who mediates autonomously between educational success and failure; c) an organisational mode that, by means of its decisions, arranges inclusion and dictates how time and space are to be divided and repeated; d) a planned, revisable curriculum, which specifies what is to be taught to the person it wishes to educate.

To grasp the ensemble of these re-specifications, Luhmann (2002, 119–121) advanced the notion of *classroom interaction*. The conglomerate term gives expression to the mechanism by which the education system differentiates itself as an autonomous function system of modern society. Since then, education can speak its very own language, as it were. As a function system, it can claim society-wide competence for conveying the knowledge considered necessary to lead our lives and code the outcome of interaction as successful or not. Classroom interaction denotes how school education creates the therefore necessary space – its horizon of meaning, in phenomenological vocabulary. It thus enables an almost infinite range of possibilities for itself, whilst simultaneously avoiding arbitrariness. The school class, Luhmann argues, is the 'technical' invention to improve the odds of an interaction that does not end in a merely pleasant get-together, where anything goes, but results in the much more improbable outcome that the persons involved learn what was planned. Through this technique, education thus articulates at once a specific indeterminacy *and* its determination. The notion of classroom interaction encapsulates both: the structural indeterminacy of educational interaction *and* the pedagogical re-specifications (the teacher profession,

the school organisation) determined to overcome its otherwise whimsical course and unpredictable outcomes. For education to become systematic, it is thus reliant on this curious, never really merging amalgam: ‘a peculiar symbiosis’ (Luhmann 2002, 121) between interaction systems that require decision-making (on who teaches what, when, to whom and so on) and organisation systems, to which that decision-making is delegated, but which always face the difficulty of the fickle volatility of the former. As much holds for the professional role of the teacher, who must also cope with the lack of transparency of the interaction in which he or she intervenes.⁴ School education, in sum, is catalysed by its attempt to control intransparency (Luhmann 1997d). The morphogenesis of its particular social order rests on a double opacity that compels it to find solutions (Luhmann and Schorr 1986): by relying on interaction as a means to address the deficient transparency of understanding and so verify the attainment of its pedagogical intentions, as much as by the creation of a professional role and organisation type to tackle the intransparency of that very interaction.

What emerges from this interplay between re-specifications is the distinctive shape of an education system that thus somehow overcomes the transience of the ever-slipping away present of the pedagogical interaction, granting it recognisability and repeatability. Both are accomplishments of a system – or more precisely of a *form* of education, by which the education system has catalysed its own self-organisation.⁵ Especially when formulated as such, Luhmann’s notion of classroom interaction closely resembles what Guy Vincent (1982, p. 529) once summarised with a rather fortunate term as *la forme scolaire* or the school form.

While the emergence of such a form is a phenomenon whose historical development is undeniably closely linked with the birth and success of the European nation-state (cf. Luhmann 1990c), school education has since established itself far beyond Europe. As we know, not in the least since John W. Meyer et al. (1977, 1992) revived institutionalism, school education became a *global* occurrence, whose impressive growth over the last century even largely abstracts from regional differences or the idiosyncrasies of local administrations. The global diffusion of school education has enabled and fuelled the rise of international comparisons, now often through cyclically repeated rankings, which give rhythm to a worldwide spread of new educational semantics (Schriewer 2000) and encourage a vivid practice of policy-borrowing between nation-states (Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow 2012). Next to such global isomorphisms, however, the transnational context of global education also offers scope for other, new and intriguing developments. It creates a space, I will argue in the next section, where the re-specifications that characterise the national school form lose their significance and are complemented, yes even replaced by new specifications able to take over their function.

II. The form and re-specifications of transnational education

The purpose of the ensuing section is to overview how what I have labelled transnational education above establishes its own unity, but does so in a different fashion, which is clearly distinguishable from classroom interaction. Here I return hence to my initial thesis, namely that Europeanisation can be considered as an *internal disjunction* of a now global education system. In order to illustrate how far Europe’s form of transnational education deviates from the school form, I draw upon observational data

obtained during each step of the annual cycle that characterises the life of the Erasmus+ programme: each year, a call for projects is launched, accompanied by information sessions provided (mostly) by the national agencies tasked with handling the implementation of the programme. These agencies subsequently organise the selection procedure, train the experts who will evaluate the received applications and contractualise those projects receiving funding. In this section, I propose a theoretical conceptualisation of empirical data acquired during such lifecycle. This conceptualisation is informed by participant observation in the selection procedure and in funded projects, in addition to using data from interviews with participants, officials, evaluating experts and policy-makers. Documentary data, pertaining to the programme's regulation and the rich history of EU policy texts, are also used.

The previously introduced functionalist tandem of generalisation and re-specification provides a valuable instrument to measure the disparity between the re-specifications of school education and Europe's formalisation of transnational education. Starting from the common problem by which all education recognises itself – the intention to transmit knowledge deemed useful for someone's life course (Luhmann 2002, 153–165) – it allows to trace out with precision how this generalised symbol is re-specified very differently in the current context of Europe's ever-emergent statehood within world society. The difference between generalisation and re-specification enables a comparison that does not mechanically assume analogies between today and the historical context of the nation-state. Instead, it allows to track down a different morphogenesis, with incongruent and sometimes even conflicting solutions to a common problem of reference. It also allows to show what new problems these different solutions bring about or, when solutions are lacking, which problems might ultimately rear their heads again. What thus comes into sight is the growing differentiation of an educational praxis that systematically addresses the same problem of reference as the school system but necessarily does so with *different* means, not least to avoid its own unconstitutionality.⁶

Legitimation by evaluation procedure

At heart the previously indicated form of the education system – the unity of instruction and selection – expresses a *temporal* difference. When the purpose is to evaluate the success of its outcome, instruction necessarily *precedes* evaluation and the ensuing selection. There is no egg without a chicken: teaching necessarily comes before evaluation can occur. This basic temporal sequence structures the pedagogical interaction. It is used to articulate time into rigidly defined periods (*cf.* Luhmann 1990a) – yearly cohorts or the currently more fashionable course modules – by which school education is able to regulate inclusion. Passing on to the next school year or module is then as a rule a matter of having satisfactorily completed the previous one.

In the case of transnational education, the situation is quite different. Inclusion into any of the myriad of education projects Europe decides to fund is first and foremost made dependent on a formal **evaluation procedure** that subjects not the instruction or its eventual outcome to assessment, but the pedagogical intentions *themselves*. Rather than relying on evaluation to verify learning outcomes *a posteriori*, this *ex ante* evaluation seeks to limit the arbitrariness of what can occur in future pedagogical interactions and in that regard operates as a functional equivalent for school's many tests and

exams. Although obviously very different, both forms of evaluation address the same basic problem of avoiding that ‘anything goes’ within the context of educational interaction. In transnational education, arbitrariness is addressed before it can manifest itself in pedagogical interaction by actively evaluating the intention itself and, as I will expand upon later, by subsequently transforming it into legal obligations. For now, it should be noted that in this reversal of the form of school education, the evaluation procedure now precedes instruction and thus transforms both. The implications of this formal inversion merit some attention.

First, it is striking how the temporal difference between instruction and evaluation returns *within* the evaluation procedure, but inevitably in a much more complex and paradoxical shape: as the difference between the instruction in a still unforeseeable *future present* and the evaluation of the already *present future* (Luhmann 1993, 73), contained as a promise in usually lengthy project proposals (*cf.* Besio, 2014). The evaluation of educational projects is confined to the proposals and is hence always an evaluation with limited vision. Since it cannot base its assessment on actual outcomes, precisely because it now precedes educational practice, the evaluation necessarily limits itself to the already present future written down in the project proposal. It can only evaluate this as if it were a faithful description of a possible but not (yet) existing present. By necessity assuming one to be the other, the evaluation assesses essentially the fictional expectations (Beckert 2016) that the project entertains regarding its own future course. Educational evaluation hence becomes a quixotical exercise in the exegesis of written fiction, which results in the promotion of the latter’s textual qualities, such as novelty, coherence and comprehensiveness (*cf.* Searle 1975) as proxies for the relevance and plausibility of the projected instruction. As far as the evaluation can establish, a good project is nothing more than a well-written proposal. Evaluation thus becomes a prognosis by means of narrative standards and, interestingly enough, in this way, repetition is excluded: proposals cannot merely copy and repeat previous projects, but inevitably – and so, as in the paradoxical conformity of fashion – need to deviate from them in order to prove their own necessity (*cf.* Esposito 2011).

Secondly, it should not escape notice that however fictional the intentions might be, this evaluation of textual qualities is rooted firmly in the reality of bureaucratic procedure, carried out by European and decentralised national agencies, which provides the selection with its own legitimacy (Luhmann 1997c).⁷ In a typical circular logic, the selection is thus itself justified by the future educational activities, which are in turn determined by the preceding selection. In other words, while the selection process appeals to specific values, such as innovation or the sharing of good practices, its actual legitimacy is realised purely by the circularity of the procedure it relies on.

This bureaucratic ‘proceduralisation’ of educational norms (De Munck and Verhoeven 1992) adds more than its own legitimacy to the practice of transnational education. The addition of an evaluation phase *ex ante* also introduces a new role position for transnational education: the education **expert**. Typically, the amorphous, semi-professional role position of such an expert is, strictly speaking, not unambiguously attributable to either the administrative bureaucracy (*cf.* Teubner 2003) or the education system itself. Precisely as an ‘excluded third’, the expert is expected to cover a supposedly neutral position (*cf.* Nassehi et al., 2007). Experts participate in the procedure set out by the political administration and in the educational selection

process. They occupy a position within each *simultaneously* and thus act as a coupling mechanism between both. Precisely as such an included outside observer, the expert is asked to observe and balance the mutual expectations of each, both the bureaucracy and the projects seeking funding. Such coordination is to be understood above all as a matter of time. Experts allow for the autonomous and possibly diverging existence of both, by temporarily synchronising education with policy and vice versa. They are the intermediary institution (Hartmann and Kjaer 2015) that structurally couples them together. By limiting their relevant environments to each other, the evaluation increases for both education and bureaucracy their mutual receptiveness – Luhmann (1990b, 40) speaks of irritability – to the events, needs and idiosyncrasies observed in each other's development. This increased susceptibility finds perhaps its clearest expression in the central principle of evaluation, i.e. proportionality (European Commission 2018, 11), which invites experts to avoid judgement in absolute terms, in favour of a perspective that takes the varying capacities and potential of the applicants into account.

Transnational disruption

While the evaluation procedure thus legitimises the expert and the selection he or she carries out, education becomes less dependent on the professional legitimacy of the teacher. This might not be the manifest goal, but nonetheless appears to be a function of the selection procedure.⁸ One of the phenomena where this becomes most apparent is the openness of transnational education to organisations different from established educational institutions. Participation is not at all limited to them, but rather tautologically understood as open to 'any organisation or informal group of young people involved in the implementation' (European Commission 2015, 310) of such a transnational project. Much has to do with the given that the transnational education I overview here results from a rather particular kind of policy reform. Its traits are already present in the preamble to the European regulation (1288/2013) establishing Erasmus+.

Bringing formal, non-formal and informal learning together in a single programme should create synergies and foster cross-sectoral cooperation across the various education, training and youth sectors.

The same idea is repeated and extended in the Programme Guide (2015, 8), where the rationale behind the merger of Europe's former funding efforts in the field of education is explained as follows:

Erasmus+ aims at going beyond these programmes, by promoting synergies and cross-fertilisation throughout the different fields of education, training and youth, removing artificial boundaries between the various Actions and project formats, fostering new ideas, attracting new actors from the world of work and civil society and stimulating new forms of cooperation.

Educational reforms traditionally invoke particular values – equality or excellence, more often than not – in order to decide and thus programmatically plan future change via the prospect of new structures (Corsi 2013). When that value, however, becomes innovation itself, as is the case here, novelty means above all dissolving the existing structures that shape the present. The Europeanisation of education is then first and foremost the disjunction of

a negative form, shaped by the ‘playful’ disruption of the differences that structure national education systems (Esposito 2013). In the reform discussed here, such a disruption does not of course so much imply the actual dissolution of these national school systems, but rather that transnational education itself is established through *indifference to their differentiation*. No lack of sympathy is suggested with such an expression. It only means to convey how neither the internal differentiation of the national education system nor the difference it establishes with its outside world necessarily matter for the organisation of transnational education. In transnational education projects, learning activities can (and do, but are not obliged to) involve nursery schools together with universities, universities with NGOs, enterprises with youth organisations: neither of these differences determines either a pre-set boundary or a necessity by which transnational education is limited in its possibilities.

I can merely mention here how the European semantics of (lifelong) learning have been instrumental to the creation and demarcation of this indeterminacy (Simons and Masschelein 2008). The more important point to underline, however, is that the reform limits itself to the dissolution of the differences that structure national educational systems. The resulting structural underdetermination is ultimately left to be solved by each project individually (*cf.* Luhmann 2011, 11). The **project** is indeed the means by which an almost formless indeterminacy again obtains a determinate shape. By restraining the emerged educational possibilities into series of distinct decisions – on who to include, with what purpose and within what time-frame – projects re-specify the pedagogical intentions of transnational education system into concrete plans for the future. They are the decision programmes or plans by which the present is expected to be purposefully programmed towards desired goals.

The limits of contractual steering

When understood as ‘programmed time’ (*cf.* Luhmann 2000, 272–274), any educational project is inevitably prone to the risk of its own failure. Like any goal-oriented planning, projects attempt to control time. But as Robert Merton knew long ago, decision plans are what we now call ‘performative’ and therefore often get under the feet of the very future they promise. As public predictions of the future, even the best projects ‘are frequently not sustained precisely because the prediction has become a new element in the concrete situation, thus tending to change the initial course’ (1936, 903–904). Therefore, the decisions by which the project is constituted could all possibly spawn unplanned consequences and thus prevent the project from reaching its goals in time or even from reaching them at all. To this one might also add, more trivially, that project proposals hoping to make a positive impression during the evaluation phase often tend to oversell themselves and thus end up making inflated promises. The risk of project failure is hence the other, inevitable face of the planning central to all transnational education. The formal *contractualisation* to which all these projects are subjected prior to funding might then appear as a means to regain some control – in particular to the executive agencies issuing the contracts. It is, however, easy to discern that these contracts, in this case labelled grant agreements, serve a different, double function.

The first is to deflate the projected future back into a workable present. Grant agreements de-futurise by introducing a certain *indifference* towards the project’s uncertain future. Unlike risk management, they do not pretend to address problems by flexibility, but

lay down legal responsibilities that remain unassailably valid obligations (*cf.* Luhmann 2004a, 165–166), save well-defined exceptions. Indifference thus means here above all obstinate invariability. Grant agreements thereby anticipate risk: they pre-establish the obligations for all involved parties when difficulties arise, much like any contract. But as they stipulate liability only for carrying out the project, not for obtaining its planned results, the focus subtly switches from the promised future output towards the actual input.⁹ Instead of a means to a goal, the agreement redefines the projects' planned activities as an ensemble of conditions and consequences, regardless of the actual outcomes of the activities. This move from purposive goal programming to conditional programming by contract (*cf.* Willke 1986) makes it possible to shift focus from the uncertainty of the project's realisation to the sobering certainty of legal obligations (*cf.* Luhmann 2004a, 165–166). And hence, perhaps contrary to expectations, contractualisation allows projects to fail successfully. Even though contractual rules do not steer the educational reality of projects, but only the legal consequences if conflict should arise, the agreement provides legal conditions for success that apply even when the project does not live up to its own expectations. In this way, even when not all grandiose promises are fully realised, one can still claim (retrospectively, in the event of dispute) to have fully satisfied all contractual obligations. Contractual juridification therefore offers a considerable advantage. It relieves projects from actually delivering the promised future imposed on them, as long as they manage to respect their contractual duties. Conversely, those promised futures remain available as a horizon of possibilities, providing lofty justifications for new and different future projects.

A second and not unrelated function of this juridification by contract is that it establishes a common point of reference between the participant organisations involved in the project, who thus form a **contractual partnership**. Many of the characterising traits of such partnerships have been dealt with extensively in the past decades (among others Granovetter 1973; White 1992; Castells 1996), not least within the framework of systems theory itself (*cf.* Fuchs 2001; Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen 2008; Teubner 2011). When, however, contracts are issued by a public administration, as is the case here, the relevance of a specific characteristic merits particular attention. I refer here to the role partnerships play in the *dispersion* of the political (*cf.* Popkewitz 2003) and the latter's wish to institutionalise change – or not to institutionalise education, as the two amount to the same here. From a political perspective, partnerships do not merely deliver a politically franchised pedagogical service. They do not simply fulfil a political order. Instead, they are considered to share responsibility for the creation of the promised future (*cf.* Knudsen & Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2014). Partnerships are not mere vessels carrying the policy but incorporate the very policy itself. 'From the perspective of the political system, the partners in a partnership are part of the political,' as Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (2008, 115) summarised.

Beyond control

From the standpoint of the education system, however, partnerships have a very different implication. What starts as a political attempt to minimise the difference between decision-making and implementation, even between education and society at large, inevitably amounts to the generation of new educational differences (*cf.* Luhmann 1990d). Hence,

educational frontiers are resettled, and new boundaries are explored. Within the education system, Europe's paradoxical obligation of freedom opens a space of possibilities that must find a pedagogical solution. When that solution relies on hybrid, ephemeral and loosely coupled partnerships, rather than educational organisations and professional teachers, the pedagogical interaction tends to change. It appears less articulated by the role difference between professional practitioner and client and more by practices or situations considered external or foreign to the education system, which are now claimed as its internal variants or modalities. Hence, work can appear as learning (job shadowing, internships), but so can game and play (non-formal education) or even simply living together (intercultural learning or citizenship skills). With these and other modalisation techniques (*cf.* Esposito 1987), the education system seems to respond to the dispersion of political decision-making with an expansive resettlement of the boundaries establishing what counts as meaningful education. The modalisation of education's environment prompts the genesis of new meaning, which is characterised by the fact that the relationship between education and its environment is now explicitly conceived as a 'relation' and appears internally accessible and utilisable as such (*cf.* Luhmann 1982b, 347). Via partnerships, the relation to the environment thus becomes central to transnational education's self-organisation.

This complicit dynamic between an unrestrictive but nevertheless evaluating and contracting authority and the unpredictable outcomes of a thus self-establishing system, which that authority holds responsible for programming itself towards change, quite obviously echoes what has been indicated elsewhere, in other theoretical traditions, as (neoliberal) governance or as benchmarking or management by objectives. Such formulae give apt expression to the ways in which statehood re-organises itself to wield power, often by means of a more cognitive, rather than legal-normative instrumentation (*cf.* Willke 2016). But because they maintain a strictly hierarchical perspective, such expressions fall short when it comes to appreciating the paradoxical character of the relationship between education and European statehood. They formulate a simple subjugation that therefore necessarily remains blind to the functional autonomy gained in this hardly novel relationship of state dependence (*cf.* Luhmann 1996). Via the above re-specifications, a system of transnational education is forced into the 'freedom and the autonomy of self-regulation by indifference to its environment' (Luhmann 1995, 183). Europe can launch funding calls and finance project proposals, it can regulate and propose endless reforms of its own regulation. But as an organisation of the global political system, it can nevertheless not teach or, more to the point, make participants learn. For that to happen, Europe needs to rely on projects carried out by partnerships, which on their turn address learners in the hope of changing them intentionally into persons able to participate in society. One does not get very far in explaining how that happens, if these re-specifications of the pedagogical intention are understood as mere matters of global governance or political decision-making, instead of those of a crystallising subsystem of education that re-specify in novel ways the pedagogical intention to change people.

After enumerating these re-specifications so as to highlight their divergence from the school form, two last observations are necessary to avoid misunderstanding. First, it should be made clear that Europeanisation cannot here equate to a sweeping regional convergence, neatly harmonising the jumble of national education systems on the Old Continent. As a distinct segment of the global education system, the differentiation of

transnational education is not defined by the territorial borders that structure political decision-making (cf. Luhmann 1982a, 240), but by the departure it marks from the formal traits of school education. This means that the issue at stake here is therefore *not* a gradually eroding of differences into European uniformity, but the increasing divergence between the form of school education and what I have labelled transnational education. For this very reason the epithet ‘transnational’ is preferable to alternatives such as ‘multi-’ or ‘international’ education, since the issue is not at all the plurality of nationalities or their possible homogenisation, but the *transcendence-by-transgression* of the educational context of the nation-state. As Poul F. Kjaer (2007, 374) commented, the regulation pursued in the EU is *de facto* global regulation. That holds true for educational matters as well, where adapting to the transnational form established by the Erasmus+ programme increases the education system’s capacity to operate globally, well beyond its initial, nationally defined context.¹⁰

Secondly, it needs stressing that considering such an internal disjunction as an omen for the imminent colonisation of the school system impedes the observation of a much simpler truth: that this disjunction does not diminish but adds itself to the education system, thus contributing to the latter’s seemingly endless and unstoppable *growth* (cf. Luhmann 2012, 225).¹¹ The education system, much in line with other domains, developed on the basis of its pedagogical intention a claim to universal competence, which increasingly collides with the limits that the school form imposes. Especially when education understands its pedagogical intention as conveying the ability to learn, there is no inherent limit (Luhmann and Schorr 2000, 100) to when or where such learning can occur, nor to what themes or skills it should encompass or who it should involve. The re-specifications of the school form that allowed the education system to develop increasingly appear as a constraint on what education might achieve, if it were not hampered by them. In other words, the limits imposed by school education collide with the claim to universal competence the education system developed on the basis of its pedagogical intention. Seen from this perspective, the Europeanisation of education no longer appears merely as a means to pursue the realisation of an emergent regional statehood, but also as the process by which a global education system profits from the policy issued by such statehood in order to justify and prolong its own expansion.

III. Between ignorance and oblivion

The ambition of this article has been to bring together three different elements in order to expose their mutual usefulness. First, I aligned with authors who observe the Europeanisation of education as the process in which a distinct educational space crystallises in close ties with the establishment of an emergent transnational statehood. Secondly, I have sought to relate this topic to the discussion, particularly lively among francophone sociologists (cf. Maulini and Perrenoud 2005), on the morphological traits of (school) education. I have presented deviation from this *forme scolaire* as that which characterises the Europeanisation of education above all. Thirdly, the too often neglected theoretical framework of systems theory was introduced as a means to grasp more precisely how this deviation distances itself from national school education. From this perspective, the funding efforts of the European Commission were approached as a catalyst for the differentiation of a transnational form of education.

Europeanisation, hence, equates to an internal disjunction of the global education system, reliant on its own techniques of self-organisation that thus resettle the limits of what counts as meaningful within that education system.

To conclude, let us return a last time to the difference between generalisation and re-specification. We have seen how modern education obtains distinguishable forms that can be shaped via diverging series of re-specifications. Conversely, it has been highlighted how its morphogenetical evolution results from an amorphous intention, which symbolises in a generalised manner the function of modern education to change who it instructs. When abstracted from its various and historically varying re-specifications, education can indeed be defined as set out to address the following basic problem: how to change people intentionally into persons able to participate in society. Especially the last part of this functional definition merits some final attention, since, whilst taking up its problem of reference, education also develops the premises necessary for an otherwise highly improbable societal constellation, namely one buoyed up by the shared and mutual expectation of collective participation. Not only do we continuously address other people under the assumption that they are educated – and presume they share that same assumption towards us – but doing so we also relate in specific ways to each other which would be highly unlikely if not for that very assumption. The particular function of the education system is therefore not only to provide individuals with specific knowledge, skills or competences, but to establish the premises for a societal context beyond the education system, where one can silently assume those skills and competences to be present and choose social relationships accordingly. Nobody walks into a bakery expecting to obtain legal aid. Education thus alleviates the double contingency of our sociality, as it provides premises that one can assume to exist ‘within himself and/or within others’ (Luhmann and Schorr 2000, 34).

As the German historian Aleida Assmann (1993, 25) has pointed out, this specific understanding of education’s function relies on the same pedagogical ideals that led to the institution of school education in early modernity. Via idealisations of individual internalisation and national communality, they equated education with the appropriation of nationally defined cultural canons and so expressed a mode of societal self-understanding, most famously expressed in Émile Durkheim’s oeuvre as collective consciousness. The *historicisation* of the past, enabling the rise of modern education in the first place, thus historically corresponded to attempts to organise socialisation as mental *internalisation*, driven by ideals of human perfection, and did so within the context of a nationally defined society (*nationalisation*). The question now is, however, how transnational education relates to this state of affairs and if here too it implies a caesura. Again, such a question should not conjure up the image of a pending usurpation of national culture under Brussels’ aegis. Rather, it points to the hypothesis that with the changing formal re-specifications of education a different social context is correlated, which adds itself to nationally defined conceptions whilst simultaneously being at odds with them. For it is clear that this transnational variant of education also seeks to organise the conveyance of knowledge deemed useful for the life course of its participants (*cf.* Luhmann 1997a) – and of course has itself significantly contributed to the introduction of that very notion. But what societal constellation does it so help to arrange? What social fabric is prepared by a transnational subsystem that, despite all its ambitions, is still very far removed from a situation where every person is included and

so every person can assume that others are too? What societal premises are created when such universalism is excluded and replaced by a rather different understanding of universality, stretching from toddlers, over the vast variety of adult life up to elderly seniors? And what kind of sociality is to be reconciled with the aversion from repetition that transnational education likes to profess, preferring a myriad of different, singular and never-to-be repeated projects over the cyclically repeated curricula of school education?

There is of course no definitive answer possible to such questions – only one that seeks to gauge the current situation – but if anything, one can attempt to characterise such transnational sociality by linking it to the two other, related processes – historicisation and internalisation – already indicated by Assmann.

The first relates to the temporality in which national education emerged. As already touched upon above, transnational projects aim for a different strategy when attempting to master and manage time. Unlike national curricula, which seek to establish what the past can teach to future generations (*cf.* Forquin 2008, 122), transnational education ventures beyond such idealisation of the past. It does not revive and rearrange past knowledge in order to project history into the future, but instead consists of projects that exploit the unknown and unknowable character of that future, deemed risky and in need of educational intervention, in order to carve out an educational space for themselves.¹² Transnational education is hence an exercise in the *futurisation* of the present (*cf.* Luhmann 1976): it strengthens our experience of the future as a horizon of endless possibilities, thus increasing the openness of the present to a plethora of different options for pedagogical interaction. Transnational education therefore does not depend on the authority of past wisdom, but on our *ignorance* of an elusive future that always escapes us. In contrast to the past pedagogical ideals of human perfection, such ignorance – and not knowledge – constitutes the infinite value that spurs the need for more transnational education. The problem is no longer the impossible task of knowing everything (*cf.* Schwanitz 2006), but the endless learning possibilities that emerge in anticipation of a future of which we remain ineluctably ignorant.¹⁴

Although the anticipation of an uncertain future may very well provide the educational present with an inexhaustible reservoir of possibilities, the resulting hyper-variability of projects certainly comes at a steep price. Like any project-based activity, transnational education pays for the extremely high variety of its planned objectives with the continuous risk of *oblivion*. Most projects that have run their course are forgotten, even when they might contain results of potential use to others. To counter such a risk, transnational education seeks to memorise its results and so to outlive the projects' inevitable ephemerality. How such memory proposes its own regulation of remembrance and forgetting opens many interesting routes for further analysis (*cf.* Esposito 2008), but the most noteworthy one here is undoubtedly that it is not understandable as individual appropriation. As a system that cannot presuppose its own collective character, transnational education does not idealise internalisation as a means for socialisation. Instead, it relies on different procedures designed to preserve information, in a form accessible to others. Through a variety of dissemination techniques, especially privileging digital platforms, memory is *externalised*.¹³ It thus establishes a sociality that escapes the all too simple bifurcation between either single individuals or communal collective, in favour of a social memory (*cf.* Luhmann 2012, 352–358) *sui generis* that, although available to all, is constituted largely independently of whether it is collectively

shared or not. In this sense, transnational education reflects much more closely than school education the traits of our current world society, which is not a collective, but a social system constituted by the contingent co-existence of autonomous and ever-expanding communicative realms. The question is therefore maybe not whether and how transnational education mirrors its national counterpart, but rather whether and for how long school education can avoid slavishly reflecting the stirring shapes of this new form.

Notes

1. Rather than referring to Margaret Archer's elaboration of the notion, morphogenesis is used in reference to cybernetic tradition (as in Krippendorff 1984) and in particular to Luhmann's understanding of the creation of forms as the emergent process that moulds an indistinct range of possibilities into a distinctive shape (Luhmann 1999). Morphogenetic processes, hence, denote then above all differentiation processes: they 'use differences, not goals, values, or identities, to build up emergent structures' (Luhmann 1990e, p. 179).
2. As Claudio Baraldi and Giancarlo Corsi explain in their introductory work *Niklas Luhmann: Education as a Social System* (2017), 'intention is *not* meant as a causal factor produced in the teacher's *consciousness*. The symbol "intention to educate" fulfils its function when it is based on a communication system. It makes it possible to describe education as a communication system which is compatible with many different states of consciousness of teachers and pupils' (p. 52, my italics).
3. Cf. Charles Ackerman & Talcott Parsons (1966) and Luhmann (1995, pp. 327–331) for a general elaboration; for the application of this theoretical scheme to the domain of education, see Luhmann (2002, pp. 142–167) and Thomas Kurtz (2004).
4. The professional ethic of teachers, with its characterising idealisations regarding the nature and addressees of their work, primarily serves this purpose. As Raf Vanderstraeten (2004) spells out Luhmann's provocative stance, its function is to motivate 'professionals who do not know how to be successful' (pp. 267–268), thus rendering more probable professional interventions that otherwise would in all likelihood not take place.
5. Cf. Corsi (1992, p. 283 n20).
6. The constitutional necessity that I indicate here refers to the well-known principle of subsidiarity as expressed in Art. 165 (4) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which unequivocally states that the content and organisation of education remain the responsibility of its member states. For an elaboration on the link between constitutions and the form of systems, I refer to the oeuvre of Gunther Teubner (2016).
7. For an official description of this procedure, cf. the Erasmus+ programme (2015, pp. 237–252) and assessment guides (2018).
8. The difference between goal and function is most succinctly grasped by Luhmann's laconic reply to the question, once used to help out his students asking for a concrete example, what the function of a table is: 'that you can stick chewing gum underneath it' (quoted in Rammstedt 1999, p. 17).
9. Cf. Erasmus+ Model Grant Agreement (2018), Art 2.1.1. Regarding the results, the agreement limits itself to the definition of their authorship and the regulation of the rights of use.
10. Cf. Regulation (EU) 1288/2013 establishing Erasmus+. For explicit stress on its global character, see Article 1(4) thereof: 'The Programme shall include an international dimension aimed at supporting the Union's external action, including its development objectives, through cooperation between the Union and partner countries.'
11. For an elaboration and empirical application of this claim, cf. Vanderstraeten (1999).
12. Or as it has been formulated by its political mandate, 'Europe's education and training systems need to adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment. They will have to offer learning and training opportunities tailored to target groups at different stages of their lives: young people,

unemployed adults and those in employment who are at risk of seeing their skills overtaken by rapid change' (European Council 2000).

13. Next to the Commission's own online Erasmus+ Project Results platform, there are also eTwinning and School Education Gateway, which both mimic more common and popular social media.
14. The relationship between time and the shifting form of education is the central theme of a forthcoming special issue in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, guest-edited by Mathias Decuyper and myself. See in particular Mangez & Vanden Broeck (2020) and Vanden Broeck (2020).

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