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international organisations, scientism and the governance of education

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International organisations established within the post–World War II multilateral order have played a central role in establishing a worldview grounded in rationality and science, with profound and enduring consequences for education. Notwithstanding the idealistic underpinnings of the post-war era, the undue elevation of scientific methods and their uncritical extension to other social domains – a phenomenon conceptualised here as "scientism" – was a central feature of this epistemic shift. Drawing on critical and feminist scholarship, this article examines scientism as a central feature of postwar educational governance, arguing that claims to scientific objectivity and neutrality helped legitimise ideologically driven conceptions of modernity, rationality and economic growth. It further identifies military thinking as an important but underexplored influence on education governance. Through historical examples of postwar educational planning informed by military principles, the article traces how modes of thought originating in military research and planning entered the field of education, undermining its potential as an emancipatory project.

Keywords: education, international organisations, OECD, scientism, UNESCO

Introduction

International organisations established within the post–World War II multilateral order have played a central role in advancing a modernist worldview based on rationality and science, with profound and enduring consequences for education. In the post-war era, the seemingly apolitical nature and objectivity of science was mobilised as the foundation of a new world order and "a powerful political resource" (Selcer, 2011, p. 2) to prevent another war. The importance of science is reflected in the title of UNESCO, the international organisation created with an explicit mandate for intellectual affairs, including education – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, where the word "science" was integrated under pressure from the British inter-war scientific community (Toye & Toye, 2010). The mandate of peace and the evocation of "the great and terrible war" is enshrined in UNESCO's constitution. UNESCO's first Director-General Julian Huxley proposed "scientific humanism" as the guiding principle of the organisation and a universal principle for all humanity, which he considered a weapon against "a world of superstition and petty tribalism" (Huxley, 1946, p. 17; see also Sluga, 2010). The scientific community also played an instrumental role in the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), established in 1948 to administer the Marshall Plan. Following its transition to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 1961, the organisation became one of the most influential actors in shaping education policies worldwide (Bürgi, 2017a).

The post-war period was characterised by an unwavering faith in achieving progress by way of scientific and objective reason and technocratic means (Bürgi, 2017a; Tröhler, 2015). Against the background of the experience of World War II and Nazi totalitarianism, science was believed to be neutral and objective, providing the ideal foundation for a cosmopolitan worldview (Sluga, 2010). "Objectivity required a community whose members saw the world from the same perspective" (Selcer, 2011, p. 14). Notwithstanding these idealistic underpinnings, science all too often gave way to scientism, serving what Selcer (2011, p. 16) calls "the oppressive hubris of the high modern state." In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott (1998) compellingly demonstrates how this hubris was reflected in the high-modernist conviction that scientific and technical knowledge could enable the "rational design of social order" (p. 89). "High modernism" is characterised by Scott as confidence in expert knowledge, measurable outcomes, standardisation, and centrally designed solutions. This "technocratic shift" (Tröhler, 2015, p. 750), which international organisations helped disseminate globally, had significant epistemic implications for education, resulting in "a massive reduction in the possibilities and areas of reform" (p. 761). This article argues that "scientism" – the undue elevation of scientific methods and claims to authoritative status, and their uncritical extension to other social domains – was a central feature of this epistemic shift. The article further identifies military thinking as an important, yet underexplored, influence on the development of global education policy. Drawing on critical and feminist scholarship that examines the epistemological assumptions and limitations of the scientistic worldview, the article investigates the historical manifestations of scientism in UNESCO's and the OECD's approach to education. The article is divided in two sections: The first conceptualises scientism; the second traces scientistic approaches through post-World War II educational projects informed by military principles, examining how modes of thought originating in military research and planning entered the governance of education.

What is Scientism?

Scientism has been defined by Eric Voegelin (1948) "as the attempt to treat substance (including man in society and history) as if it were phenomenon" (pp. 463–464). What Voegelin means by "substance" are complex phenomena such as human consciousness, meaning, purpose and morality that are not directly measurable. In contrast, a "phenomenon" is observable and measurable – something that can be quantified or experimentally verified. Scientism differs from science in that it draws on the vocabulary of scientific concepts to advance ideologically driven ideas. Friedrich Hayek (1952) defined scientism as "a mechanical and uncritical application of habits of thought to fields different from those in which they have been formed" (pp. 15–16). Voegelin's and Hayek's writings were profoundly shaped by their experience of totalitarianism, which exploited science to lend an appearance of scientific legitimacy to ideological claims. As argued by Hannah Arendt (1951), "Ideologies are known for their scientific character: they combine the scientific approach with results of philosophical relevance and pretend to be scientific philosophy…" (p. 468).

The creation of international organisations after World War II was built on the ideology of progress, based on Western liberal and capitalist ideas of modernity, rationality and economic growth, and its logic was supposed to be universal (Auld & Elfert, 2024). Drawing on Foucault, feminist scholar Audrey Reeves (2012) argued that "liberal governmentality…does not exclude coercive disciplinary mechanisms, but reactivates them in new configurations" (p. 350). The ideology of progress was underpinned by "the Western imaginary of Universal Man" (Smythe, 2022), or the "complete man" – a key concept advanced in UNESCO's first report on the future of education, *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow* (Faure et al., 1972). While the idea of the "complete man" had a strong humanistic connotation, drawing on existentialist philosophy (Elfert, 2018), the notion

also carried the danger of scientism, as illustrated by this quote:

> The man now emerging is one whose knowledge and means of action have grown to such an extent that the frontiers of what he thinks is possible are infinite. And it is a fact that man today is beginning to be able to control the processes of nature and take responsibility for them, thanks to his knowledge and mastery of scientific laws. (Faure et al., 1972, pp. 153–154)*1*

As Suzanne Smythe (2022) argued from a feminist perspective, drawing on Sylvia Wynter, the "ideal of the 'complete man'" represented a "modernist project to realise Man's destiny at the centre of the universe" (p. 773). In the attempt to find universally applicable principles and solutions, these ideas have contributed to a homogenisation and standardisation of the social world, with grave consequences for education. Scientism reduces reality to observable data and assumes that the methods of the natural sciences – measurement, quantification, and empirical testing – are the only legitimate means of understanding the world, dismissing the deeper situated, embodied and relational dimensions of human experience and knowledge. Feminist scholars have criticised the neutral, objective and disembodied view of reality and proposed an account of knowledge that acknowledges its situated and embodied character, as illustrated by Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of "situated knowledges," and Sandra Harding's (1995) notion of "strong objectivity", an objectivity grounded in the perspectives of marginalised groups rather than the interests of dominant power structures and ideologies.

While scientistic approaches, instruments and methods were postulated as objectively true and valid, they were shaped by a particular group: Western-educated educational planners whose epistemic positions derived from ideologically driven principles, stemming from economics and the military. This problematic epistemic bias is captured in Sandra Harding's (1986) feminist question to science: "Is it possible to use for emancipatory ends sciences that are apparently so intimately involved in Western, bourgeois, and masculine projects?" (p. 9). Feminist scholars have addressed the damaging role of scientism – not only in dismissing less powerful voices, but also in delegitimising embodied, intuitive, and experiential forms of knowledge, and disputed the validity of "value-free" science. As Lowe (1993) put it, "if knowledge is seen as value-free, then the question of who that knowledge serves can never arise" (p. 8).

Another key feature of scientism is the extension of principles associated with a particular field to other fields. In education, the extension of military principles to education and educational institutions was particularly consequential. After World War II "systems analysis", an approach that derived from military research, became a dominant paradigm that permeated the field of social policy. Systems analysis represented "a technique for military decision making developed at the RAND Corporation in the 1940s" (Light, 2003, p. 37) that "grew to become the premier science of military decision making in the cold war" (p. 39). As Ida Hoos (1983) observed,

> systems analysis and the family of techniques to which it is related penetrated into and pervaded thought processes to the point that there was created a "management syndrome," i.e., the notion that all human affairs could be managed, and that by utilizing the tools of management science we would solve society's problems

"rationally." (p. xii)

An overlapping development was the "imperialist expansion of modern economics" (Fourcade, 2010, p. 92) in the post-World War II period, when economics were elevated to the status of science and applied to education, a field previously considered non-economic. As analysed by Foucault (2008), applying human capital theory to education enabled the economists, such as Gary Becker and Theodore W. Schultz, "to apply economic analyses to completely new fields and domains" (p. 227). Central to the economistic shift was the rise of the "value-free development expert" (Berman, 1979, p. 161). Tröhler (2015) has analysed the extension of the "culture of evidence" that derived from the medical field to the social sciences, including education. Against this background, the following section examines educational experiments undertaken by international organisations that reflected scientistic thinking and drew on military principles. Despite their shortcomings, these experiments left a lasting imprint on education systems around the world.

Post-War Scientistic Experiments in Education Inspired by Military Principles

In the 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by a strong belief in social engineering and planning approaches, social scientific methods were endowed with objectivity and neutrality previously attributed to the natural sciences. This period saw the building of an international governance and development infrastructure, where education was given a key role as part of the American and Western foreign policy strategies in the context of the Cold War. Educational planning emerged as a new field, and a new cadre of educational planning experts was trained through specialised programmes in educational planning and related fields, including the economics of education, comparative education and business management, at leading American universities. The big American Foundations, such as the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, played a significant role in promoting these programmes, investing substantial resources in the development and expansion of social science departments and in methods presented as "ideologically neutral" (Coombs, 1970, p. 14; see also Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). Quite a few of these experts had held military positions during World War II that had shaped their thinking.

UNESCO's first educational flagship programme, "Fundamental education", was led by John Bowers, a former military officer, who "tended to use military terms, such as the 'attack' or 'assault' on ignorance and poverty" (Elfert, 2018, p. 68). As stated by Julian Huxley, Western education was framed as bringing scientific enlightenment to those who lived in "ignorance" and "darkness" (Huxley, 1946, pp. 17, 38). Although the fundamental education programme aspired to serve the needs of local communities, Watras (2007) considered the "scientific way of thinking" ingrained in the programme a "tragic flaw" (p. 71).

In the OECD and its predecessor, the OEEC, the links between military principles and education during the Cold War were even closer. In 1958, as a reaction to the launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union, the Office for Scientific and Technical Personnel (OSTP) was created within the OEEC under the leadership of Alexander King, "a natural scientist who had played a major role in the British war effort" (Eide, 1990, p. 8). The OSTP was associated with the European Productivity Agency, established in the OEEC with the aim of increasing the supply of a scientifically and technically trained labor force. The OSTP promoted a highly technocratic planning approach to education and the training of "manpower", inspired by systems analysis. In parallel, the Committee for Scientific and Technical Personnel (CSTP) was established as an

intergovernmental committee. The OSTP's administrative work and the CSTP's committee-level work were central to the emergence of education as a concern of the OEEC (Bürgi, 2017b). When in 1961 the OEEC transitioned into the OECD, Alexander King was instrumental in putting education at the forefront of the organisation's activities. Half of the CSTP's budget was provided by the United States Department of Defense, in support of the "new curriculum" movement for mathematical and scientific subjects (Bürgi, 2016b, p. 413). These efforts were aligned with the 1958 National Defense Education Act in the United States promoting scientific and mathematical education (Tröhler, 2010).

The Mediterranean Regional Project (MRP), an experiment in manpower planning carried out in some of the OECD's least developed member states, originated in the CSTP. Carried out between 1962 and 1965, the MRP represented the "quintessence of educational planning in the 1960s" (Williams, 1987, p. 335), applying scientific planning and manpower forecasting to economic development. Based on available demographic and economic data, national teams – made up of economists, statisticians, and education specialists – attempted to estimate future enrollment needs in order to satisfy projected labor market demands. Manpower planning drew heavily on military operations research. During World War II, operations research had applied mathematical modelling, optimisation, statistics, and systems analysis to optimise decisions about the use of military resources (Fortun & Schweber, 1993). In the post-WWII period, these methods were applied to make decisions about how educational systems should be organised and managed (Johnes, 2015). Overall, the OECD's social engineering approach was heavily influenced by military wartime research (Bürgi, 2016a).

Manpower planning was highly controversial, with many questioning whether that approach was either feasible or useful for designing education systems (Hollister, 1967). Critics also challenged the idea that educational planning should be driven primarily by anticipated economic and vocational needs, pointing instead to weak data, flawed methodologies, and limited research (Eide, 1990; OECD, 1967). Although initiatives such as the MRP were presented as scientific and critically important for modernisation, in practice they often advanced "by trial and error" (OECD, 1967, p. 6). Even key figures involved in the MRP expressed strong doubts about the claims and assumptions made at the time. Louis Emmerij described the approach as "close to irresponsible" (as cited in Elfert, 2019, p. 55), and Kjell Eide (1990) characterized the overall program as a failure. As demonstrated by Ida Hoos (1983) in her analysis of the application of systems analysis to public policy, including education,

> the wedding of educational planning to manpower needs is an enticing one for it offers the conveniences of quantifiable inputs and outputs. The counting of students and teachers, the enumerating of jobs, the matching of one with the other, all have appeal because they lend themselves readily to "systematic" treatment. They also carry certain assumptions: that manpower forecasting is an exact science… These assumptions are built on shaky premises. The state-of-the-art in manpower forecasting is not nearly well enough developed to provide a secure basis on which to plan. (pp. 154–155)

The MRP had applied the logic of systems analysis, originally developed for military planning, to education and manpower planning. American foundations funded and promoted the spread of these planning instruments and principles for education (Giovinazzi, 2022). Although influential pioneers

of educational planning such as Philip Coombs, who had led the systems analysis project at the Ford Foundation and was appointed in 1963 as director of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), were critical of elevating planning to a science –"little good is likely to come from viewing educational planning as a 'new science'" (Coombs, 1970, p. 12) –, educational planning was guided by technocratic and management procedures, standardisation, accountability and effectiveness, and underpinned by an economics of education approach. Coombs's book *The World Educational Crisis*, which became one of the most important works in the field of educational planning, applied systems theory to education (Coombs, 1968; see also Husén, 1983).

Another example of the strong links between the military and education is the Planning Programming Budgeting System (PPBS), that had been designed by the RAND Corporation for military use and had been used in the Vietnam War as a decision-making and budgeting framework based on cost-benefit analysis, systems analysis, and operations research. PPBS "became the brand name for the style of systems analysis created in the Department of Defense in 1961 and 1962" (Light, 2003, p. 41). Under President Lyndon B. Johnson, PPBS was applied to all public sectors and all federal agencies were mandated to use it (Light, 2003). It was also introduced to the World Bank by the former Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, after he took office as the Bank's President in 1968 (Natsios, 2010). The PPBS represented a major managerial and epistemic shift insofar as it "shifted the focus on decision-making from inputs to outputs" (Breul, 2010, as cited in Natsios, 2010, p. 15). As the World Bank, which began giving loans for education in the early 1960s, developed into the most powerful policy shaper of education in developing countries, PPBS and the managerial approach it represented exerted a powerful influence on educational planning in developing countries. The output-oriented approach is to this day characteristic of the World Bank's approach to education (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). PPBS also played a significant role in higher education management (Giovinazzi, 2022).

The epistemic consequences of scientism in education have been wide-ranging, leading to increasing reliance on metrics, benchmarking, testing, managerialism and performativity, understood as the pressure to demonstrate performance against measurable targets. These developments have contributed to convergence, standardisation and homogenisation, and an outcome-based approach to education around the world (Elfert & Ydesen, 2023). In contemporary times, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) epitomizes the logic of scientism. The "competency" paradigm that informed PISA, first launched in 2000, and the related DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies) project launched in the late 1990s, which aimed at defining "21st century competencies", shares intellectual foundations with systems analysis and originates in behaviourist psychology that was used in the United States to train the military (Hodge, 2007; McCowan, 1998). As Tröhler (2010) argued, "what looks normal through the lenses of PISA only appears to us to be normal because the Cold War educational policy is the very ground and origin of PISA" (p. 10). While UNESCO advocates a more humanistic and holistic vision of education, scholars have identified a "neuroscientific turn" within the organisation (Bryan, 2024; Yliniva et al., 2024). This shift arguably reflects a more instrumental conception of learning, understood as a process that can be measured, optimised and engineered through scientific intervention. Such approaches draw on behavioural, psychological and neuroscientific traditions that have, in some areas, been shaped by military research (Rudolph, 2002).

Conclusion

This article has examined how international organisations have shaped the epistemic framing of

education by invoking claims of scientific objectivity and neutrality to advance ideologically driven conceptions of modernity, rationality and economic growth. In this process, principles and tools originating in fields such as military research and social engineering were transferred to education, recasting a domain with social and cultural purposes as one guided by economic calculation and managerial and technical optimisation. The adoption of manpower planning and instruments such as the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS) illustrates this historical trajectory, whose underlying assumptions continue to inform educational reform.

These developments have constrained education's emancipatory and peace-building potential, undermining a vision that was central to the founding aspirations of international organisations. They also raise questions central to feminist critiques of scientific knowledge: whose knowledge is recognised as authoritative, whose experiences and perspectives are excluded, and whose interests are served when historically situated political choices are presented as universal and technically necessary solutions? The promise of scientific rationality and the plannability of the world has contributed to reducing education to a project of social control rather than social change.

As the legitimacy of international organisations increasingly rests on their capacity to produce, mobilise and authorise scientific knowledge (Zapp, 2021), confronting this epistemological legacy is essential if international organisations are to retain their credibility. This requires not a rejection of scientific inquiry, but a critical examination of how particular forms of knowledge acquire authority, how claims to neutrality and objectivity can conceal ideological interests, and how alternative, situated and marginalised perspectives might inform the governance of education.

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1. See Rappleye & Komatsu (2022) for a critique of the Faure Report.