



Memories of Wolfgang Mitter

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Abstract

This recollection of the memories that Vandra Masemann has about Wolfgang Mitter focuses mainly on the period from 1987 to 1996. He was the representative of the Comparative Education Commission of the German Education Society, and then became President of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) from 1991 to 1996. She shares her professional, academic and collegial memories during the time when she worked closely with him on the WCCES.

Keywords: Wolfgang Mitter, World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES)

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My memories of Professor Wolfgang Mitter date back some thirty years. I am honoured to be able to share some of them briefly in this special issue of the HERJ. We were both presidents of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), and shared many experiences in meetings during the 1980s and 1990s particularly. I was very sorry to hear of his death as we had remained in touch until the year of his death.

I first met him in 1986, when the WCCES Executive Committee met in Toronto, in conjunction with the meeting of the U.S.-based Comparative and International Education Society (CIES). There were also some venerable and esteemed persons at that meeting – WCCES President Michel Debeauvais from France, Secretary-General Raymond Ryba from the U.K., and Gerald Read, one of the WCCES founders, from the U.S.A. As the representative of the Comparative and International Education Society of Canada (CIESC), I knew almost no-one there, but Professor Mitter who was the representative of the German society was friendly and welcoming.

My memories of Wolfgang Mitter are much clearer when we met again at the 1987 World Congress in Rio de Janeiro. He had invited me to chair some of the sessions in his Research Commission which dealt with issues of cultural diversity. This was an honour which I greatly appreciated, and we enjoyed a mutual academic interest. It was the first time I had ever attended a World Congress or one of its sessions. I was entirely unused to the protracted verbatim delivery of some of the papers! I recall some very enjoyable social times in the evening at that Congress, with colleagues speaking a variety of languages while imbibing a variety of drinks. Certainly we all became more lucid as the evening wore on. It was my first experience of the very convivial social occasions which I was to have in succeeding years with many WCCES colleagues and with Wolfgang and his wife Sylvia. I also have a memory of visiting Professor Mitter in Frankfurt at the Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung (DIPF), where he introduced me to some of his Eastern European colleagues. That was the first time I had ever heard anyone use the term “glasnost”.

There was also serious business to attend to at the Rio Congress that would have a lasting impact on us for many years to come. The CIESC with Professor David Wilson as President had prepared a proposal to host the next Congress in Montreal in 1990, but we were unaware that the Chinese Comparative Education Society with Professor Gu Mingyuan as President had also prepared a proposal to host it in Beijing the same year. After a period of intense debate and negotiation, the World Council decided to allow Canada to host the next World Congress in Montreal in 1989 and China to host it in Beijing in 1991. Neither I nor Professor Mitter had any idea at the time of that decision that our roles in the WCCES were to be intertwined for several years after that!

The events in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in June 1989 had a profound effect on the WCCES and on Professor Mitter and me personally. Because of the suppression of student dissent, the WCCES voted at its Executive Committee meeting in Montreal on July 1989 to defer the decision about the next Congress until the following year. A

subsequent meeting of the Executive Committee agreed to admit the Chinese Comparative Education Society – Taipei (CCES-T) to the World Council, as we were informed that this decision was not in conflict with the one-China policy. However, the State Education Commission of China was not in agreement, and did not support the mainland Chinese CCES further in regard to hosting a Congress or even attending the WCCES meetings. Further details of this intense period of WCCES history can be found in the book dealing with the history of the World Council and its members in chapters written by both Professor Mitter and myself (Masemann, Bray and Manzon 2007).

These events affected the succession of the WCCES Presidency in 1991. Wolfgang Mitter would normally have succeeded me immediately, but there was so much work to do that year that we became Co-Presidents until he became sole WCCES President in 1992. Luckily, Professor Mitter offered to have the next Congress hosted by his colleagues in Prague. I handled the routine business of the World Council for that year, and Professor Mitter put a great deal of effort into helping the Comparative Education Section of the Czechoslovak Pedagogical Society colleagues to organise and finance the Congress. He was particularly happy to communicate again with his colleague Professor František Singule, who was Chairman of the Congress Organising Committee, but he was sad that Singule died before the Congress took place. At the Congress itself, it was a great pleasure to be in Prague so soon after the Velvet Revolution, and our colleagues there expressed their happiness at being able to present their papers to a much wider audience than would have been possible in the Communist era.

In 1996, another World Congress was held, in Sydney, Australia. It was also a very successful Congress, and Professor Mitter concluded his Presidency with an autobiographical account of his life and his development as a scholar in comparative education. I learned a great deal more about him from that talk than in the formal business meetings of the Council. In the Festschrift published in honour of his 70th birthday (Kodron, von Kopp, Lauterbach, Schäfer, and Schmidt, 1997, I wrote a chapter about recent directions in comparative education and made reference to that speech: “He used his own biographical experiences as a model to show the various perspectives from which he was able to view these changes over the last forty years. He then traced the major thematic, theoretical and methodological changes that had occurred over the period of his very active professional life. The main themes he referred to were as follows: East-West conflict and its impacts on education; large-scale educational reforms in Europe and other industrial countries; intercultural education in multicultural societies; the collapse of education and its educational subsystems; the post modern revolt against theories of modernity; the interrelation between universalism and cultural pluralism.” (Masemann, 1997: p. 127 quoting from Mitter, 1996: pp.4-6).

My memories of Professor Mitter at the World Council are too many and various to distinguish them separately. He was always a very energetic and enthusiastic discussant, with the interests of the Council his foremost concern. He shared that attitude with his close friend Raymond Ryba, who was the Secretary-General during almost all of that

period. Neither of them made their own personal advancement the basis of their thoughts or actions while they were in the service of the World Council. They shared a close bond for many years until Professor Ryba's death in 1999. When Wolfgang became WCCES President, he chaired meetings in the same enthusiastic manner. He was, however, during his entire tenure, very concerned about the negotiations with the Chinese colleagues, and wanted to see a positive outcome to the problem concerning the one-China policy, a solution which eluded him. I have always regretted that he did not live long enough to attend the World Congress in Beijing in 2016.

I will end on a more personal note with my memories of sight-seeing with him in the many cities where we met at meetings. A highlight was in the early 1990s when we were part of a tour of the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Professor Mitter and his wife Sylvia, as well as Professor Ryba and his wife Annemarie and others, spent a wonderful day touring this treasure house of Chinese culture and history. One vivid memory I have is, on many other occasions, arriving at the conference hotel to be greeted by Wolfgang and Sylvia Mitter who had already explored the city, returning from their very bracing and long sight-seeing walk, also having completely mastered the public transportation system and having identified the most worthwhile tourist destinations. They were some of the most indefatigable tourists I have ever known.

Professor Mitter served the World Council for six years following his presidential term. In the years since then I still received Christmas greetings from him, "family to family" as he always wrote on the DIPF official card. I remained in touch with him until his death. I was very sad to receive the black-edged announcement of his passing. I know that he made a valuable contribution to the World Council, to the world of comparative education, to the life of his family, and more widely to the life of his friends, among whom I was lucky to count myself as one.

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