

# **Postmodernism in Educational Theory:** **Education and the Politics of Human Resistance**

edited by

**Dave Hill, Peter McLaren,  
Mike Cole and Glenn Rikowski**

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Glenn Rikowski

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## CHAPTER 1

# Postmodernism in Educational Theory

## Glenn Rikowski and Peter McLaren

### Postmodernism in educational theory

In many parts of the capitalist world postmodernist politics still lays claim to contemporary relevance. Indeed, it claims to be the only politics available. The authors of this book collectively discern a need to clear the decks of such junk theory and debilitating ‘political’ posturing because of the urgent tasks ahead for socialists. We also, in various ways, stress the significance of education and training as resources for constructing a future based on the struggle against capital, the social forms and institutions it engenders and the social inequalities that arise from its market mechanisms.

Some ‘Left’ postmodernisms, or ‘postmodernisms of resistance’ appear to hold out prospects for a fruitful consummation of postmodernist and Marxist outlooks. We aim to dispel that illusion. Education has a crucial role to play in the struggle for a future where social, economic and political options are not *closed* by the domination of capital and its value-form of labour.

Postmodernism is an obstacle to the formation of open and radical perspectives which challenge inequalities and the deepening of the rule of capital in all areas of social life. As Raduntz (1999, p. 14) notes, postmodernism ‘constitutes a sterile theoretical cul-de-sac with no political program for transformative change’. In recent years, postmodernism has assumed an educational form—as educational theory, postmodernised modes of ‘reflective’ teacher practice, postmodern educational research methods and so on. Hence, it poses a particular challenge to those viewing education as a resource for social equality and democracy.

The incursion of postmodernism into UK educational circles has been a relatively recent phenomenon. It appears to have followed what has been described as the ‘cultural turn’ in social theory: a focus on symbolic meaning after decades of research dominated by structural, functionalist and empirical approaches within the human sciences. Stronach and MacLure (1997) note that the *British Education Index* had no postmodern entries between 1986–1991. There was one for 1992, two for 1993 and fifteen for 1994 (p. 32). Thus, 1994 seems to be a significant milestone for British educational postmodernism, and the publication of Usher and Edwards’ *Postmodernism and Education* in that year heralded the ‘arrival’ of postmodernism in the British educational *milieu*. Stronach and MacLure’s (1997) *Educational Research Undone* and



Stuart Parker's *Reflective Teaching in the Postmodern World* (1997) consolidated the position of postmodernism within educational research and pedagogy respectively in the British context. In the United States, postmodernism appeared in educational theory and research much earlier and much more extensively. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw an explosion of education books and articles written from postmodernist perspectives (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1990; Lather, 1991—as leading examples), the first being Peter McLaren's critique of postmodernism, *Postmodernity and the Death of Politics: A Brazilian Reprieve* (1986). During this period, some American education journals became clearing houses for educational postmodernism.

Attempts to 'define' postmodernism and 'educational postmodernism' are fraught with difficulty. Daring to spell out differences between postmodernism and postmodernity (as in Cole, Hill and Rikowski, 1997; and Fielding and Rikowski, 1996) easily brings down accusations of oversimplification and crassness from postmodernists (cf. Blake, 1997). Even taking Usher and Edwards' (1994, pp. 1-2) rendering of postmodernism, as a certain 'attitude' towards 'life', or a certain 'state of mind'; ironical, self-referential posture and style, a different 'way of seeing'—still begs the question of why this *particular* 'attitude' is superior, more relevant or politically 'cool' than any other. For us, a commitment to social justice which seeks to end social inequalities is a better 'attitude' to adopt.

At the popular level, postmodernism reflects a certain celebration of aimless anarchism, captured by Martin Jay as 'a world in which Beavis and Butt-head have replaced Horkheimer and Adorno as the reigning champions of negation' (1998, p. 108). As a social-theoretical project, 'postmodernism' is excessive; within the realm of 'discourse' (which functions as a parallel universe) it knows no bounds. In the social universe, the real world (which, for us, incorporates 'discourse'), on the other hand, collectively and individually, we face structural constraints on our form of life; constraints sets by capital and its social relations (Postone, 1996). For postmodernists, all concepts are decentred (fragmented, splattered) and all dualisms (such as the Marxist notion of two major social classes) deconstructed. The search for 'meaning' within texts/discourse becomes infinitive; comprising endless academic work for postmodernists. As Cole, Hill and Rikowski (1997) show through a critique of the work of Blake (1996), postmodernism, 'as excessive social-theoretical practice', attempts to negate the Enlightenment project, and with it reason and rationality, along with any attempts to secure 'knowledge'. Meta-narratives, ethics and value, and any appeals to 'truth' are also scuppered. The effects of postmodernism are predictable: relativism, nihilism, solipsism, fragmentation,

pathos, hopelessness. Worse, it acted as obfuscation and veil for the projects of the Radical Right (Hill and Cole, 1995; Cole and Hill, 1996), and continues to obscure their continuing project under the guise of the 'Third Way' (Hill, 2000).

Of course, postmodernists might argue that their object and purpose is just 'playfulness'. Blake (1996, 1997) claimed that he was merely appraising and assessing postmodernism's value for educational philosophy. Waite (1996), on the other hand, holds that such indulgences can more accurately be viewed as acts invoking *self destruction*. Facing the harsh rule of capital, we need to build ourselves up, find similarities between us (as opposed to emphasising differences and fractured, hybrid identities) and to enhance our strengths based on *labour in and against capital* (Neary, 1997). We need to become a social and political force of substance; not virtual forces in the ethereal realm of 'discourse'. And while it is true that in some respect there is a materiality to discourse as a form of practice, postmodernists fail to make the necessary connections between discursive materiality and social relations of production.

It is the political uselessness and debilitating effects of postmodernist discourse which jar most. This can be best illustrated through an example. At the 1997 British Association's Annual Festival of Science, Alan Smithers indicated that some education research efforts were 'a desperate waste of time' (Barnard, 1997; Halpin, 1998, p. 1). To illustrate the general point, Smithers picked on Nigel Blake's (1996) article, *Between Postmodernism and Anti-Modernism*. Educational research in general, and postmodernist educational perspectives in particular, continued to take a battering, the critics spurred on by Chris Woodhead from the UK Government's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

In an article in the *Times Education Supplement* (Blake and Smith, 1997) Blake struck back through arguing that 'discussions about [educational] policy and practice can be informed by *rational argument* and critique' (our emphasis). However, Blake's appeal to rational discourse as arbiter of the value of education research flies in the face of both the postmodernist and his own tendency (Blake, 1996) to be sceptical about, or to undermine, 'Western' or Eurocentric notions of 'reason' and rationality. After attempting to rescue himself with the enemy's poison, Blake then confusedly argues that *postmodernist* perspectives on educational research can be of value (Blake and Smith, 1997). This indicates that not only is postmodernism useless as a basis for self defence, *even for postmodernists*, but as a resource for defending the poor, informing class struggle and arguing against the reality of social inequality it is likely to be even more unhelpful.

## Identity politics and contemporary crises

Postmodernist ‘politics’, such as it is, largely rests upon the concepts of identity and difference. As Jenny Bourne shows (this volume), the ‘politics of identity and difference [are] being clearly used to justify the break with class politics’. The problem with basing a ‘Left’ politics on notions of identity and difference is that these concepts, when driven through the mill of postmodernism, become an *anti-politics*, a kind of ‘game of despair’ (Cole and Hill, 1995). This is because, in pointing towards the fragmentation of ‘selves’ and a corresponding lack of a *core* to personhood, the hybridity of ‘identities’ (we are legion), and the infinite play of *difference* based on social context, perspective, infinite interpretation and variegated relations to the Other—we are left with *little or nothing in common* upon which to build a politics of resistance to capital. This applies to a prospective politics of gender, ‘race’, disability and sexuality as much as it does for a politics based upon class struggle. Postmodernists reflect what Peter Sloterdijk calls ‘cynical reason’, which is an ‘enlightened false consciousness’ or:

[a] hard-boiled, shadowy cleverness that has split courage off from itself, holds anything positive to be a fraud, and is intent only on somehow getting through life. (1988, p. 546)

The hyper-tech cousins of the postmodernists, the post-human and transhuman theorists who emphasise our march towards the cyborg (fused human-machine entity), add another layer of thought which throws a politics of *commonality* off-balance; though some (Pepperell, 1997) hold out prospects for a new *cyberpolitics* based on our shared evolutionary destiny (Haraway, 1988, 1991). However, what postmodernists and post/trans-human theorists<sup>1</sup>—protagonists for a cyborg future—blatantly ignore or deny is that our lives and ‘selves’ are, after all, very much centred: by *capital*, as social force and social relation. As capital is a social force which exists as a range of contradictory social drives and flows through capitalist social relations, and insofar as we become capital, then *our everyday lives are lived through and express these contradictions*. Our lives *are* fragmented, shattered and unbalanced—and postmodernism reflects this, though only at the level of ‘discourse’ and the ‘text’—but this strikes a chord only because the ‘human’ has historically become capital, human-capital (Rikowski, this volume). Thus, as well as causing havoc *externally* to individuals, capital is also the ‘horror within’ personhood; we live our lives through its forms (money, value, state, commodity and so on) and its contradictions. As Rikowski (this volume) indicates, the struggle against the ‘horror within’ cannot be undertaken ‘internally’—through

some form of ‘Marxist psychotherapy’. Rather, the need is for a politics aimed at the abolition of the value-form of labour—the dissolution of capital itself—and this involves our *uniting* as labour against capital.

Beyond our fragmented selves, international capital is going through a severe crisis. As McLaren and Farahmandpur (this volume) and McLaren (1998b) note, the outcomes of the current crisis of capital accumulation include the redistribution of income from poor to rich; the erosion of welfare benefits; the socialisation of risks to capital; the suppression of labour incomes; the re-enforcement of absolute surplus-value extraction (longer working hours); a raft of anti-labour laws in many Western countries; increased casualisation, job insecurity and flexibilisation of labour (temporary contracts, part-time and low-paid McJobs in the service sector); and increasing social division within the working class, accompanied by profound weaknesses within labour movements in many countries. Furthermore, many Governments have reacted to the crisis by seeking to give businesses within their national capitals a competitive edge in the global market place by reforming education and training systems (e.g. in the context of the ideologies of globalisation and modernisation, see Cole, 1998). In the UK in particular, human capital theory (largely implicitly, but increasingly explicitly) is at the foundation of education and training policy development. Reform ‘mania’ has resulted, powered by a generalised drive to raise the quality of human capital (labour-power) throughout British capital. This is certainly the case with respect to current U.S. school reform efforts too (McLaren and Farahmandpur, this volume). The special emphasis on labour-power quality results from the (erroneous) perception of Governments that they can at least control *this* commodity, if no other.

There is a need for a socialist response to these developments. One of the aims of this book is to provide a range of such responses. But we are not just reacting against the poverty of postmodern theory and current economic and educational crises. Our project aims to go further and much deeper. The various contributions in the book highlight the contradictory roles of education and training in capitalism. Education and training are implicated in the social production of labour-power, and in social inequalities and divisions on the one hand, but can become critical forces for change on the other. With respect to the latter, McLaren (1997) emphasises the critical, revolutionary and contraband role that pedagogies can play. Michael Neary (chapter 5) and Mike Sanders, Dave Hill and Ted Hankin (chapter 6) make clear that education and training have significant roles to play in strategies of human resistance to the rule of capital in everyday life and struggles for social justice and social equality.

## Outline

This book incorporates two major themes: the appraisal and critique of postmodernism within educational theory; and the explication of Marxist and socialist-feminist alternatives to postmodernism which highlight human resistance to capital and its associated forms of inequality. With respect to education and training, the focus is fourfold: first, there is an emphasis on the degeneration of educational theory through the 'postmodern turn' (and the effects for educational politics, policy and perspectives); second, attention is given to the ways capitalist education and training are implicated in the social production of labour-power, the living commodity on which the whole capitalist system rests; third, a range of educational inequalities are analysed and theorised, and various implications for the struggle for equality within education are drawn out; finally, and most importantly, the subversive, critical and emancipatory aspects of education are explored, with an emphasis on *critical, revolutionary and contraband pedagogies*—pedagogies that run against the grain of capitalist educational and social life.

With these themes and foci in view, the book is organised into two main sections. The first section concentrates on postmodernism in educational theory, but also in politics and policy developments. The second section brings education as a form of human resistance to capital and social inequalities and divisions to the fore, whilst also expanding on *specific* aspects of the critique of postmodern educational theory and research (e.g. Kelly on feminism and postmodernism, Bourne on 'race' and postmodernism, Sanders, Hill and Hankin on social class).

In chapter 2, **Michael Apple and Geoff Whitty** argue that the pendulum has swung too far away from social and educational theories and traditions informing change in curriculum and pedagogy. Postmodernist and poststructuralist alternatives, although superficially 'cool', have sometimes merely thrown up old forms of social and educational outlooks where social control becomes the dominant *leitmotif*. Apple and Whitty advocate a shift from a postmodernist obsession with *meaning* in educational discourse towards a concern with *critical action*. They call for a re-emphasis on the *political economy of education*, though not to the neglect of cultural aspects of contemporary social and educational life. The chapter provides analyses of educational 'reforms' of the last ten years (mainly in a British context, but also with examples from the USA and New Zealand) and asks the question: can these be characterised as instances of *postmodern* educational reforms? Apple and Whitty argue that analysis of changes in capitalist accumulation processes is a more useful starting point for exploring these 'reforms'. Whilst

they point towards some positive effects of postmodern theory, they are critical of its excessive moments and flights of fancy.

The main target of chapter 3, by **Mike Cole and Dave Hill**, is ‘postmodernisms of resistance’. They contrast these false pretenders with straightforwardly reactionary forms of postmodernism. Fashionable ‘postmodernisms of resistance’ seek to provide an alternative to Marxist educational perspectives. The authors provide trenchant criticisms of postmodernist thought in general, and ‘postmodernisms of resistance’ in particular before showing how *all* forms of postmodernist discourse disempower those aiming to uncover and struggle against a range of social and educational inequalities. Finally, they provide arguments which indicate that postmodernist educational research and writing gloss over the major division within capitalist society: the social class divide.

In chapter 4, **Glenn Rikowski** indicates that a politics of human resistance to the rule of capital faces a particular problem: *we are capital*. Most of the article is taken up with demonstrating how we become capital, and in what ways ‘human’ life is capitalised. Criticisms of fashionable trans/post-human theories are provided *en route*. Special emphasis is given to the social production of labour-power in capitalism, and the parts that education and training play in the formation of human-capital; humanity *as* capital. Finally, the chapter points towards the role that critical pedagogy can play in understanding and resisting our predicament as human-capital.

**Michael Neary** (chapter 5) problematises the concept of ‘youth’, and *inter alia*, the sociology of youth and youth cultural studies. By delving deeply into Marxist theory, Neary provides an innovative critique of conventional theories of human resistance. Through focusing upon some of Marx’s basic structuring concepts—*value, labour, labour-time* and so on—Neary expresses how capital is ‘an impersonal form of social domination’ created by labour itself and which takes the form of abstract labour. In this analysis, Neary exposes some weak points within capitalist domination. He then proceeds to explore these vulnerabilities through an historical account of the ‘production of a specific form of human sociability: youth, through a particular form of regulation: training’. Neary does this through an examination of the UK Employment and Training Act of 1948. Through this account, he shows how the resultant ‘training culture’ *was set against human resistance* (to capital’s domination). Neary’s exploration of the 1948 Act and the post-War and contemporary youth condition shows how we can theorise resistance beyond orthodox accounts of working class struggle, and in a way which shows that human resistance to capital ‘cannot be contained’.

In chapter 6, **Mike Sanders, Dave Hill and Ted Hankin** provide compelling arguments for a ‘return to class analysis’ as a basis for a rejuvenated educational theory and politics. These authors show how we still live in a class-divided society and unearth some of the key facts regarding social class differences. They then go on to show the deleterious effects of postmodernist discourse on contemporary educational debate and politics. The main part of the chapter is taken up with working through problems and issues in class analysis, prior to showing the relevance of social class to a range of contemporary policy developments. They end with an argument for reinvigorating the secondary curriculum through a pedagogy which enlightens young people about the (capitalist) nature of the society in which they live and which provides resources for critical analyses of contemporary society.

**Jenny Bourne** (chapter 7) critiques postmodernist and poststructuralist ‘positions’ on ‘race’. She shows how these perspectives have de-radicalised the study and politics of ‘race’, whilst simultaneously undermining social class analysis. Bourne provides an account of the rise of postmodernist theory through its beginnings in Cultural Studies to its eventual flowering in the hokum of New Times and theories of identity and identity ‘politics’. She shows how we can reclaim radical ‘race’ perspectives, pinpointing criticisms within culturalism and positions which make positive claims for a ‘politics of identity/difference’, and showing how ‘Left’ postmodernists have betrayed the oppressed. Bourne concludes with a critique of the work of Phil Cohen on youth and education. This critique functions as an illumination of the poverty of postmodern perspectives. Postmodernism, argues Bourne, is useless as a basis for understanding and resisting racism.

In chapter 8, **Jane Kelly** critically surveys postmodernist and poststructuralist feminisms. She charts the development of these theories within feminism and then exposes their incoherence. For Kelly, ‘postmodernised feminism’ is on a road to nowhere: bereft of political direction, imbued with theoretical drift. Through an historical and empirical analysis of the position of women in Britain, Kelly finds that there is still much about which to be angry. The position of women on a range of issues—from pay, to working conditions and beyond—requires clear theoretical analysis which can function as guide to effective political action for changing women’s lives for the better. The preoccupations of postmodernism are elsewhere. Postmodernism is not only excessive in its effects, but is a form of self-indulgence, argues Kelly.

**Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur** (chapter 9) begin with a wide-ranging critique of neo-liberal ideology which pinpoints some of the contemporary attacks on workers and oppressed groups committed in its name. Whilst McLaren and Farahmandpur acknowledge some positive aspects of

postmodern theory, they note its failure to become a force for effective opposition to neo-liberal policy drives. They develop critical positions on globalisation and the marketisation of social life, and then go on to demonstrate the ‘naughtiness’ of postmodernism through pointing out its collusion and synergy with neo-liberalism. Following a ‘return to class analysis’ and an extensive review of the relevance of social class to understanding key aspects of capitalist inequalities, McLaren and Farahmandpur set about ‘re-enchanting the project of critical educational theory’ through developing a contraband pedagogy.

In the Concluding chapter, **McLaren, Hill and Cole** focus on the notion of ‘human resistance’, and show how the various chapters in this volume inform and theorise this issue. They explore concrete ways through which we can resist the degenerative tendencies of contemporary capital, and examines where education fits into strategies for human resistance. At this juncture, the authors make a case for forms of critical and revolutionary pedagogy and explicate the roles they can play in an anti-capitalist politics of human resistance.

### **Acknowledgements**

This is to acknowledge the welcome contributions of Mike Cole and Dave Hill to this chapter.

### **Notes**

1. Post-human and post transhuman theory are outlined and discussed in Rikowski (this volume).