

### Postmodernism and Education

Nicholas C. Burbules

The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education

*Edited by Harvey Siegel*

Print Publication Date: Oct 2009

Subject: Philosophy, Social and Political Philosophy, Epistemology

Online Publication Date: Jan 2010 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195312881.003.0029

### Abstract and Keywords

This article examines the impact of postmodernism on the philosophy of education. It explains that one of the most important elements of postmodernity is a growing awareness of the radical diversity and potential incommensurability of the different cultural forms of life that sustain groups and individuals and discusses postmodernists' denial that postmodernism is inherently apathetic or hostile to social or political action. It addresses the promise of and problems facing postmodern approaches to the philosophy of education.

Keywords: postmodernism, philosophy of education, radical diversity, cultural forms, social action, political action

---

## 1. Overview

IT represents a challenge to produce an encyclopedic entry on postmodernism, or its impact on educational theory, because there is nothing approaching a consensus on what “postmodernism” is. First, it has come to be an umbrella term for a host of quite different theoretical positions. Richard Rorty's version of neo-pragmatism; Michel Foucault's or Jean-Francois Lyotard's versions of poststructuralism; Jacques Derrida's deconstructive philosophy; Hans Gadamer's hermeneutical phenomenology; Jurgen Habermas's critical theory; and the diverse feminisms of Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, Donna Haraway, and Luce Irigaray—plus many more examples—have all been referred to with the label “postmodern,” even though most of these writers do not use the term to describe themselves. It would certainly be a stretch to find any set of theses that all of these thinkers share. Even a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” definition that could encompass them all would have to be extremely general and vague. Hans Bertens's (1986) overview of the literature emphasized instead the plurality of postmodernisms. Added to this is the use of “postmodern” as a qualifier, sometimes attached to worldviews that do not seem “postmodern” at all: postmodern Marxism; postmodern Christianity; and even postmodern conservatism.

## Postmodernism and Education

---

Second, it seems to be of the nature of postmodernism to resist any formal characterization of theses that could prescribe a coherent, assertive position. Postmodernism, if anything general might be said of it, represents a certain kind of critical attitude, most often defined in relation to what it is not. It has been (p. 525) described as a denial of meta-narratives; a reaction against Enlightenment values and rationality; an extreme form of anti-realism or social constructivism; or a radical assertion of difference and nonnormativity. These are not just negative or critical views toward particular traditional philosophical claims; they question at a more fundamental level the very possibility of developing a coherent, comprehensive alternative theoretical position.

Third, it may be a misnomer even to characterize this thing “postmodernism” as an “ism” in the first place. The term, after all, originated not as a philosophical theory but as a description of movements within art and architecture (Harvey 1992; Jameson 1991). Many writers refer instead to postmodernity or the postmodern condition. In other words, what comes first is not an assertive theoretical stance, but a constellation of social and cultural changes that, it is claimed, have made the maintenance of certain traditional beliefs, values, and hopes problematic. Here, I believe we move closer to the crux of the matter. As I have written elsewhere, when Lyotard (1984, p. xxiv) provides his famous one-sentence definition of postmodernism, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives,” he does not mean (as he is frequently taken to mean) a rejection of meta-narratives or a conclusively worked out refutation of them. He means, quite literally, “incredulity”—an inability to believe them any longer, even if we once could (Burbules 1996). It means an ambivalent and ambiguous internal relation to modernity, not outgrowing or surpassing it. Postmodernists are creatures of a modernist society and culture who have lost faith, of a certain sort, in its ability to deliver on its promises. The causes of the postmodern condition are variously taken to include the Holocaust, globalization, and the myriad prospects of sudden and virtually worldwide catastrophe (whether through nuclear, biological, viral, or climate-related causes). Science and technology have not solved these problems, and have often exacerbated them. The most advanced democratic and liberal societies have proved to be among the worst in ignoring or perpetuating these problems. A reasoned consensus across cultures and religions that might adjudicate common human interests and values seems as far away (and sometimes further away) than ever. The postmodern condition, in this context, then, represents a kind of disenchantment with the spirit of the Enlightenment, not a rejection or refutation of it.

The quotation that best captures this ambivalence is Gayatri Spivak's comment on deconstruction: “If I understand deconstruction, deconstruction is not an exposure of error, certainly not other people's error. The critique of deconstruction, the most serious critique in deconstruction, is the critique of something that is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything” (Spivak 1993, p. 27). Similarly, Lyotard writes, “What then is postmodernism?...It is undoubtedly part of the modern. Everything that is received must be suspected” (Lyotard 1992, p. 12). In short, the very possibility of a “postmodern critique” is grounded in the conditions of modernity: Kant's critical philosophy, Hume's skepticism, Descartes' radical doubt, Marx's ideology-critique, Nietzsche's nihilism, Kierkegaard's existentialism, Dewey's pragmatism, Wittgenstein's reflections (p. 526) on

doubt and certainty—even logical positivism and analytical philosophy, in a certain sense—all reflect a modernist skepticism toward traditions and received “foundations” of truth. What is different about these modernist philosophies is the aspiration to undertake such a critical exercise in order to arrive at a truer, clearer, more honest account of things. But that is just what postmodernism doubts.

This is a different kind of “critique”—an auto-critique, if you will, not of another's beliefs and traditions but of one's own. It is pulling the rug out from under one's own feet. It is most assuredly not a matter of demonstratively refuting another position and replacing it with a better one; because this very sort of endeavor, and the narrative of progress that implicitly underlies it, is part of what postmodernism wants to put into question. This attitude, sometimes described as a kind of pervasive irony, takes back with one hand what it seems to give with the other. One way to summarize this is that postmodernism is not, in a strict sense, “post” anything. It is a changed relationship of modernity with itself; as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, “living with ambivalence” (Bauman 1991). Or, as Lyotard puts it, “‘Postmodern’ simply indicates a mood, or better a state of mind” (1986–87, p. 209).

## 2. The Postmodern Condition

One important element of postmodernity is a growing awareness of the radical diversity and potential incommensurability of the different cultural forms of life that sustain groups and individuals—not in fact an increase in such differences but an increased sensitivity to these differences. In the current world, media, mobility, and new forms of communication and popular culture have brought diverse cultures into much closer proximity with one another. The nature of many global political and economic interdependencies has been to force the effort of engaging and reconciling conflicting beliefs and values—it is, generally speaking, no longer enough simply to co-exist. Now, it is a mistake to assume that incommensurability is the inevitable consequence of such encounters; but speaking practically, people do sometimes reach the limit of their ability or willingness to understand one another, or to pursue potential agreement with one another. In the face of such a realization, the modernist optimism that continued conversation can be successful in uniting or reconciling diverse perspectives and values has been thrown into doubt. For philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, the irreducibility of the Other to our understanding is the presumed starting point of such encounters.

A second element, related to the first, is a certain destabilization of the assumption of a coherent, consistent identity. Theories of performative and constructed identities emphasize much more the fluidity and context-dependence of even seemingly fixed biological categories like sex and race, let alone more (p. 527) obviously cultural identifications. Theories of hybridity emphasize the increasingly blended and boundary-blurring combinations that people find in themselves. Like the issue of difference, above, it is not only that such liminal selves are becoming more commonplace, but also that people are becoming increasingly aware that such liminality and hybridity may have always been the unrecognized norm, and not the exception. Reflections like these look at the supposedly unshake-

able certainly of Descartes' "I think, therefore I am," and ask "Who is the 'I' speaking here?"

A third element is an understanding that dynamics of asymmetrical power distort and compromise even the best of human intentions; and that these dynamics are ubiquitous across the formal and informal structures of life in which humans are engaged. State, institutional, and corporate entities shape even the domain of seemingly personal or private choices. In the current world, technical systems of surveillance, manipulation, and control are increasingly widespread and subtle. We participate in these, consciously or unconsciously, nearly all the time. Not all of these manifestations of power are necessarily pernicious. But their ubiquity should sensitize us to the power dimensions of even apparently benign acts; to the limits of good intentions; to the deep culpability we all have within a world society that implicates us in a web of contingencies and interactions whose consequences are, in some degree, always harmful to someone; and to the dubious adventure of seeking a path toward any utopia that promises a better life for all.

A fourth element concerns language, and the particular way in which discourse—the patterns of language in use—colors and shapes our ways of living and being in the world. Postmodernism partakes of a radical nominalism. Our practices of communication, explanation, justification, truth-telling, and so on (and our apparently nonverbal practices as well) are always partly expressions of the particular language or languages we have. But because our languages are diverse, and noncongruent, there will always be a limit on any particular discursive system as a standpoint, in a place and time, within which one can try to describe all matters of truth, value, and so forth; such matters will always be to some extent the expressions of this language, and this place and time. This realization does not lead to relativism, necessarily; for there usually is a good deal of overlap or intertranslatability among different discursive systems. But this stance gives postmodernism a pervasive skepticism toward standard conceptions of realism, reason, justice, or objectivity.

These elements, along with others, underlie the postmodern incredulity toward some of the promises (or presumptions) of the Enlightenment. Each is a disturbed and disturbing suspicion—a loss of faith, I've called it—in universal claims and disinterested points of view. Dominant conceptions of Truth and Justice appear as the expressions of socially and institutionally privileged voices, not as grounding points. The kinds of arguments that philosophers have offered in support of such claims are, from the postmodern standpoint, insufficiently reflective about their own contingency and particularity.

### (p. 528) 3. Criticisms of Postmodernism

The emphasis here on a characterization of postmodernism as a kind of incredulity is meant to explain why some of the common criticisms of postmodernism may fail to hit the mark. David Carr (1998, p. 8) decries "the postmodern assault on knowledge and truth." My friend and editor here, Harvey Siegel, offers, in response to Wilfred Carr's characterization of postmodernism, several criticisms of that account:

First...[the] postmodernist wants to reject the possibility of objective knowledge, but apparently regards it as an objective fact about the world that a subject's knowledge of that world is always "preinterpreted" and that such knowledge is therefore never objective....

Similarly, the postmodernist insistence that there is "no privileged position that enables philosophers to transcend the particularities of their own culture and traditions" seems itself to speak from such a position, since it seems to be making an assertion concerning all philosophers, cultures, and traditions....

Third, "foundationalist philosophy" is specified in such vague and general terms that it would be hard to locate a clear advocate of it in the contemporary literature....

Fourth, the postmodernist's argument against the possibility of objective knowledge is a strikingly weak one.... Does it really follow...that because my knowledge of trees, atoms, and people is always situated within my conceptual scheme, that there aren't trees, atoms, and people which exist independently of my scheme? (Siegel 1998, p. 30)

I believe that Siegel is right in identifying a failing in accounts of postmodernism that, often in a rather celebratory way, proclaim the end of traditional philosophy, particularly the end of epistemology. There is, as he says, something self-undermining about assertive, conclusive claims about the impossibility of certain kinds of knowing and valuation—claims which themselves brook no exception.

But I have also suggested that many of the writers whose ideas are the deeper source of postmodern claims do not write this way: they are not "rejecting" or "assaulting" anything, and in the more thoughtful of these sources there is a tone that is very much the opposite of the triumphalist claim to have surpassed or defeated modernism, knowledge, or truth in any sense. In those cases, I would suggest, varieties of transcendental argument or claims that postmodern positions are self-contradictory lose some traction, because the most compelling postmodern writers are not making the kinds of definitive, sweeping assertions that would subject them to such criticisms. They are concerned, not with denial or refutation, but with the expression of a radical doubt. Spivak, whom I cited earlier, is perfectly aware that she needs to invoke the standards and rhetoric of argumentation in order to frame the skeptical questions she wants to pose toward them; and she admits the discomfort of trying to occupy both stances simultaneously. It is troubling, as Spivak makes clear, to doubt that which is necessary to one's life and mode of thinking. Wittgenstein (1969), in another context, makes clear the (p. 529) limits of the possibility of doubt—for there are epistemic conditions that make doubt itself possible (and these cannot be doubted, at least not all at once).

Another set of criticisms starts from the other side and attacks the characterization of a "postmodern condition" that supposedly throws into doubt the meta-narratives of modernity. These counterclaims are usually more overtly political and historical than philosophical: "History has not stopped, we are not in a circular gravity. We do not accept that there

is nothing left to do except survive along the remnants, nor do we accept that all struggles must be localized. Most crucially, we are not incredulous toward metanarratives” (Beyer and Liston 1992, p. 378).

Particularly for scholars of a Marxian theoretical bent, which emphasizes so strongly the difference between “ideology” and the material, economic conditions that provide an objective basis to social-class conflict, the postmodern suspicion, if not hostility, toward general theories threatens an enervating acquiescence to a social order they see wracked by fundamental injustices (see also Cole and Hill 1995). Politically, one must know whose side one is on and whom one is against. Hybridity and the fluidity of differences may make for provocative theoretical discussions, but they distract from the fundamental divides in power and privilege that shape modern society, which need to be diagnosed clearly and challenged directly.

Postmodernists, in response, deny that postmodernism is inherently apathetic or hostile to social or political action. What is at stake, rather, are conflicting notions of activism and justice; and strategic disagreements about the effective focal points of political intervention. Totalizing theory, even socialist theory, supported some of the worst forms of totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Belief that one is seeing clearly the “objective conditions” that others refuse, or are unable, to recognize has often led to political vanguardism and ends-justify-the-means strategies. Many of the leading figures of postmodern theory lived through the turbulence of 1968 in France and elsewhere, and were shaped by those events; this partly explains their “incredulity.” Beyond this, a politics of difference is still a politics, just of a different kind: not given to binary characterizations of oppressors and oppressed; looking at power in its multiple and often conflicting dimensions; treating social distinctions and categories of identity as needing to be questioned and deconstructed, not reified. This is a politics that emphasizes cultural alongside economic factors, and which is suspicious of state interventions intended to create greater equality, freedom, and social justice. Admittedly, what constitutes a more just alternative to this state of affairs is often not so clear; and one of the areas in which we see this limitation to postmodernism is in the field of education.

## 4. Postmodernism and Education

Andy Green wrote, “There is clearly no such thing yet as a postmodern theory of education” (Green 1997, p. 8). Despite the apparent open-endedness of that “yet,” (p. 530) Green was obviously skeptical about whether there ever could be such a thing: “Postmodernism has little of value to offer educational theory but it has many dangers” (Green 1997, p. 20).

Indeed, it is reasonable to wonder whether the term “a postmodern theory of education” is doubly contradictory: first, as already addressed here, because it is far from clear whether postmodernism can, or wants to, offer a “theory” of anything, as such. But at a deeper level, the endeavor of education seems to contain within it normative assumptions and values that rest uneasily within a postmodern sensibility. “Education” is, on any con-

## Postmodernism and Education

---

ceivable account, some activity or process intended to move the development and learning of people in a desired direction—a direction that, if many analytical philosophers of education are correct, intrinsically contains within it the idea of human betterment. Certainly a postmodern perspective can provide (and has provided) a critical angle on such efforts: What does “betterment” mean? Within whose cultural norms and interests? For which students? Who decides what knowledge, values, and dispositions of character are worth acquiring? How are the activities of teaching structured or distorted by elements of unequal power? What happens when educational practices get embedded in the bureaucratic, state-governed, and disciplinary structures we call “schools”? It appears that education is, in Foucault's terminology, intrinsically “normalizing,” at least to a degree, and it seems impossible to imagine any system of education that would not be subject to that criticism. But then a deeper question arises: In what ways is a normalizing education necessarily bad? Isn't “normalizing,” in part, just what we expect from education—in the sense of socializing learners into participation within a given social formation? Again, we are in an ambivalent space.

But when one turns to what might be a more prescriptive, alternative account, postmodernism seems to founder on its own auto-critique: On what basis could such prescriptive, alternative conceptions rest? What generalizability could they have? How could they possibly flourish within the institutional structures and constraints of schools as they currently exist? As Rousseau discovered in the *Emile*, even an attempt at completely natural and unfettered education for freedom inevitably brings in elements of social constraint.

Nevertheless, many thoughtful scholars have tried to provide just such a positive, “post-modern” account of education. Stanley Aronowitz, for example, wrote:

Following from the dialectical relationship of knowledge and practice, postmodern educators believe the curriculum can best inspire learning only when school knowledge builds upon the tacit knowledge derived from the cultural resources that students already possess....

Perhaps more controversial is the fostering by postmodernists of the claims to intellectual validity of marginal discourses in the sciences and social sciences, especially those that refuse, on philosophical or ideological grounds, to observe accepted algorithms of inquiry. At issue is the question of diversity in ways of producing knowledge and, more broadly, the validity of the distinction between legitimate intellectual knowledge and other kinds of knowledge....

(p. 531)

One can imagine a postmodern high school. One of its more distinctive features is that what is studied is a matter for local decision making. Higher bodies—state and local school boards, principals and department chairs—may propose courses, texts, and pedagogies. And parents may express their concerns and try to influence what is taught and how. But the students and teachers have final authority. (Aronowitz 1991, pp. 15, 17, 20)

## Postmodernism and Education

---

Whatever the merits of these proposals, however, one might ask what “postmodernism” adds if the main policy impacts are simply to reinforce fairly conventional understandings of progressive education, multiculturalism, and respecting teacher autonomy. Indeed, what is most striking about these recommendations, from a certain point of view, is how much they re-inscribe most of the actual practices and structures of schooling, simply mobilized in the service of a broadly left-democratic sensibility. This isn't to reject them, but one does wonder what makes them distinctively “postmodern.”

Robin Usher and Richard Edwards approach the problem in a different way:

The very rationale of the educational process and the role of the educator is founded on the humanist idea of a certain kind of subject who has the potential to become self-motivated and self-directing, a rational subject capable of exercising individual agency. The task of education has therefore been understood as one of “bringing out,” of helping to realize this potential....

It is because postmodernism presents no foundational standpoint and no new theory that it teaches us to be skeptical of all systematic theorizations.... The implication is that it is precisely by adopting a postmodern argument that we can open ourselves through critical dialogue with others and with texts, to all varieties of educational tradition. (Usher and Edwards 1994, pp. 24–25, 29, 31)

This is more clearly postmodern in its spirit, because it emphasizes the indeterminacy of educational outcomes once one adopts a skeptical stance toward all meta-narratives. Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish add: “How could philosophers ever ask again, ‘Who is the educated man?’ as if there might be an answer for all times and cultures” (Blake et al. 1998, p. 5). What these latter authors are asking, in contrast with Aronowitz, is not only how to forge “postmodern” educational processes and curricula that question or contest prevailing meta-narratives but also what is much more challenging: What might it mean for education to proceed without any meta-narratives concerning itself?

The conditions of postmodernity discussed previously—an increased awareness of, and sensitivity to, radical and sometimes incommensurable difference; the instability of a fixed or consistent sense of identity; the pervasive analysis of power relations as constitutive of human interactions; and the indeterminacy and limits of language as a medium for adjudicating competing claims of truth and value—all go to the very heart of any possible account of education. How do we decide what “necessary” curricula or canons of learning might entail? How do we argue for an account of human betterment in the absence of any normative beliefs about what it means to be human? How do we navigate teacher-learner relations when power, privilege, and partisan interests always hover as considerations in the background? (p. 532) How do we use language as a medium of communication and instruction while also problematizing the gaps and cultural particularities built into any language that we might have?

It may be well enough, in the context of higher education, for example, to argue that these very considerations might become part of a critically reflective pedagogy that, in true postmodern spirit, is also always partly deconstructing itself. But it is harder to see



## Postmodernism and Education

---

how this perspective sustains a general account of education—one that can address the learning of children, that allows for the mastery of basic literacy and thinking skills, that provides a basis of cultural understandings sufficient to posing the kinds of deeply problematizing questions called for by a postmodern sensibility. One needs to know a great deal about one's own culture and traditions, as well as those of others, in order for a theory of difference to have resonance, for example. In short, it is doubtful whether the capacity for a postmodern outlook on things can be developed, educationally, in a consistently postmodern matter. Once again, then, we find ourselves “living with ambivalence.”

## References

- Aronowitz, Stanley. (1991). *Postmodern Education*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. (1991). “Postmodernity, or Living with Ambivalence.” In *Modernity and Ambivalence*. (pp. 231–45). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bertens, Hans. (1986). “The Postmodern Weltanschauung and its Relation to Modernism: An Introductory Survey.” Republished in *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (pp. 25–70). (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).
- Beyer, Landon, and Daniel Liston. (1992). “Discourse or Moral Action: A Critique of Postmodernism.” *Educational Theory* 42(4): 371–93.
- Blake, Nigel, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish. (1998). *Thinking Again: Education After Postmodernism*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Burbules, Nicholas C. (1996). “Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education.” In *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (pp. 39–48). Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.
- Carr, David. (1998). “Introduction.” In *Education, Knowledge and Truth: Beyond the Postmodern Impasse*, ed. David Carr (pp. 1–15). New York: Routledge.
- Cole, Mike, and Dave Hill. (1995). “Games of Despair and Rhetorics of Resistance: Postmodernism, Education, and Reaction.” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 16(2): 165–82.
- Green, Andy. (1997). “Postmodernism and State Education.” In *Education, Globalization, and the Nation State* (pp. 7–28). New York: St. Martin's.
- Harvey, David. (1992). *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change*. New York: Blackwell.
- Jameson, Fredric. (1991). “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” Republished in *A Postmodern Reader*, ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (pp. 312–32). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993.

## Postmodernism and Education

---

(p. 533) Lyotard, Jean-François. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

— (1986–87). “Rules and Paradoxes, and Svelte Appendix.” *Cultural Critique* 5: 209–19.

— (1992). *The Postmodern Explained*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Siegel, Harvey. (1998). “Knowledge, Truth, and Education.” In *Education, Knowledge and Truth: Beyond the Postmodern Impasse*, ed. David Carr (pp. 19–36). New York: Routledge.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. (1993). “In a Word.” Interview with Ellen Romney, quoted in Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York: Routledge.

Usher, Robin, and Richard Edwards. (1994). *Postmodernism and Education*. New York: Routledge.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. (1969). *On Certainty*. New York: Harper. (p. 534)

### Nicholas C. Burbules

Nicholas C. Burbules is Grayce Wicall Gauthier Professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois. His research focuses on philosophy of education, critical social and political theory, and technology and education. His most recent book is with Michael A. Peters and Paul Smeyers, *Showing and Doing: Wittgenstein as a Pedagogical Philosopher* (2008). He is the editor of *Educational Theory*.