EDUCATION
and the
POSTMODERN CONDITION

EDITED BY

MICHAEL PETERS

Foreword by Jean-François Lyotard

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Series Foreword

For many theorists occupying various positions on the political spectrum, the current historical moment signals less a need to come to grips with the new forms of knowledge, experiences, and conditions that constitute postmodernism than the necessity to write its obituary. The signs of exhaustion are in part measured by the fact that postmodernism has gripped two generations of intellectuals who have pondered endlessly over its meaning and implications as a "social condition and cultural movement" (Jencks 1992, 10). The "postmodern debate" has spurned little consensus and a great deal of confusion and animosity. The themes are, by now, well known: master narratives and traditions of knowledge grounded in first principles are spurned; philosophical principles of canonicity and the notion of the sacred have become suspect; epistemic certainty and the fixed boundaries of academic knowledge have been challenged by a "war on totality" and a disavowal of all-encompassing, single world views; the rigid distinctions between high and low culture have been rejected by the insistence that the products of the so-called mass culture, popular, and folk art forms are proper objects of study; the Enlightenment correspondence between history and progress and the modernist faith in rationality, science, and freedom have incurred a deep-rooted skepticism; the fixed and unified identity of the humanist subject has been replaced by a call for narrative space that is pluralized and fluid; and, finally, though far from complete, history is spurned as a unilinear process that moves the West progressively toward a final realization of freedom.[1]

While these and other issues have become central to the postmodern debate, they are connected through the challenges and provocations they provide to modernity's conception of history, agency, representation, culture, and the responsibility of intellectuals. The postmodern challenge constitutes not only a diverse body of cultural criticism, it must also be seen as a contextual discourse that has challenged specific disciplinary boundaries in such fields as literary studies, geography, education, architecture, feminism, performance art, anthropology, and sociology.[2] Given its broad theoretical reach, its political anarchism, and its challenge to "legislating" intellectuals, it is not surprising that there has been a growing movement on the part of diverse critics to distance themselves from postmodernism.

Although postmodernism may have been elevated to the height of fashion hype in both academic journals and the popular press in North America during the last twenty years, it is clear that a more sinister and reactionary mood has emerged that constitutes something of a backlash. Of course, postmodernism did become something of a fashion trend, but such events are short lived and rarely take any subject seriously. But the power of fashion and commodification should not be underestimated in terms of how such practices bestow on an issue a cloudy residue of irrelevance and misunderstanding. There is more at stake in the recent debates on postmodernism than the effects of fashion and commodification; in fact, the often-essentialized terms in which critiques of postmodernism have been framed suggest something more onerous. In the excessive rhetorical flourishes that dismiss postmodernism as reactionary nihilism, fad, or simply a new form of consumerism there appears a deep-seated anti-intellectualism, one that lends credence to the notion that theory is an academic luxury and has little to do with concrete political practice. Anti-intellectualism aside, the postmodern backlash also points to a crisis in the way in which the project of modernity attempts to appropriate, prescribe, and accommodate issues of difference and indeterminacy.

Much of the criticism that now so blithely dismisses postmodernism appears trapped in what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as modernist "utopias that served as beacons for the long march to the rule of reason [which] visualized a world without margins, leftovers, the unaccounted for—without dissidents and rebels" (Bauman 1992, xi). Against the indeterminacy, fragmentation, and skepticism of the postmodern era, the master narratives of modernism, particularly Marxism and liberalism, have been undermined as oppositional discourses. One consequence is that "a whole generation of postwar intellectuals have experienced an

identity crisis. . . . What results is a mood of mourning and melancholia"
(Mercer 424).

The legacy of essentialism and orthodoxy seems to be reasserting itself
on the part of left intellectuals who reject postmodernism as a style of
cultural criticism and knowledge production. It can also be seen in the
refusal on the part of intellectuals to acknowledge the wide-ranging
processes of social and cultural transformation taken up in postmodern
discourses that are appropriate to grasping the contemporary experiences
of youth and the wide-ranging proliferation of forms of diversity within
an age of declining authority, economic uncertainty, the proliferation of
electronic-mediated technologies, and the extension of what I call con-
sumer pedagogy into almost every aspect of youth culture.

Michael Peters's splendid book shifts the terms of the debate in which
postmodernism is usually engaged, especially by its more recent critics.
In doing so, various authors in the text argue that postmodernism as a site
of conflicting ideas, practices, and tendencies becomes useful pedagogi-
cally when it provides elements of an oppositional discourse for under-
standing and responding to the changing cultural and educational shifts
that are going on in the industrial world. *Education and the Postmodern
Condition* will be invaluable in helping educators and others address the
changing conditions of knowledge production in the context of emerging
mass electronic media and the role these new technologies are playing as
critical socializing agencies in redefining both the locations and the
meaning of pedagogy.

My own concern with expanding the way in which educators and
cultural workers understand the political reach and power of pedagogy as
it positions youth within a postmodern culture suggests that postmodern-
ism is to be neither romanticized nor casually dismissed. On the contrary,
I believe that it is a fundamentally important discourse that needs to be
mined critically in order to help educators to understand the modernist
nature of public schooling in North America.[3] It is also useful for educators
to comprehend the changing conditions of identity formation within
electronically mediated cultures and how they are producing a new genera-
tion of youth who exists between the borders of a modernist world of
certainty and order, informed by the culture of the West and its technology
of print, and a postmodern world of hybridized identities, electronic
technologies, local cultural practices, and pluralized public spaces.

But the debate about postmodernism has come into bad times. That is,
there has emerged recently a backlash against postmodernism that repro-
duces rather than constructively addresses some of the pedagogical and
political problems affecting contemporary education. It is against this

backlash that *Education and the Postmodern Condition* appears as a
welcome antidote.

WELCOME TO THE POSTMODERN BACKLASH

Whereas conservatives such as Daniel Bell (1976) and his cohorts may
see in postmodernism the worst expression of the radical legacy of the
1960s, an increasing number of radical critics view postmodernism as the
cause of a wide range of theoretical excesses and political injustices. For
example, recent criticism from the British cultural critic John Clarke
(1991) argues that the hyper-reality of postmodernism wrongly celebrates
and depoliticizes the new informational technologies and encourages
metropolitan intellectuals to proclaim the end of everything in order to
commit themselves to nothing (especially the materialist problems of the
masses).[4] Dean MacCannell (1992) goes further and argues that "post-
modern writing [is] an expression of soft fascism" (p. 187). Feminist
theorist Susan Bordo (1993) dismisses postmodernism as just another form
of "stylish nihilism" and castigates its supporters for constructing a "world
in which language swallows up everything" (p. 291). The nature of the
backlash has become so prevalent in North America that the status of
popular criticism and reporting seems to necessitate proclaiming that
postmodernism is "dead." Hence, comments ranging from the editorial
pages of the *New York Times* to popular texts such as *13thGen* to popular
academic magazines such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* alert the
general public in no uncertain terms that it is no longer fashionable to utter
the "p" word.

Of course, more serious critiques have appeared from the likes of Jürgen
Habermas (1978), Perry Anderson (1984), David Harvey (1989), and
Terry Eagleton (1985), but the current backlash has a different intellectual
quality to it, a kind of reductionism that is both disturbing and irresponsible
in its refusal to engage postmodernism in any kind of dialogical, theoretical
debate.[5] Many of these left critics often assume the moral high ground and
muster their theoretical machinery within binary divisions that create
postmodern fictions, on the one side, and politically correct, materialist
freedom fighters on the other. One consequence is that any attempt to
engage the value and importance of postmodern discourses critically is
sacrificed to the cold winter winds of orthodoxy and intellectual parochial-
ism. I am not suggesting that all critics of postmodernism fall prey to such
a position, nor am I suggesting that concerns about the relationship
between modernity and postmodernity, the status of ethics, the crisis of
representation and subjectivity, or the political relevance of postmodern

discourses should not be problematized. But viewing postmodernism as a terrain to be contested suggests theoretical caution rather than reckless abandonment or casual dismissal.

What is often missing from these contentious critiques is the recognition that since postmodernism does not operate under any absolute sign, it might be more productive to reject any arguments that position post-modernism within an essentialized politics, an either-or set of strategies. A more productive encounter would attempt, instead, to understand how postmodernism's more central insights illuminate how power is produced and circulated through cultural practices that mobilize multiple relations of subordination. And it is precisely on this point that *Education and the Postmodern Condition* provides welcome theoretical relief.

Rather than proclaiming the end of reason, postmodernism can be critically analyzed for how successfully it interrogates the limits of the project of modernist rationality and its universal claims to progress, happiness, and freedom. Instead of assuming that postmodernism has vacated the terrain of values, it seems more useful to address how it accounts for how values are constructed historically and relationally, and how they might be addressed as the basis or "precondition of a politically engaged critique" (Butler 1991, 6–7). In a similar fashion, instead of claiming that postmodernism's critique of the essentialist subject denies a theory of subjectivity, it seems more productive to examine how its claims about the contingent character of identity, constructed in a mul-tiplicity of social relations and discourses, redefines the notion of agency. One example of this type of inquiry comes from Judith Butler, who argues that acknowledging that "the subject is constituted is not [the same as claiming] that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency (1991, 13). The now familiar argument that postmodernism substitutes represen-tations for reality indicates less an insight than a reductionism that refuses to engage critically how postmodern theories of representation work to give meaning to reality.

A postmodern politics of representation might be better served through an attempt to understand how power is mobilized in cultural terms, how images are used on a national and local scale to create a representational politics that is reorienting traditional notions of space and time. A postmodern discourse could also be evaluated through the pedagogical consequences of its call to expand the meaning of literacy by broadening "the range of texts we read, and . . . the ways in which we read them" (Berube 1992–93, 75). The fact of the matter is that mass media play a decisive role in the lives of young people, and the issue is

not whether such media perpetuate dominant power relations but how youth and others experience the culture of the media differently, or the ways the media are "experienced differently by different individuals" (Tomlinson 1991, 40). Postmodernism pluralizes the meaning of culture, whereas modernism firmly situates it theoretically in apparatuses of power. It is precisely in this dialectical interplay between difference and power that postmodernism and modernism inform each other rather than cancel each other out. The dialectical nature of the relationship that postmodernism has to modernism warrants a theoretical moratorium on critiques that affirm or negate postmodernism on the basis of whether it represents a break from modernism. The value of postmodernism lies elsewhere. Homi Bhabha is very instructive on this issue and points to the importance of postmodernism as a way of translating the limits of modernism and Eurocentrism into a search for new analyses and translations. Postmodernism in this sense is useful less as a fixed tradition or discourse than a marker of transit, a boundary from which new investigations can begin. Bhabha writes:

If the jargon of our times—postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism—has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the "post" to indicate sequentiality after-feminism; or polarity-anti-modernism. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond only embody its restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and excentric site of experience and empowerment. . . . The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological "limits" of [modernism] are also the enunciative boundary of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices—women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities.[6]

Acknowledging both the reactionary and progressive moments in postmodernism, anti-essentialist cultural work might take up the challenge of "writing the political back into the postmodern" (Ebert 1991, 291), simultaneously radicalizing the political legacy of modernism in order to promote a new vision of radical democracy in a postmodern world. One challenge in the debate over postmodernism is whether its more progressive elements can further our understanding of how power works, how social identities are formed, and how the changing conditions of the global economy and the new informational technologies can be articulated to meet the challenges posed by progressive cultural workers and the new social movements.

More specifically, the issue for critical educators lies in appropriating postmodernism as part of a broader pedagogical project that reasserts the

primacy of the political while simultaneously engaging the most progressive aspects of modernism. Postmodernism becomes relevant to the extent that it becomes part of a broader political project in which the relationship between modernism and postmodernism becomes dialectical, dialogic, and critical.

Although the authors in *Education and the Postmodern Condition* largely address the work of Jean-François Lyotard and postmodernism as a site of conflict and struggle, they do so from the perspective of a wide-ranging critical debate. In doing so, the authors display how differences provide the basis for new languages and make struggle imperative to any project that takes human agency seriously. Educators and students who want to understand how postmodern discourses have influenced educational theory through various theoretical discourses will find this book invaluable and very difficult to put down.

<div style="text-align: right">Henry A. Giroux</div>

NOTES

1. For a particularly succinct examination of the postmodernist challenge to a modernist conception of history, see Vattimo 1992, especially Chapter 1.

2. A number of excellent books have appeared that provide readings in postmodernism that cut across a variety of fields. Some of the more recent examples include Jencks 1992, Natioli and Hutcheon 1993, and Docherty 1993.

3. I have taken this issue up in great detail in Giroux 1988 and Giroux 1992.

4. See Clarke 1991, especially Chapter 2. Clarke's analysis has little more to do with a complex reading of postmodernism than a defensive reaction of his own refusal to take seriously a postmodern critique of the modernist elements in Marxist theories.

5. Needless to say, one can find a great deal of theoretical material that refuses to dismiss postmodern discourses so easily and in doing so performs a theoretical service in unraveling its progressive tendencies from its reactionary ones. Early examples of this work can be found in Foster 1985, Hebdige 1988, Vattimo 1992, Ross 1988, Hutcheon 1988, Collins 1989, and Connor 1989; more recent examples include Nicholson 1990, Lasch 1990, Chambers 1990, Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, Best and Kellner 1991, Denzin 1991, and Owens 1992.

6. Homi Bhabha, "Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation," *Kunst and Museumjournal* 5:4 (1994), p. 16.

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Foreword: Spaceship

"Sometimes I dream that I am an astronaut. I land my spaceship on a distant planet. When I tell the children on that planet that on earth school is compulsory and that we have homework every evening, they split their sides laughing. And so I decide to stay with them for a long, long time. . . . Well anyway . . . until the summer holidays!"

On the first day back at school in September David, aged seven and a half, comes home with the following homework: He has to learn this little story by Erhardt Dietl. In the space of one hour he can recite it in the right tone of voice without any mistakes. He has drawn the distant planet in his exercise book and the spaceship approaching it. The first thing that school makes him learn is the happiness of a world without school, with no obligations and no homework. This world exists on another planet. It is reached in a spaceship. The story does not say whether the little dreamer had to study to learn how to pilot the spaceship. It seems just as natural as climbing onto a bicycle. Years ago my sister and I would go off with two or three little friends, on long bicycle rides into the blue Atlantic summer, with our parents' blessing and our day's supplies of food on our carriers.

Perhaps going to school has only ever been to fill in time between radiant holidays. Perhaps the freedom promised by the Enlightenment was really the grace of this summer light bestowed on all. And the process of learning had perhaps as its true goal to give to the child the beauty of the world, its colors, breaths, poems, theorems, and other people.