

Prologue

Modern and Postmodern Thought

Western thinking has been dominated since the middle of the eighteenth century by a philosophy of modernism. Modernism focuses on the idea of the autonomous individual as the primary source of meaning and truth in contemporary culture. Innovation and progress are valued over dogma and tradition. Scientific ways of testing and knowing the world take precedence over faith and traditional systems of knowledge. Reason dominates.

Some theorists refer to modernism as the *Enlightenment Project*. Its roots lie in the late Renaissance. It saw the rejection of a magical and mystical world. Its place was taken by a world of science, reason, and supposed objectivity. Faith in science and the idea of progress became a dominant theme in Western intellectual thought.

In the field of education, the American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) demonstrated his belief in science and the scientific method when he stated, “Ultimately and philosophically, science is the organ of general social progress.”¹ It is a scientific model that has dominated educational thought and reform since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Underlying this model has been the belief that the process of teaching could be reduced down to highly controllable methods and techniques. Psychologists interested in the process of learning, such as Edward Thorndike (1874–1949) and B. F. Skinner (1904–1990), believed that learning involved very specific and repeatable operations or procedures and could ultimately be precisely understood through research based on scientific experimentation.

In reality, scientific models of education have proved less productive than had originally been hoped. In general, over the last twenty-five to thirty years, many scholars have become increasingly skeptical about how much science can help us understand education and society in general. Issues may be too complex, and science too limited, to provide answers about how the world actually works. This certainly seems to be the case in terms of education, which is a far “messier” field than the advocates of scientific models of learning seem to have

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taken into account. Many individuals have abandoned a purely scientific approach and argue instead that we must deal with the realities of a *postmodern* society or culture.

Postmodernism, by definition, challenges modernist and scientific assumptions. Essentially it argues that a new type of culture and society emerged during the decades following World War II. Postmodernism asks if science is necessarily progressive and will improve our lives. It also challenges the objectivity of science.

An example can be seen by looking at research on nuclear science from a postmodern perspective: Is the world better off because of scientific experimentation with the atom? In some regards, yes. No one who has benefited from a medical technology such as a CAT scan would argue against its benefits. But what about the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? What is their opinion concerning the benefits of atomic power?

In this context, the educational theorist Henry A. Giroux argues that we have entered a new period of historical time—that is, a postmodern era.

Postmodernism in the broadest sense refers to an intellectual position, a form of cultural criticism, as well as to an emerging set of social, cultural, and economic conditions that have come to characterize the age of global capitalism and industrialism. In the first instance, postmodernism represents a form of cultural criticism that radically questions the logic of foundations that has become the epistemological cornerstone of modernism. . . . Postmodernism refers to an increasingly radical change in the relations of production, the nature of the nation-state, the development of new technologies that have redefined the fields of telecommunications and information processing, and the forces at work in the growing globalization and interdependence of the economic, political and cultural spheres.²

Other theorists use the term *post-fordism* to describe the complex culture and economic system that has been coming into existence in recent years. According to Stuart Hall,

“Post-Fordism” is a [broad] term suggesting a whole new epoch distinct from the era of mass production. . . . It covers at least some of the following characteristics: a shift to the new information “technologies”; more flexible, decentralized forms of labor process and work organization; decline of the old manufacturing base and the growth of the “sunrise,” computer-based industries; the hiving off or contracting out of functions and services; a greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging, and design, on the “targeting” of consumers by lifestyle, taste, and culture rather than by the categories of social class; a decline in the proportion of the skilled, male, manual working class, the rise of the service industry and “white-collar” classes and the “feminization” of the work force; an economy dominated by the multinationals, with their new international division of labor and their greater autonomy from nation-state control; and the “globalization” of the new financial markets, limited by the communications revolution.³

The changes that are part of a postmodern or post-fordian culture are profoundly important in terms of the field of education. Think about the changes that have taken place in American culture since the early 1980s—changes that reflect the emergence of a postmodern culture. Think about the proliferation of personal computers, the Internet and World Wide Web, drugs such as crack cocaine (introduced in the mid-1980s), and AIDS (not even identified as a disease until 1981). Think about *perestroika* and the end of the Soviet Empire, or the rise of China as an economic and political force. Think about changes in the economy (women increasingly entering the workforce), changes in family structures (the growth in the divorce rate), 9/11 and the war on terrorism, and other postmodern forces that have shaped American and world culture in recent years. What roles have these issues and events played in the creation of a new world order?

What does it mean for the United States to be the only military superpower in the world? What does it mean when American children spend more time watching television than going to school? What does it mean when the San Diego Padres baseball team sells sushi as a snack at their games (not just hot dogs, peanuts, popcorn, and cracker jacks)? These are indications of the emergence of a new culture and society in America. How do these facts, in turn, shape and influence what it means to be educated and the activities of schools and the teachers who work in them?

The following selections by George Counts and Vaclav Havel address the types of changes that we are talking about that represent postmodern forces at work. The editorial by Counts was written in 1934 at the height of the Great Depression. It is included because it anticipates, to a remarkable degree, changes that would dominate American culture and education by the end of the century. It is also important because it assigns a special role to education in the creation of the new social system.

In the case of Havel's 1995 speech/essay, "The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World," we have one of modern Europe's most celebrated intellectuals describing the emergence of a postmodern culture and the need for contemporary men and women to transcend its limitations.

These two pieces are included in this work as a prologue because they set in context where and what our culture is currently about and, ultimately, what it means to teach and learn in a postmodern culture. Closely related is the piece by Jean-François Lyotard (Chapter 35).

As you read these two selections, keep in mind the following questions:

1. How does postmodernism change the experience of teachers working in the schools?
2. How does postmodernism change the experience of learners and the process of learning?

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Notes

1. Dewey, John. 1916. *Democracy and Education*, 239. New York: Macmillan.
2. Aronowitz, Stanley, and Giroux, Henry. 1991. *Postmodern Education: Politics, Culture, and Social Criticism*, 62. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
3. Quoted in Giroux, Henry, and McLaren, Peter, eds. 1994. *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, 12. New York: Routledge.