



Liberal Education and Its Postmodern Critics

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It is a truism to say that education is politicized. Yet my goal here is to show that politicized battles over education are mostly not about politics but about philosophy. Policy battles are heated not only because the practical stakes are high, but because they affirm or deny entire philosophies of life.

What is education's mission? As teachers our goal is to develop within the child the knowledge, character, and skills necessary for successful living as an adult. That takes us directly into philosophy. If education is about knowledge, then what counts as knowledge, instead of merely having an opinion or a hypothesis? How is it acquired—by observation? reasoning? mysticism? faith? Or is knowledge impossible? Epistemology is essential to education.

If education is about character and preparation for successful living, then what is good character and what is successful living? Which traits are virtues and which are vices—pride or humility? Fairness or cheating? Moderation or gluttony? Can those be taught, and if so how? And what values make a successful life—love, wealth, health, wisdom? Ethics may also be essential.

If education is to develop adult human beings, then what does that mean? We are rational but also emotional—are those harmonious or in conflict? We have physical needs and capacities as well as psychological ones—how do our minds and bodies relate? We are subject to biological constraints and environmental conditioning, but do we also have a volitional capacity to shape our own lives? Philosophical questions of human nature are also essential.

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And if education is to enable the young to leave the protective and stylized nursery and school world and enter fully into the real world, then what is that reality? The real world is made up of humans, other animals, and technologies—and beyond that ecosystems and climate systems and solar systems and galaxies. Beyond those natural systems, is there also a supernatural reality of the gods or God? Metaphysics is also central to education.

Many answers have been given to those many questions. The ones most influential on education have been those of the most influential philosophers in history—Plato, Augustine, Locke, Kant, and others.

In broad strokes, the history of education can be divided into three eras: the Premodern era, prior to 1500 or so, in which a traditional model of education dominated—the Modern era of recent centuries, in which liberal education's model came to dominate—and now our Postmodern era of harsh critique of both the traditional and liberal models of education.

Postmodernism fundamentally rejects modernism and premodernism, so let us begin by contrasting modern liberal and premodern traditional education.

Modern vs. Premodern

In the early modern world, the battles over education began as a reaction against traditional practices that were often authoritarian and distant from practical concerns. Approved truths were taught and the false was censored. Students dutifully listened, repeated, and obeyed. The modern education revolution stressed secular practicality, independence of judgment, experience and reason, free expression and play as keys to learning. Consider Michel de Montaigne's 1575 "On the Education of Children":

If he [the student] embraces the opinions of Xenophon and Plato by his own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs but his. Who follows another follows nothing . . . Truth and reason are common to all men, and no more belong to the man who first uttered them than to him that repeated them after him."¹

Montaigne's independence claim is striking, especially in contrast to the view that following authority—whether Scripture, classical texts, or established institutions—was considered proper.

¹Michel de Montaigne, "On the Education of Children" (1575), <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/montaigne/montaigne-essays-1.html#II>

A generation later, in 1597, Francis Bacon proclaimed that “Knowledge is power.”² Bacon is modern in emphasizing the practicality of knowledge as a tool to improve life in the natural world, in contrast to long-held views that knowledge is an end in itself and of other-worldly things often irrelevant to practical concerns.

Galileo Galilei’s 1615 widely circulated open letter makes the modern claim that science and religion are equally legitimate modes of understanding reality, and that experience and reason should take precedence over faith and threats of punishment for those who question or disbelieve. “I do not feel obliged to believe that that same God who has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect has intended to forgo their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them.”³

A generation later comes John Milton’s 1644 blanket rejection of censorship:

Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?⁴

Open publication and discussion by anyone and everyone—that is a strikingly modern method—especially in contrast to long-held claims that error must be censored and that only authority-approved truths allowed into public circulation. These trends are integrated a generation later in John Locke’s philosophy and applied in his *Some Thoughts concerning Education*. Locke adds that learning should be pleasure that is pursued freely:

Great care is to be taken, that [education] be never made as a business to him, nor he look on it as a task. We naturally, as I said, even from our cradles, love liberty, and have therefore an aversion to many things, for no other reason, but because they are enjoined us. I have always had a fancy, that learning might be made a play and recreation to children.⁵

Locke’s remarks are striking in the context of a long history of seeing education as a painful duty undertaken because authorities have decreed it so.

²The full line is “Ipsa scientia potestas est” (“Knowledge itself is power”). Francis Bacon, *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597).

³Galileo Galilei, “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina” (1615).

⁴John Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644).

⁵John Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1692).

From Bacon in 1597 to Locke in 1690 is a revolutionary century of modern ideas displacing orthodox ones. In revolutions, the debates are polarized and the risk of caricature is high. So let us turn to the other side, beginning with the most influential philosopher of education in history. In Plato, we find many premodern proto-authoritarian-education themes given philosophical grounding.

On freedom in education, Plato tells the myth of Gyges,⁶ about the shepherd who found a magical ring enabling him to become invisible—and who used that power to steal, rape, and murder. The story’s moral is that human nature tends to badness, and that humans naturally abuse freedom. Consequently, education must impose discipline and use punishment to correct the human tendency towards evil.

On play and pleasure in education, in Plato’s famous allegory of the cave,⁷ Socrates emphasizes the language of compulsion, pain, and duty. The ignorant learners in chains in the cave do not initiate the process of education. Instead they are *compelled* to rise, *forced* to turn toward the otherworldly light, and their ascent is *painful*.⁸

Also in *The Republic* is Plato’s influential argument for censorship of literature, music, and the arts. The Platonic educator takes up the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry”⁹ and asserts the state-enforced dominance of philosophy. Children must be exposed only to good material and protected from the bad. Yet much in Homer, Aristophanes, and others portrays the gods and heroes as immoral and ridiculous. Therefore, censorship must be vigorous. In *Laws*, we find a Platonic argument for the regulation of children’s games to train them to strict obedience to the laws. The Athenian Stranger says:

[T]here exists in every State a complete ignorance about children’s games—how that they are of decisive importance for legislation, as determining whether the laws enacted are to be permanent or not. For when the program of games is prescribed and secures that the same children always play the same games and delight in the same toys in the same way and under the same conditions, it allows the real and serious laws also to remain undisturbed.¹⁰

⁶Plato, *Republic*, 359a–360d. See also *Phaedrus* 253d–e.

⁷Plato, *Republic* (360 BCE), 515c.

⁸In St. Augustine’s religious Platonism, the doctrine of Original Sin parallels the Myth of Gyges, and Augustine’s famous phrase *Per molestias eruditio* (“True education begins with physical abuse”) parallels Plato’s points about imposed discipline and pain.

⁹Plato, *Republic*, 607b, 386a, 401b, and 595a.

¹⁰Plato, *Laws* (360 BCE), 797a–d.

To the extent that Socrates and the Stranger speak for Plato, this model of education follows: Children must learn (1) rule-following—especially rules made by others, and made in the past—and not to change things, (2) imposed discipline, (3) obedience, (4) censorship, and (5) education as a painful duty. These points from Plato are often phrased as questions and made by the semi-fictional Socrates and others, yet educators applied them more or less consistently, in both religious and secular forms, for two millennia.

A Counter-Liberal Reaction

The modern revolution in education reached intellectual maturity with the representative figures Montaigne, Bacon, Galileo, Milton, and Locke in the long seventeenth century. But the revolution was not decisive for all of Europe, as a counter-revolution was mounted in the German states, especially in Prussia.

Immanuel Kant wrote on education a century after Locke and was well aware of Lockean liberal education. Yet Kant brought his powerful intellect to bear upon attacking it systematically. Locke had emphasized children's self-motivation and freedom to pursue their own interests. Kant disagreed: children must act out of duty, not inclination:

One often hears it said that we should put everything before children in such a way that they shall do it from *inclination*. In some cases, it is true, this is all very well, but there is much besides which we must place before them as *duty*. For in the paying of rates and taxes, in the work of the office, and in many other cases, we must be led, not by inclination, but by duty. Even though a child should not be able to see the reason of a duty, it is nevertheless better that certain things should be prescribed to him in this way.¹¹

Locke argued that we begin *tabula rasa* and become good or bad by our choices. Kant re-asserts a version of Original Sin: “the history of *freedom* begins with badness, for it is *man's* work.”¹² And since we must not repeat Eve and Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, obedience must come first. “Above

¹¹Immanuel Kant, *On Education* (1803). Translated by Annette Churton (University of Michigan Press, 1960), Chapter 4, Section 82.

¹²Kant, “Speculative Beginning of Human History,” (1786). In *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*. Translated by Ted Humphrey (Hackett, 1983), 54.

all things, obedience is an essential feature in the character of a child, especially of a school boy or girl.”¹³

Kant’s emphasis upon obedience was influenced by Johann Georg Sulzer, the leading education theorist in the German states. In 1748, Sulzer stated his fundamental thesis this way: “Obedience is so important that all education is actually nothing other than learning how to obey.” Sulzer elaborates:

It is not very easy, however, to implant obedience in children. It is quite natural for the child’s soul to want to have a will of its own, and things that are not done correctly in the first two years will be difficult to rectify thereafter. One of the advantages of these early years is that then force and compulsion can be used. Over the years, children forget everything that happened to them in early childhood. If their wills can be broken at this time, they will never remember afterwards that they had a will.¹⁴

Much of Kant on education reads like a gloss upon Sulzer. Yet how will students learn obedience given their natural unruliness? Children will often be disobedient: “Every transgression in a child is a want of obedience, and this brings punishment with it.”¹⁵ Kant then presents a taxonomy of disobediences and corresponding punishments.

We again have a striking contrast to the liberal approach, as expressed by Locke: “I am very apt to think, that great severity of punishment does but very little good; nay, great harm in education . . . *ceteris paribus*, those children who have been most chastised, seldom make the best men.”¹⁶

We thus have so far, at a high level of abstraction, a two-way debate between a premodern educational philosophy system—with advocates stretching across the centuries from Plato to Augustine to Kant—and a modern liberal educational philosophy with its roots also in ancient thinkers but developed systematically in the generations from Montaigne to Galileo to Locke.

Postmodernism is a fundamental rejection of both the modern and the premodern. Consequently, it rejects both traditional authoritarian education and liberal education and calls for a distinct third option.

One postmodern element is *cognitive*—whether knowledge is achieved through rational or non-rational methods. (But what if knowledge is a myth

¹³Kant, *On Education*, Section 80.

¹⁴Johann Georg Sulzer, *Versuch von der Erziehung und Unterweisung der Kinder (An Essay on the Education and Instruction of Children)* (1748).

¹⁵Kant, *On Education*, Section 83; Kant, *Confessions*, Book 1.

¹⁶Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education*.

and only subjective stories prevail?) Another element is *ethical*—whether objective value is found in this life or in an afterlife. (But what if no objective values exist and all is amoral power?) Another is about *human identity*—whether individuals are defined by a God-given soul or by the independent choices they make. (But what if individuality is a myth and we are social constructs?) And another element is *political*—whether education should prepare one to assume one's place in a hierarchy or for free and self-responsible living. (But what if hierarchy and freedom are rejected and radical equality substituted?) Most philosophical debates are three-way battles, and postmodernism asserts a consistent third position.

Many philosophical developments over the last two centuries fed the rise of postmodernism, including Karl Marx's strong-versus-weak exploitation theory,¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectival power-politics,¹⁸ John Dewey's pragmatic assimilation of the individual to the group,¹⁹ and Martin Heidegger and the other existentialists' emotionalized anxiety, dread, and disquiet.²⁰ (See my *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* for the intellectual history.)²¹

Suppose we take modernism's pride in its commitment to freedom for individuals, its commitment to extending the franchise, and to eliminating many various arbitrary social barriers. Postmodernists reject this—for anybody who is not a white, male, or ethnically Anglo-Saxon. As Henry Giroux phrases it:

Within the discourse of modernity, the Other not only sometimes ceases to be a historical agent, but is often defined within totalizing and universalistic theories that create a transcendental rational, white, male, Eurocentric subject that occupies the centers of power, while simultaneously appearing to exist outside time and space.²²

Against modernism's claim that capitalism has generated much wealth and extended liberty and property rights, postmodernists argue that Rousseau and Marx were correct: our economic system is dominated by a small group of rich at the top who use society's wealth to benefit themselves at others' expense. Modernists tell a

¹⁷Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

¹⁸Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), Section 259.

¹⁹John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), 163.

²⁰See Martin Heidegger on "the fundamental mood of anxiety" [Angst]. "What Is Metaphysics?" The text of Heidegger's inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg, 1929.

²¹Stephen R. C. Hicks. *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Scholarly Publishing, 2004; expanded edition, 2011).

²²Henry Giroux, *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Educational Boundaries* (1991), <http://tinyurl.com/mtw339c>

good-news story about innovative technologies—airplanes, X-ray machines, antibiotics, computers, and so on. But the postmoderns reply that high-tech military devices are used to exterminate or threaten others, and that our cars, central heating, and easy air flight are ultimately ruining the environment. Technologies and other innovations serve power, and the modern world is self-destroying.

Many postmodernists will claim the moderns' emphasis on reason, experiment, and analysis is merely one way of thinking. Perhaps white males are proficient, but we should not require all to think like white males. Modernism's science is an intellectual imperialism eclipsing other human knowings. Penny Strange, for example, hopes for "an escape from the patriarchal science in which the conquest of nature is a projection of sexual dominance."²³

Modern individualism, postmodernists will argue, masks ongoing group conflict. Human beings are culturally identified—their economic backgrounds, learned gender roles, racial groupings, and the shaping of their technological environments. Consequently, humans are not fundamentally individuals but rather dissolved by the forces of modernity—what Fredric Jameson calls "the death of the subject"²⁴—so modernist rhetoric about being our own selves and thinking independently is a fraud used to cover group conflicts.

Finally, postmodernists target modernism's emphasis on reason's objectivity and competence. The claims of reason are a fraud. In Foucauldian formulation: "It is meaningless to speak in the name of—or against—Reason, Truth, or Knowledge."²⁵ The modernist claims of reason have been shown, postmodernists argue, to be fatally flawed—just as the claims of mysticism and faith in the earlier, premodern era were shown to be fatally flawed.

Instead, the "truth" is a cynical truth that the world is really governed by power and conflict. Rather than a happy-ever-after story of progress that the modernists want to tell—the world is an ongoing series of zero-sum battles—winners versus losers, this group versus that group, amoral power struggles, and so on without end.

Postmodernism's Revolution in Education

What are the implications of postmodernism for education? Frank Lentricchia puts it bluntly: postmodernism "seeks not to find the foundation and the

²³Penny Strange, "It'll Make a Man of You," in Michael Kaufman, editor, *Beyond Patriarchy* (Oxford University Press, 1987), 59.

²⁴Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 15.

²⁵Michel Foucault paraphrased by Todd May, *Between Genealogy and Epistemology* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 2.

conditions of truth but to exercise power for the purpose of social change.”²⁶ The postmodern world of education is a struggle for power, and all participants must enter the fray. Chandra Talpade Mohanty focuses the point upon women and Third World people: the academy and the classroom are

political and cultural sites that represent accommodations and contestations over knowledge by differently empowered social constituencies. The teachers and students produce, reinforce, recreate, resist, and transform ideas about race, gender, and difference in the classroom.²⁷

None of the competing ideas can claim truth, Henry Giroux reminds us in “Border Pedagogy as Postmodernist Resistance.” Postmodernism has rejected premodern-religion-friendly and modern-science-friendly philosophies: “It does this by refusing forms of knowledge and pedagogy wrapped in the legitimizing discourse of the sacred and the priestly; its rejecting universal reason as a fundamental for human affairs.”²⁸

But still, according to posmodernists, the “transcendental rational white, male, Eurocentric subject”²⁹ dominates education, and privileging that group has diminished others: “Read against this Eurocentric transcendental subject, the Other is shown to lack any redeeming community traditions, collective voice, or historical weight.” This calls for revolution—an institutional restructuring of higher education—with many components.

Under modern education, one expectation has been that all individuals possessing reason can learn, regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity, and that a collision of different perspectives helps everyone learn. But, postmodernists argue, the mixing of dominant and minority groups leads to the silencing of minorities. So we need separate academic fields for the disempowered groups—women, blacks, Third World peoples. That will, Mohanty argues, support those groups’ “attempts to resist incorporation and appropriation by providing a space for historically silenced peoples to construct knowledge. These knowledges have always been fundamentally oppositional.”³⁰

²⁶Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 12.

²⁷Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Feminism and the Language of Difference,” chapter 8 of *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, edited by Henry A Giroux and Peter McClaren (Routledge, 1994).

²⁸Henry Giroux, “Border Pedagogy as Postmodernist Resistance,” in *Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics* (1991), 245–246, <http://tinyurl.com/mtw339c>

²⁹*Ibid.*, 245.

³⁰Mohanty, “Feminism and the Language of Difference.”

Another restructuring component follows from the rejection of education as a pursuit of truth and its replacement with education as the training of social and political activists. Following Lentricchia, the postmodern educator's task is to help students "spot, confront, and work against the political horrors of one's time."³¹ The educator next cultivates students' identification with the oppressed, which transforms them into revolutionaries. The oppressed Others can, in Giroux's words, "both reclaim and remake their own histories, voices, and visions as part of a wider struggle to change those material and social relations that deny radical pluralism."³²

Further restructuring focuses on teacher training. Everything else in the postmodern transformation follows from first transforming the teachers into cultural workers who, in turn, transform the next generation. Therefore, we need to remake higher education primarily about teacher/activist-training. Most contemporary Western teachers are themselves white, humanistic, and heterosexual, and most have been conditioned to think in terms of premodern religion or modern scientific liberalism. They must become self-reflectively critical of their own identities to become more sensitive to nonwhite, non-human-centered, and non-heterosexual ways of thinking about things. As Giroux phrases it, "This suggests that to the degree that teachers make the construction of their own voices, histories, and ideologies problematic they become more attentive to Otherness as a deeply political and pedagogical issue."³³

The rest of education can then be recast along postmodern lines:

- (1) Curriculum matters, including decisions about what texts will and will not be read.
- (2) Speech policies within the classroom and on campus, including which views can be expressed and which views cannot.
- (3) Guest speaker invitations and disinvitations.
- (4) Methods of evaluating student performance, and
- (5) Hiring policies for teachers and administrators.

The Future of Liberal Education

Educators are often thoughtful and passionate human beings, and they are sensitive to whether a particular policy coheres or conflicts with their

³¹Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change*, 12.

³²Giroux, "Border Pedagogy," 250.

³³*Ibid.*, 252.

philosophical commitments. Yet typically those philosophical commitments are implicit or semi-articulated. So a purpose of this essay has been to highlight a three-way philosophical battle over education. I have presented premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism as idealized types, though within those idealized types there are variations and continuing attempts to blend them.

An open question then is how education should proceed given that both the policy and underlying philosophical debates are not—and are not likely ever to be—settled. I will answer only in terms of my own commitments to modern (liberal) education.

There is an asymmetry of purpose in the three approaches to education. Premodern education has historically tended to slip into an authoritarian indoctrination. Postmodern education has not been any different, with its “politically correct” indoctrination. Both easily devolve from education in the full sense to training of mere followers and activists.

For liberal education, the imperative is different. Liberal education is the education suitable for free individuals. That requires the development of individual judgment and the capacity for self-responsible action that respects the rights of others. All of that requires informed judgment on the many challenges of life, from love, friendship, and family to economics, religion, politics, and aesthetics. Free thinkers must know their own commitments and the arguments for them—but to make those commitments well they must also know the arguments against them, and the arguments for and against the other major positions. There are no shortcuts.

So education’s standing policy should be to insist upon true intellectual diversity in the curriculum and faculty. Professors can and should have something to profess. Yet their first responsibility is to ensure that their students are in a position to assess independently what is being professed. Any self-respecting teacher will cover all of the major arguments, and any self-respecting education institution will ensure intellectual variety among its professors. Our only method of making progress on matters of controversy is to shun all coercion, all the way from the subtle indoctrination of young minds to the outright physical intimidation of anyone.

Liberal educators must affirm, in Thomas Jefferson’s words, “the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion.”³⁴

³⁴Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826.