

After postmodernism: Education in an exhausted modernity

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I. A brief sketch of the mood of late modernity

„Modernity“ is another word for „crisis“ - there is nothing new or original in that view. Notions such as Weberian *disenchantment* (of the world) or Lyotardian *delegitimation* (of the great modern narratives) are just different ways of understanding the nature of this crisis at the heart of which we can find a great lack of „vertical transcendence“ (Ferry, 1996). Separated from God, unable to believe in the power of universal reasoning, and aware of the political and ethical tragedies that are rooted in the modern division between subjective liberty and the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* („ethical life“), the late modern person is used to the gap between the (modern) discourse of emancipation and the (modern) reality of injustice. As economic *globalisation* appears to look more and more like the opposite of *universal* morality (Baumann, 1997), this gap becomes so obvious that even the „average consumer of modern ideas“ is able to give a rather plausible account of the modern crisis. In spite of this, however, the crisis is not perceived as being in urgent need of resolution. The late modern person, fully aware of this gap, is not shaken by it. She may recognise that there are good reasons to be indignant, but this most „political“ feeling, indignation, is only a rare visitor to the late modern person. Her heart is sceptical, and no longer attached to the project of human betterment (Touraine, 1997); she is acutely aware of the fragility of humanism. This does not make her „anti-modern“ since she still acknowledges (1) that the roots of her subjective liberties are in juridical autonomy and (2) that authenticity is found in her own personal, private life (which, however, ironically is often quite standardised, after all; cf. Beck, 1986). The late modern person feels the „malaise of modernity“ (Taylor, 1991), the tragic competition between the modern „hypergoods“ (Taylor, 1989), and between autonomy and authenticity in her personal life (cf. Menke, 1996). But she also knows that these modern „roots“ are the consequence of a process of *uprooting* (to put it paradoxically). In fact, modern forms of life gather their attractiveness by denying any substantial or „material“ embeddedness; their attractiveness is due to a presumed *neutrality* towards any modes of transcendence and, in consequence, to a lack of moral *imperatives*.

The term *late* modernity, introduced by Giddens (1991), shall be used in this paper to refer to the state in which the price of modern uprootedness is recognised. The debate between communitarians and liberals during the last two decades (see Brumlik & Brunkhorst, 1993; Honneth, 1995) can be viewed as a symptom of the increasing insight into the price of

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modern uprootedness. It is during this period that a radical and aggressive economic neo-liberalism has demonstrated to the world that the *homo politicus* has become a clownesque self-interpretation of the modern subject. As economic rationality continues to „colonialise“ (Habermas) the *Lebenswelt* (life world), the old modern project of moral betterment of humankind is buried in the graveyard of great human ideas. Our *late* modernity is not so worrisome because of its „reflexivity“ (Giddens, 1991) or „radicality“ (Welsch, 1988) but rather because of its „exhaustion“. The late modern person is still familiar with the vocabularies of emancipation, progress and justice, and, in this sense, she no longer has to be „enlightened“. But the brightness of the idea of a moral subject who acts according to universal laws is gone and it becomes clear that this is not due to the deficits of modern moral thinking or anti-modern cultural or religious forces. Rather, it is the modern ambiguity of equally legitimate interpretations of subjective liberty - namely juridical autonomy and personal authenticity - that has led to tensions within modern culture and the modern self. While the „anti-tragic confidence“ (Menke, 1996) is still cultivated in liberal versions of modernist discourses, late modern discourses are much more modest and sceptical (they are „Hegelian“ rather than „Kantian“, so to speak). It is as if the *homo politicus* had to revoke his „erroneous belief“ that the world could be changed by means of words and reasoning. Anti-liberal movements (conservative communitarianism, religious fundamentalism) can therefore be seen as attempts to bring the *enchantment* back into the world and the *power* back to words. From this perspective, it seems confusing to view so-called postmodernists as anti-modernists (as has been the case for a decade; cf. Rosenau, 1992; Beck, 1993): most „postmodern thinking“ is much too *liberal* to be anti-modern (see second section). But while modern-postmodern discourse is still a sign of the existence of a belief in the usefulness and meaningfulness of critique and argumentation, the late modern subject appears to be much more „mute“, a silent contemplator of the increasing gap between pathetic discourses and sober realities. It might be true that the late modern self is still a listener to her „inner voice“, but at the same time she knows that this voice can be less and less trusted as she continues her (psychologised) self inquiries. Educational philosophy that does not give special focus on the political helplessness and the psychological farce of the late modern subject seems to have an intransparent, somewhat diffuse function in educational discourse. It seems more appropriate to acknowledge the fact that the late modern educational subject is *worn-out*, exhausted from the discursive roller-coaster rides of emancipation and human progress. Is there still anyone who can firmly and exclusively use the vocabulary of Enlightenment without being reminded of the dark sides of modernity, without demonstrating an embarrassing narrow-mindedness, and without evoking feelings of inauthenticity? In our late and tired modernity some dreams are close to death, some of them concern the power and the significance of education in the „modern project“.

II. The dramaturgy of the modern-postmodern discourse

Dramaturgies make life interesting. The dramaturgy of the modern-postmodern educational discourse has made education interesting again. What is *really* the case, is not important as long as discourse moves on. "Discourses", as Parker says, "allow us to see things that are not 'really' there". Once „an object has been elaborated in a discourse it is difficult *not* to refer to it as if it were real" (1992, p. 5). In the centre of the dramaturgy of the modern-postmodern discourse in education lies what can be called an „architectural metaphor“ (cf. Uhle, 1993): society, on the one hand, is understood to have a moral *foundation*, a *groundwork* of shared values that form the *basis* of social interaction and (legitimate) practice; and theory, on the other hand, is viewed as being *founded* on shared concepts of rationality or truth. The role of postmodernism in this dramaturgy, then, was to delegitimize or deconstruct this foundation, the upshots of its efforts being ethical relativism and theoretical chaos, or, in other words, the establishment of a Nietzscheian „nothing is true, everything is allowed“.

Indeed, such a perspective seemed to be the beginning of the end of modern education and pedagogy (cf. Baacke et al., 1985; Beck, 1993). It was due to this dramaturgy of discourse that rather wild debates occurred, but in these debates a link between educational discourse and the „real“ situation of society and education was never really sought. It is still unclear whether social practice and theory-generation depend on „unshakeable“ foundations and whether such foundations are, after all, possible. Long before the postmodern debate in education, „serious questions“ have been raised "about accepted conceptions of a nonrelative science, a nonrelative truth, and a nonrelative rationality" (Foster & Herzog, 1994, p. 3). But the architectural metaphor which spurred on the dramaturgy of educational discourse and the self misunderstandings of its participants is not immune to criticism. Societies are not structured like buildings, and modern education does not primarily focus on the training of „construction workers“ who are able to repair the cracks of societies' presumed foundations. Modern societies do not depend on *rational* consensus (as a widespread „operationalisation“ of a modern foundation), even though it might be argued that such consensus with regard to (normative) values or theoretical premises is desirable, and even if the belief in the possibility of rational consensus might be a necessary feature of any argument (Apel, 1988; Habermas, 1983). The manifold nature of social and scientific life, and of practical and theoretical interests, requires a variety of situation-specific criteria that, as can easily be shown, in most cases turn out to be incompatible (cf. Eilingsfeld, 1994). The decision about which criterion is valid or useful in a specific situation may be based on rational argumentation, but the "power of the better argument" (Habermas, 1991) largely depends on the existence of a shared language game, a discourse type in common. This power may fully dissolve as different games are played and no common "highest or superior judge" (Welsch, 1988), in other words, no "supreme principle" can be found that could possibly be agreed upon. What Lyotard (1984) calls "meta-narrative" is actualised in the modern belief that the aim of *inter-*

discursive consensus could be achieved by means of rational argumentation. However, the lack of a "superior judge" does not necessarily lead to confusion and chaos, and it does not mean that consensus could never be reached when different players are playing different games; rather, it means that agreements reached in such situations do not have a superior or shared rationality as a base, and are not due to the power of the better argument but to *some kind of* co-ordination process (cf. Giegel, 1992). With regards to relevant theoretical and ethical issues, argumentation finds itself often in a stalemate situation where opposing arguments turn out to be equally legitimate, yet incompatible. Nevertheless, decisions have to be made, and this means that the claims of rationality have to be revised in order to co-ordinate interests and validity claims. Social and even scientific life is full of agreements that are neither based on shared rationality nor shared values or shared theoretical premises. Such foundations are not necessary for social interaction or solution-processes in disputes. According to the foundationalist view, agreement is not possible in the absence of shared principles, a shared rationality. But the foundationalist is left with the need to account for the fact that social interaction takes place and solutions are reached in contexts in which there is a disparity between rationalities.

It is an ironic element of the dramaturgy mentioned above that a workable definition of the postmodern situation does not seem possible in the view of many (even postmodern) authors (see Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 2-9). The standard definition of modernity standing for universal validity claims, a homogeneous nexus of moral, theoretical and esthetical ideas, is far from being beyond reproach. If this the case, then we can hardly expect a satisfactory definition of *post*-modernity to be forthcoming. It may be argued though, that modern thinking is based on the duality of the particular and the general, singularity and universal, and that it is mainly interested in generality and universality. Particularity, diversity and discontinuity seem to create a problem for this perhaps central strand of modern thinking (cf. Foster & Herzog, 1994). The existence of the unique and the singular only seems to be accepted as long as it is able to serve as an example for something more general. Postmodern authors such as Lyotard (1989) give prominence to the singular, to experiences and situations that are not comparable, maybe not even understandable. This is the starting point of any postmodern ethics, the sceptical attitude towards the *one and only* truth and the *one and only* morality. Following Usher & Edwards (1994), one could argue that postmodernists critique "faith in rationality and science with its promise of inevitable progress in the task of human betterment" (p. 9). But such a view is modern as well, because it reflects the discursive character of modernity (in which principally everything can be the object of critical discourse). The same authors provide an approach to a positive "definition" of postmodernism: "Perhaps it is best understood as a state of mind, a critical, self-referential posture and style, a different way of seeing and working, rather than a fixed body of ideas, a clearly worked-out position or a set of critical methods and techniques" (p. 2). But this approach, too, fails to clearly distinguish postmodernity from modernity. For modernity,

being discursive in character, provides a base for radical plurality (Welsch, 1988). We can see this in the diversity of key concepts and methodology in any of the social sciences. Even postmodernism's focus on difference, singularity, and „examples“ (which do not seem to refer to generalities but rather to other examples) is not a new view.

A more adequate starting point for distinguishing postmodern from modern thinking might be to look at the different use of esthetical judgement in the moral and theoretical domain. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant (1991/1790) developed a theory of aesthetic judgement that adequately accounts for such situations. Aesthetic judgements are essentially different from moral judgements on the one hand and scientific judgements on the other. Judgements of taste, as Kant calls them, are seen to be "peculiar in that they not only rest on feelings but also claim universal validity" (Walsh, 1967, p. 319). According to Kant, aesthetic delight is disinterested. This allows us to think of it as universally shared. The universality claim that Kant has in mind is not objective but *subjective*. Judgements of taste connect the special, the singular with a *newly created* universality, a universality that is not given objectively but is treated as such. Postmodernists often refer to the aesthetic mode of judgement in order to show what could be meant by the relation between singularity and universality but, of course, they do not accept Kant's strict dualism of an empirical world and a world of reason. „Postmodernists“ may also use this mode (judgement of taste) in the context of theory and morals. „Modernists“ will deny that aesthetics is relevant to these two domains (Welsch, 1995).

Another possible way of differentiating postmodernism from modernism is the former's understanding of culture as a system of signs (Lövlie, 1992, p. 120) and its implication that signs do not have meaning in themselves but rather by the place they occupy in relation to other signs. According to this view, concepts such as autonomy, when viewed as central attributes of the modern subject, can be looked at as products of language, and in this case, of the modern discourses of emancipation and authenticity. The view of culture as a net of heterogeneous and interrelated systems of signs, and the view that there is no direct or clear link between the sign and the referred object "behind the sign" have great impact on the understanding of the educational subject. Subjectivity and the construction of the self are thus part of sign systems contingent to culture and history, yet they are neither fully arbitrary nor fully determined. We may then understand the meaning of the self and of subjectivity by examining language games as they are played. As Wittgenstein suggested (1968/1952), meaning is use.

If the foregoing considerations on the relevant distinctions between postmodernism and modernism are correct, then the language game metaphor seems to be an appropriate way of reflecting on educational discourses. This implies some modesty with respect to the use of generalisations. Just as there is no universal form of language, language games have no point in common which allows us to identify them as games. There is only what Wittgenstein called "family resemblance" (There might be a striking resemblance between several

generations of the same family, close study shows that there is no feature common to all members of the family). Language games are only small segments of the whole of language, and the modern language game of moral autonomy is only a small part of the whole of education.

As soon as the language game metaphor is accepted, the dramaturgy of the modern-postmodern discourse dissolves because it becomes evident that questions of educational philosophy neither refer to decontextualized truths nor to arbitrary modes of thinking but rather to context-bound modes of talking about and reflecting on a phenomenon which can be regarded as an „anthropological constant“ and which has been the subject of reflection long before the terms of modernity or postmodernism were introduced into these specific and somewhat „esoteric“ language games. In short, the debate on postmodernism can be interpreted as an expression of a modernity which is fully aware of its own vulnerability and ambiguity, a modernity that has lost its attractiveness, its moral impetus, and its hope, a modernity with an *open future* (to state it pleonastically).

III. Education in a sober late modernity

As modernity arrives at the point where one has a feeling that the time of great projects and visions belongs to the past (Gergen, 1990), language games of the self become obtrusive and even coercive because the self seems to be the only "locus of control" left to the late modern individual (Beck, 1986). In consequence, the canonised language games of the self marginalises other language games. Security, meaning and authenticity are increasingly sought in the self. Christopher Lasch described this tendency in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979). When the social world and education are mainly interpreted in psychological terms, in terms of needs, feelings and motivation, the notion of autonomy as morality -- as it is understood in the Enlightenment tradition -- becomes obsolete and even implausible (cf. Reichenbach & Oser, 1995; Reichenbach, 1998). If the subject and the self are not to be understood as monolithic and independent entities, one might conceptualise them rather as being like "texts", which are exclusively understandable within a symbolic system of differences, transformations and substitutes (Derrida, 1981; Lövlie, 1992). The late modern self might then be seen as "language game player" (Meder, 1987, 1994). The late modern language game player may also play the psychological games of the self but she will refuse to believe in a "true" or "real" self. She doubts the necessity of trans-situational consistency in judgement and action, and will therefore not invest great amounts of time and energy in the search for her "real" self, the very "nature" of human beings or personal "authenticity". She knows that these notions are contingent constructs, even if more or less useful ones, constructs that -- depending on the language game being played -- fit well, and sometimes provide an impression of truth and depth. The language game player may know about her decentricity, about the inconsistencies

in her feelings, opinions, and values, and she may know about the relativity of making sense of life. She does not really feel that she is the very centre of her life, and she does not mourn that loss of illusion. She plays different games, which are authentic to her, and she lives in a world where heterogeneous language games are played. She defends diversity, but she is very modest when it comes to universal claims with regard to presumed fundamentals postulated as preconditions of any liveable plurality (Reichenbach, 1998).

The late modern person experiences that the „wind of freedom“ is a „harsh wind“, to state it with the poet Conrad Ferdinand Meyer; it experiences a „naked“ freedom, a freedom which is not attached to a common moral project or vision. Education can thus no longer be legitimated by referring to a better future or to transcendental ideas. Many sociological findings have made it all too clear that the education systems of modern mass societies produce „winners“ and „losers“, and that the social inequalities are rather reinforced than neutralised through education. The idea of education as the vehicle of emancipation and future justice therefore has become rather ironic. This irony cannot be undone by still more pathetic modern moral discourses of justice and emancipation which finally only illustrate the disconnectedness of modern ideas and modern reality. It might be true that we still need these great modern ideas for our late modern self-understanding and self-description, but, at the same time, we feel how powerless they have become. Education itself has become an ironic enterprise; even if the necessity of and the need for education will remain, one has to admit that certainty concerning the proper aims of education (and even of what education is all about) is gone. Further, it is an ironic „solution“ to state highly formal and abstract educational aims in such a situation: moral, social and cognitive competencies, critical ability, personal autonomy with respect to one's own beliefs, and the like. Such (noble) aims are simply another way of saying that we do not know what kind of substantial moral abilities and attitudes are preferable and necessary for the future. This seems equally true for often-stated aims of the future „learner“: flexibility, availability, („life-long“, of course) willingness to learn, and others. Such aims are just words that fit well with the imperatives of the late modern global market situation. Nevertheless, they are empty concepts and only represent a rather naive „response“ to the obtrusive neo-liberal ideology, which seems to proclaim a world in which the quick learner, the socially smart person, and the physically healthy will be better off. Education, but also educational „theory“, as it accepts this type of world interpretation becomes the most uncritical partner of a purely economic order. It is at this point that education cuts its last link to Enlightenment thought, detaching itself from the tradition which saw education as the precondition of the development of moral subjects that would be able to discursively form the future society according to a moral vision. At this point, the great modern idea of education as serving the moral betterment of society will then only be invoked in grandiose public discussions, and like the lessons taught in a sermon, promptly forgotten once beyond the church doors.

However, there is perhaps no need to be too pessimistic: the modern goods of autonomy and authenticity continue to be central for the modern identity. This is the reason why it seems unavoidable that the late modern individual will sooner or later experience the *scandal* of his or her life. This experience stands as the crack where political thinking will be reintroduced in the educational discourse. The educational subject will then be conceptualised in a more ironic modern framework and may overcome its exhaustedness and/or neo-liberal smoothness. Late modern education, because it is still interested in the formation and development of the moral subject, will overcome its unmodern lethargy and passivity by admitting that it experiences the scandal of helplessness. However, as long as education is accepted as a servant of anonymous mass society, and not as a practice of human liberty (cf. Arendt, 1994; Fink, 1987, 1992), no scandal will be perceived.

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