Articles

The Retreat of Marxism and Socialist Feminism: Postmodern and Poststructural Theories in Education*

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ABSTRACT

Anyon uses her personal history as a contributor to the resurgence of progressive scholarship in the late 1970s and early 1980s to critique recent work in education. She argues that Marxist thought has failed to develop and has been largely abandoned by critical scholars, many of whom now seek empowerment for teachers and students through postmodern and poststructural ideas. She undertakes an analysis of these new theories, and of their instantiation in educational scholarship that claims to use them to foster empowerment and change. Anyon assesses the political possibilities and consequences of these theories and the practices they entail. The goal of the analysis is to identify theory that will be useful in struggles for a more equitable society.

The publication of Bowles and Gintis’s Schooling in Capitalist America in 1976 can be viewed as a watershed in educational criticism. This book was followed by a large number of publications critical of the contours and effects of education in the United States. Representative works included publications by Michael Apple (1979, 1982), Henry Giroux (1981, 1983), Madeleine Macdonald (1981), Madan Sarup (1980), Rachel Sharp (1980), Paul Willis (1981), Young and Whitty (1977), and myself (1979, 1981). The ideas that attracted those of us on the Left included an insistence that social class, forms of labor, and structures of political and economic power were fundamental in perpetuating not only educational but other social inequalities. We called ourselves “cultural workers,” and were hopeful that we would influence students and

*Editor’s Note: A response to this article appears in the Dialogue section of this issue.

colleagues to work for social transformation—fundamental change in education and other social systems.

By 1985 the body of work produced by the Left in education had reached substantial proportions. Socialist-feminist insistence that Marx’s conceptions were based on male experience and would therefore need to be altered to address women’s concerns had become a focal point (Anyon 1983; Apple 1983; Arnot 1983; Deem 1980, 1983; Gaskell 1984; Lather 1984).

My own contributions to the field were soon curtailed due to single parenthood and university administrative duties. It was not until the spring of 1990 that I reentered the scholarly arena by attending a conference of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). As I looked through the program, and attended a number of sessions at this national meeting, it became apparent that the ideological scene had shifted dramatically in the five years of my absence. There was only one Marxist-oriented session that I could locate (one to which I had been asked to respond), and I could find no sessions that appeared to take a socialist-feminist perspective.

Moreover, the Marxism of the papers I critiqued seemed simplistic and mechanical; both theory and data were predictable. The authors addressed issues such as control by the state, ideology in curriculum, and tracking, all of which had been discussed in the very same way, using the very same language, ten years earlier. In these papers Marxism seemed stuck in the categories of analysis whose use now seemed politically naive: “revolution,” “capitalist exploitation,” and “vanguard of the working class.” The term social transformation seemed to have lost a sense of possibility. The uncritical use of these terms entrenched the dialogue in categories whose referents and relevance on the world stage could no longer be taken for granted. It seemed to me, and I stated in my role as discussant, that although these problems remained important, the discourse of Marxism in education—as exemplified in these analyses—had failed to develop.

Other sessions at the 1990 AERA conference suggested that the interesting critical work was now being done in “postmodern” and “poststructural” modes, by scholars who regarded the idea of opposition between worker and capitalist as a limiting and critically useless binary opposition. Such categories had become to these scholars quaint remnants of the “Marxist metanarrative.”

Subsequent perusal of current publications in education revealed to me that this shift was apparent in a younger generation as well as in established scholars whom I had been used to thinking of as Marxists, critical theorists and socialist-feminists. I decided that I must investigate the new paradigms since, after all, postmodernism and poststructuralism were presented by theorists in education as ideas that promoted social change—by promising improved critical practice, empowerment, or emancipation (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Britzman 1991; Cherry-

My dissatisfaction with Marxism, and my study of postmodernism and poststructuralism, have been motivated by a concern which I hold to be of central importance, and that guides the analysis in the rest of this paper. That concern is best phrased as the question, What makes a theory useful? By “useful,” I intend that such a theory would make usable recommendations to those who work for a more humanitarian, more equitable society, and, consequently, this theory will have a progressive effect on society itself. I share the assumption of many Marxists, feminists and postmodern/poststructuralists that philosophy cannot be torn from its political context.

I also believe that the political context can in turn be affected by cogent (useful) theorizing. I concur with Brian Fay when he argues that social theory can be a “catalyst for social change” (1975, 110), and that such a theory is one that “attempts to provide a means whereby social actors can solve the problems which are facing them.” Moreover, a politically useful theory is not judged primarily by epistemological criteria. For, as Fay argues, “the truth of this theory is . . . judged partially on whether or not the satisfactions which it promises are forthcoming” (108).

It is my contention in this paper that the relation between theory and the practice it recommends becomes crucial if the theory is to have a role as an agent of social change. Karl Marx (in volume I of Capital) argued that human activity, as purposive and mentally imagined (or “theorized”) exhibits the integration of theory and practice. The more recent mainstream view of the theory-practice relationship has been that these are separate and distinct phenomena. Theory is scientific or philosophical, and practice is behavioral and problem oriented.

Postmodern and poststructural theorists (e.g., Rorty 1980; Ryan 1984), however, hold that while there are obvious differences between theory and practice, the two are integrated in that they inform each other in basic ways: Theory exemplifies a kind of practice, and practice always instantiates a particular theory. Indeed, postmodern and poststructural approaches to the relationship between theory and practice valorize the connections between the two, and attempt to integrate theory and practice in research and other work (see, e.g., Britzman 1991; Cherryholmes 1988; Lather 1991; Weedon 1987).

I applaud the postmodern/poststructural position on the value of integrating theory and practice. I want, however, to make several points that will become important later in this paper: In order for theory and practice to inform each other, as postmodern and poststructural theories argue they do and should, precepts of the theory ought not contradict, or oppose, ways in which the theory is executed (in, say, postmodern scholarship, research, and teaching). Indeed, the precepts of the theory must be, quite literally, capable of enactment. Moreover, and this point
is significant, if theory and practice are to be integrated, then practice itself ought to be a primary resource from which those theoretical recommendations that are made are drawn.

**POSTMODERN AND POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORIES**

While poststructuralism has an older and more direct lineage (in that it is constituted by scholarly work that opposes such structuralists as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure), postmodernism is diffuse, and involves a more general 'structure of feeling' (Harvey 1989) that pervades many disciplines and artistic endeavors. The two kinds of theories overlap in many cases, often subsumed in and by each other. Indeed, as Susan Bordo has remarked, these theories have a way of "slip-sliding" away: Through paradox, inversion, self-subversion, facile and intricate textual dance, they often present themselves (maddeningly, to one who wants to enter into critical dialogue with them) as having it any way they want” (Bordo 1990, 144).

There is, indeed, an "intricate textual dance” to these theories. In addition, there are various types or genres (e.g., feminist postmodernism) within the group. However, I think it is possible to identify three analytical heuristics on which, among postmodern and poststructural theorists, there seems to be general agreement: the importance of the local, the validity of deconstruction, and the centrality of discourse. These, as will be demonstrated, all have implications for the social utility of the theories.

Informed in large part by the writings of Michel Foucault (1972, 1973, 1980) and Jean-François Lyotard (1984), postmodern/poststructural approaches attempt to assess local power relations rather than large, abstract social structures. This purposeful limitation is intended as a corrective to the large-scale analyses of structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss and (especially for Lyotard) Karl Marx. Eschewing the metanarratives of Enlightenment thinkers, who utilized categories and explanations purporting to apply across cultures and epochs, postmodern/poststructural theorists argue that ad hoc, local narratives that avoid metatheorizing are appropriate because they produce truths (lowercase t) that are more likely to capture the complexity of situations. Large-scale analyses are deterministic and thereby reductive of this complexity. Modernist (Enlightenment) metanarratives (for example, of progress through science) are also suspect (Lyotard 1984) because they purport to be privileged, normative discourses, capable of legitimating and evaluating other discourses, but not themselves in need of legitimation or subject to the same evaluation (see also Baudrillard 1981, 1984).

Postmodern/poststructural approaches to meaning also valorize the local, as opposed to the universal. Because there are no universal Truths to which we can assign transcendental applicability, assessment ought to avoid the use of transcendental signifiers—generalizations or guiding
principles that are assigned a privileged status (Derrida 1981). While each discourse produces its own "truth," the actual meaning of this truth is said to be uncertain. The uncertainty of meaning is based largely on Derrida's notions of the textual dispersal and deferral of meaning, whereby meanings are never clear because the constituent terms cannot be pinned down (Derrida 1981, 1982; see also Lacan 1977).

A second heuristic in postmodern/poststructural theories is deconstruction, an approach to critical analysis based on work by Derrida (1981, 1982; see also Culler 1983). Most uses of deconstruction involve identifying the rhetorical operations that ground an argument and then demonstrating that the terms being used are contradictory or philosophically unstable. This may involve locating a set of conceptual categories that are thought to be discrete and in opposition to each other, and demonstrating that they are in actuality not in opposition but are definitionally interdependent. A major goal of deconstruction is to show that many of the categorical oppositions that permeate traditional social analyses (e.g., male/female, culture/nature) are socially constructed rather than natural and immutable (Hutcheon 1989). The postmodern/poststructural position discussed above, that theory and practice are mutually constitutive, is an example of the use of deconstruction, in which it is argued that the mainstream opposition between theory and practice is falsely premised.

Deconstruction has been widely applied in both the humanities and social sciences. Michael Ryan has argued in regard to political economy, for example, that binary distinctions in Marxist theorizing (base/superstructure, political force/economic development, and private/public) are spurious distinctions, open to the deconstructive critique that rather than being different or exclusive poles (or spheres), they are merely differential, and part of each other (1984, 83).

Deconstruction seems to me to provide a particularly astute analytical method, not unlike the strategies used by Marx in, say, Capital, Volume I: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, and by some Marxists (see, e.g., Anyon 1979). I have appropriated deconstruction as a useful strategy in this paper, and will use it as a way to assess postmodern and poststructural theories in education.

A third construct that I find helpful when thinking about the uses of postmodern and poststructural theory is the argument that discourse does not (language does not) reflect either human consciousness or an external "reality" (Derrida 1973, 1982). Poststructural and postmodern theorists define language in ways that attempt to free linguistic meaning from the determinism of structuralist definitions, in which meaning is fixed by predetermined binary opposition. Postmodern and poststructuralist writers want, rather, to open up the field of meaning to "language at play" and the "endless dissemination of signifiers" (see Derrida 1973, 1981, 1982). In this view, actors are not central to the process of signification; as participants in discourse, we use words whose previous uses carry meaning which goes beyond our intentions.
Some postmodern and poststructural writers emphasize the political nature of discourse (see Foucault 1980 and Bakhtin 1981). For these writers, a discourse implies a political apparatus, a community, and the power to assign legitimacy. Discourse sets conditions of what kind of talk occurs, and which talkers speak. This view of language insists that human subjectivity is not at the center of meaning. Rather, subjectivity is constructed by the discourses that interpolate it (Althusser 1977; Foucault 1980).

**POSTMODERN AND POSTSTRUCTURAL DILEMMAS**

As someone who "cut her teeth" on Enlightenment theories of the Marxists, and who was comforted by the apparent ability of Marxism to apply on a grand scale, I have been moved and instructed by the postmodern/poststructural critiques. The new scholarship has taught me a respect for ambiguity—an appreciation of partial theories and of the complexities and possibilities of an attempt to assess local networks. I have also gained a healthy respect for the power of discourse—and of totalizing narratives—to influence subjectivity. I have gained a new understanding of the uncertainty that must attend reliance on any one discourse.

However, postmodern and poststructural critiques, while certainly instructive, leave me with what in much earlier days I would have called "existential angst": While I have been cautioned by these new theories against reliance on any one set of terms, interpretation, or discourse to analyze society, postmodern and poststructural theories offer what can only be called "a set of terms"—that is, an interpretation of society, a discourse, which I am supposed to privilege. That the approach has such a basic contradiction is a source of concern, and will be explored further below.

Other contradictions within postmodernism and poststructuralism deepen my concern. For example, while these theories caution against traditional binary oppositions in received thought, I found as I was reading the texts of postmodernism and poststructuralism that these theories are themselves based on a number of binary oppositions. For example:

- postmodern/modern
- poststructural/structural
- ad hoc theory/totalizing theory
- local narrative/metanarrative
- aesthetic, nonscientific/scientific, rationalistic
- decentered subject/centered subject
- many truths/one Truth
- difference/essentialism
- deferral of meaning/fixed meaning
- nonbinary(binary thinking

In postmodern and poststructural theories, as in the binary oppositional thought they critique, one term in each of these pairs of categories
is given a positive value, and the terms are commonly used to oppose
“new,” or postmodern, ways of thinking to “old” (e.g., Enlightenment)
ways of thinking (see also Hassan 1985; Harvey 1989). Thus, while these
theories posit that binary oppositional thinking is limiting and should be
avoided, postmodern and poststructural practice is in large part based
on this type of thinking.¹

These contradictions in postmodernism and poststructuralism lead
me to ask: Can theories which contradict fundamental precepts of their
own design constitute a reliable guide to emancipatory practice? My anxi-
ety here does not result from the ambivalence Zygmunt Bauman (1992)
argues flows from the many “freedoms” he alleges postmodernism
unleashes. Rather, my worry is about the usefulness for progressive social
change of theories which often argue that they provide an oppositional
framework, yet contradict in practice fundamental positions they put
forth.

The next portions of this paper assess the social usefulness of post-
modern and poststructural theories, as these theories are instantiated in
recent educational scholarship of Cleo Cherryholmes, Patti Lather, Eliz-
abeth Ellsworth, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren. The analysis will
identify aspects of the theories that would provide assistance to those
who work for empowerment and change in education. The analysis will
also identify aspects of these theories that would hinder such work.

POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORIES IN EDUCATIONAL CRITICISM

Cleo Cherryholmes’s text (1988) is an example of a work that adopts
poststructural ideas in order to avoid the limitations perceived in
Enlightenment thinking. Cherryholmes argues that “the possibility of
[poststructural] understanding brings with it the promise of increased
freedom and power, increased freedom from existing social structures,
and more power to create our societies and schools” (149). Two funda-
mental problems of Enlightenment thinking Cherryholmes attempts to
overcome are binary oppositional thinking and deterministic metanar-
ratives (10–15).

Cherryholmes uses Derrida’s method of deconstruction to point up
the contradictions and conservative political biases embedded in the
binary oppositions of traditional educational discourse (22). In regard to
the commonly assumed distinction between subject-centered learning
and learner-centered learning, for example, Cherryholmes argues that

learners do not exist without subjects and a subject to learn does not exist without
previous learners. When subjects are valued over learners, the interests of learn-
ers who constituted the subjects (experts) are valued over the interests of other
learners (students). It is simply the case that the subject-centered/learner-cen-
tered distinction privileges learners who are subject-matter experts. (P. 140)

Deconstruction is skillfully used by Cherryholmes to reveal contradic-
tions embedded in many of the binary oppositional categories assumed
by educators (e.g., researcher/researched; cognitive/affective; concept/fact; terminal objective/intermediate objective [see chap. 3]).

I would argue, however, that Cherryholmes fails to unearth basic binary oppositional assumptions of his own. Not only does his text share the defining poststructuralism/structuralism dichotomy noted in the preceding section of this paper, but there are other binary oppositions that infuse his text. Several of these are as follows: indeterminacy of meaning/fixed meaning (see chaps. 1, 4, and my discussion below); many truths/one Truth (see chaps. 4, 6, 8, and below); and critical pragmatism/vulgar pragmatism (see 151–52, 178, and chaps. 7, 8).

Cherryholmes makes a clear distinction between indeterminate and fixed meaning. This distinction underlies analyses he undertakes in the rest of the text concerning what we can know and do about educational matters. Valorising indeterminacy, Cherryholmes argues that “meaning is not centered or fixed” (134). Meanings are always in flux, indeterminate, and exhibit “difference” (continual change and deferral). “Deconstruction demonstrates an ever-present instability in meanings . . . that structural interpretations obfuscate” (123). “Textual slippage, disruptions, discontinuities, ambiguities and incompleteness are found everywhere” (66).

Cherryholmes’s argument that it is impossible to pin down the meaning of any text or discourse also reflects his commitment to the position of Lyotard and Foucault that Enlightenment metanarratives purporting to describe universal Truths are suspect. I would argue however that, like the Enlightenment scholars he dismisses, Cherryholmes is also putting forth a metanarrative that purports to describe a universal Truth. This is a metanarrative of indeterminacy; a metanarrative about the certainty of uncertainty. Arguing that meaning is always indeterminate seems no less a deterministic and universalizing view than Enlightenment narratives such as the orthodox Marxist view he critiques, in which capitalists are “always” expropriators, and workers “always” righteous.

The presence of a subtext of binary oppositions in Cherryholmes’s text, and the deterministic metanarrative of indeterminacy at its core, are, I would argue, unintended traits his text shares with the Enlightenment philosophies he critiques.

Cherryholmes also shares classical liberal social values of the Enlightenment. Human dignity was a goal valued by Enlightenment philosophers. These philosophers argued for human dignity on the basis of abstract individualism. The model for what counted as an individual was male, of the upper classes. It was assumed that human liberty, dignity and equality were not affected by one’s gender, class or race (Harding 1986, 1990; Harvey 1989).

Cherryholmes states, “I believe promoting human dignity is an important, if not the most important, educational goal” (172). Like the classical thinkers of the Enlightenment, he also ignores what are in fact important effects of one’s class, race, and gender on the assignation of dignity by society. The gender, racial and class characteristics of individuals are not
integrated into the discussion of human dignity (172–176) in a meaningful way, nor are they examined elsewhere. Women are mentioned in three sentences of the book, and minorities in several as well; there are no entries in the index for women, sexism, feminism, blacks, minorities, or social class.

Thus I find that insofar as Cherryholmes’s text exhibits fundamental characteristics of a method of thinking and valuing he seeks to transcend, he fails to enact basic theoretical premises he adopts. His text exemplifies a fundamental problem of postmodern approaches: basic theoretical premises that are advanced are not carried out in practice.

This flaw, it should be noted, is not inconsequential to the utility of social theories generally. It proved fatal to Marxism. While Marxism theorized an equal society, its practice was in most cases totalitarian. The effectiveness of twentieth-century feminism, as well, has been circumscribed by the discrepancy between its theory and practice: while theorizing about “women” in general, its practice until recently involved primarily women of the white middle class.

POSTMODERN AND POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORIES IN EMANCIPATORY RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY

Patti Lather’s scholarship exhibits in quite interesting ways the attempt to use postmodern theories to enhance the emancipatory potential of research and teaching. In her book, Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy Within the Postmodern, Lather (1991) reports results of a three-year study in which she assessed university students’ “resistance” to the “liberatory curriculum” (xix, 70, 80) of a women’s studies course she was teaching. Students were asked to respond (on a questionnaire and in journals and interviews) to questions about their attitudes toward sex oppression in society and the effect of the course on these attitudes (77–79). They were also asked to include in their journals responses to a chart Lather made, entitled “Stages of Feminist Consciousness-Raising” (127).

Lather (1991) states that she is sensitive to the possibilities of imposition of researcher “enthusiasms” (64). She argues that positivist and other orthodox methodologies erroneously promise value-neutral social science (52). Rather, she states, “values [do] permeate inquiry” (50); but the postmodern strategy of self-reflexivity “will [if developed] keep us from being imposition” (80; see also 64, 76, 78, 92). She argues that “key issues revolve around this central challenge: how to maximize self as [researcher]... without becoming imposition” (64).

Self-reflexivity, and Lather’s postmodern understanding that “to put into categories is an act of power” (1991, 125), prompt her to claim that she avoids imposing her own point of view. In an attempt to avoid imposing her point of view she interprets the students’ responses to the course under four different rubrics (these are, loosely following van Manen 1988, a realist tale, a critical tale, a deconstructivist tale, and a reflexive tale [128, 129–151]).
Lather (1991) states that she is sensitive to the issue of voice, as well. She argues, following Elizabeth Ellsworth, that the postmodern sensitivity to “Others” insists that emancipatory pedagogy have “no prescription” (146). Rather, pedagogy should depend for its goals and strategies on the voices and interests of the classroom participants (43).

She urges in regard to the issue of voice that the “transformative intellectual” of critical pedagogy must be decentered as the “master of truth and justice” in order that the voices of students and research subjects be heard (47, 138; see also 76). She believes that a collaborative approach (92) to research can allow the researched to “speak in their own voices” (129). She states that in order to allow the students to have their own voices in her study, “the survey grew out of dialogue with students enrolled in the course and is, hence, couched in their own language and understanding of key experiences in taking the course” (129).

I want to suggest that Lather’s research and pedagogy (that is, her practice) do not meet the theoretical hopes she has for them. She—as pedagogue and researcher—defined, a priori, and prescribed, the terms of the course (a feminist analysis of society); the terms of liberation (the “liberatory” women’s studies curriculum); the study itself (assessment of student responses to the course); and the rubrics by which the student responses would be interpreted. Lather is clearly at the center here.

As she herself states, to put into categories is an act of power. For teacher and syllabus to categorize liberation as resulting from feminism is to define the terms and frame the discussion of what liberation is in powerful ways. No student in the published report, for example, raises the possibility that liberation, if needed, could come from other sources such as religion, wealth, Marxism, socialist-feminism, and so forth (130–132, 135–136, 140). Thus, in responding to Lather’s questions about sex oppression in society and the effect of feminism and her course on “liberating” them, the students are not using their own voices so much as responding to Lather’s in hers.

One could argue that the discrepancy between Lather’s theory and practice comes about because she failed to follow the precepts of a chosen guide (e.g., postmodern theories). I agree with this rather obvious statement. I want to make the following, more fundamental point, however: the theory makes research and pedagogical demands that are in all likelihood as impossible to carry out as the positivist precepts for value-free inquiry. Indeed, to argue, as does Lather, that one can decenter one’s voice from one’s discourse, remove prescriptions from one’s pedagogy, and avoid imposing one’s “enthusiasms” in research, is to put forth a curious (although unintended) version of the positivist argument that one’s social science can be objective.

Like Lather, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) has utilized postmodern theories as a guide to emancipatory work in the classroom. Ellsworth’s article, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” provides an example of how the postmodern attention to local dynamics of power can facilitate direct
political action. Ellsworth advertises a curriculum course that has as a goal to combat incidents of racism on her campus. She works with the students who enroll to understand and “interrupt” offensive institutional “business as usual” (298–299).

Ellsworth attempts to use “critical pedagogy” (Giroux 1986) and finds it does not allow her to engage in the kind of dialogue that, she alleges, would lead to political activity. She argues that the pedagogical prescriptions of critical pedagogy are too abstract, relying on rational discussion and employing general terms like “minorities,” “the state,” and “critique” (1991, 298, 300–306).

In contrast, she focuses on the local: the immediate classroom and campus environment (299). She argues that in order to promote political action, classroom power relations must be addressed (299, 302). She initiates a dialogue with her students that attempts to analyse the ways their differences of skin color, sex, social class, sexual orientation, weight, age, religion, place of national origin, and ability (310) affect classroom dynamics. Her point is that each individual’s perspective is admittedly partial yet potentially oppressive to others (311).

However, by forming friendships (what she calls “affinity groups,” 317), and by forging voluntary alliances (318) that are sensitive to the perspectives of others in the group, anti-racist activities that do not oppress others in the class can be planned and carried out (318). She and the students execute several actions that confront institutional “business as usual” at the library mall and administrative offices (319–320).

Ellsworth’s work demonstrates how a focus on the immediate environment, with which the participants are familiar, can be used to initiate direct political interventions that may not be encouraged by abstract theorizing about, say, “racism in the United States today.” It seems that a focus on the local may serve postmodernism well as a politically useful characteristic.

I want to raise a troublesome issue here, however. When we read postmodern accounts of “the local,” such as Ellsworth’s account of classroom dynamics and institutional racism, we are reading accounts that have been fictionalized. By this, I mean to point to the fact that analyses of the “micro” always contain some understanding of the larger, the societal, the enveloping “macro.” In the case of racism, for example, some knowledge of the ways in which racism is structured by the laws, conventions and histories of our society, some knowledge of the ways in which the economy, technologies, and sexism interact with racism—these are always present, even if implicitly, in analyses of local power dynamics.

I would argue that in Ellsworth’s case, an assumption of the systematic nature of oppression in our society, based on one or more “grand narrative” of some sort, influenced the decisions she and her students made. (Ellsworth uses, for example, the phrase “racist society,” 302; and “racist culture,” 303). I would argue that such metanarratives informed the analysis of classroom and institutional relationships of power, the choice of which relationships to attempt to “interrupt,” and the method of
doing so. Such grand narratives as informed their understanding and
guided their practice are not included in the published report, however,
and apparently entered the classroom discussions, if at all, only periph-
erally. An analysis of the larger picture forms, however, it seems to me,
an important and influential subtext.

What is at issue here is not merely a distortion in reporting. What is
at stake is the adequacy of theory (and, ultimately, well-informed prac-
tice). In this instance Ellsworth’s practice is informed by more than the
theoretical premises on which she attempts to base it. While the theory
makes the impossible demand to “stay local,” in fact her analysis was
substantially more global.

In part the dictate to stay local is caused by the postmodern binary
opposition local theory/totalizing theory, in which ad hoc, partial theo-
rizing is valued. I will suggest later that it would enhance the accuracy,
and therefore ultimately the utility, of theory if we attempt to transcend
such oppositions, redefine labels like micro/macro, and focus not only on
local manifestations or on abstract, structural characteristics, but also
(and explicitly) on the relationships between them.

The educational scholarship reviewed so far demonstrates disjunc-
tures between postmodern theory and practice that, I have argued, limit
the ability of the theory to contribute to efforts at social change. Theo-
retical premises are not or cannot be enacted, and the theory does not
therefore provide the guide to practice that is intended.

POSTMODERN THEORIES AND IDEOLOGY

Analysis of Henry Giroux’s work will demonstrate an unintended social
consequence of this disjuncture between theory and practice. Giroux,
like Lather and Ellsworth, proposes emancipation through the infusion
of postmodern theories. He reports his suspicion of metanarratives,
arguing that educational scholars should attend to the contingent, the
specific, and the historical (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, 81). He also
insists that critical pedagogy involves letting students speak, as well as
attending to the “voices” of marginalized Others (see, e.g., Giroux 1991,
chap. 8; also, Aronowitz and Giroux 1991, 82, 83, 102, for example).

As Ellsworth noted in 1989 (300) there were no voices of Others in
the work by Giroux that she reviewed. Contrary to Giroux’s pronuncia-
ments, readers were given no sense of what the different perspectives
and stories of students or marginalized Others are, or what they would
say if given the chance. However, in a more recent publication, Giroux
(1991, chap. 8) discusses the work of several black women writers, citing
the importance of their contributions. The African American author of
Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics, bell hooks, offers her opinion
of being discussed by what she calls “radical critical thinkers” (150):

I am waiting for them to stop talking about the “Other,” to stop even describing
how important it is to be able to speak about difference. . . . Often their speech
about the “Other” is a mask, an oppressive talk hiding gaps, absences, that space where our words [those of the Others] would be if we were speaking, if there were silence, if we were there. . . . Often this speech about the “Other” annihilates, erases: “No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Rewriting you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk,” Stop. (Pp. 151–152)

A paradox in the proposal by postmodern scholars to place Others at the center of their talk is that to do so in a meaningful way is to give up pages (and authority) in one’s text. While this might be desirable in some instances, the focus of the proposal is in part misguided: What must occur, in addition to postmodern discussions, is that social conditions must be created that foster opportunities for Others (e.g., blacks, Latinos, students) to publish (or act or paint, etc.) without having to go to the white majority for “space.”

The marginalization of Others’ voices in Giroux’s text is part of a larger problem, which needs to be addressed. This problem is the predominance of abstract concepts. I agree with Proefriedt’s (1989) complaint that Giroux’s theorizing is largely inaccessible to those Others whose freedom it argues for. I want to go beyond this critique, however, and point out an important social consequence of abstract theorizing (exemplified by, but in no way limited to, Henry Giroux). Here I am referencing discourse that draws primarily not on material from empirical findings, but on concepts from other theories (see, e.g., Giroux 1991).

Marx (1971, 1973) and Marx and Engels (1976) developed a concept of ideology, which Marx used to critique the German Hegelian philosophers whose abstractions, he believed, mystified and obfuscated the empirical conditions of people’s lives. Ideology, for the early Marx, was a method of thinking about society which gives primacy to concepts and their speculative manipulation. Rather than being grounded in people’s activities and the material conditions thereof, ideological thinking uses abstract concepts regarding “human nature,” “species being” (or, in the case of postmodernism, “transcendental subject,” or “border pedagogy”; see Giroux 1991).

C. Wright Mills called abstract theorizing the “withdrawal into systematic work on conceptions” (48). This withdrawal confines us (as readers) to a conceptual level that is divorced from a realistic ground. Dialogical relations between observable reality (school life, structure, personnel and their beliefs, authority relations, embeddedness in economic situations, etc.) and useful theoretical concepts are obscured. The abstract concepts manipulated by the ideologist become a boundary to inquiry (say, about how schools and teachers can change) rather than a beginning. This boundary to inquiry hampers efforts to discover, for example, practices that will provide the desired changes.
In his analysis of capitalism, Marx studied how relations among people come to take on the appearance of relations among things. His analysis of the fetishism of commodities shows how the presence of workers is severed from the product, as the product enters into relations in which it is exchanged for money in such a way that commodity and money appear to have agency.

I want to argue that just as in capitalist economic interchange where agency appears displaced from people onto commodities and money, so in abstract theorizing agency is displaced onto discourse. As thought is separated from events, language appears to be an independent realm. The universe on paper is not only perceived as independent from lived existence, but it (the discourse, the ideology) is assigned power otherwise attributed to people.

In some postmodern and poststructural approaches, a sense of personal agency is thwarted not only by this valorization of abstractions, but by definitions of terms that overtly transfer agency from persons to language. The definition of “the subject” common to postmodern and poststructural discussions, wherein subjectivity is constituted by the discourses that interpel late it (Althusser 1971) is an example of this transference, as is Foucault’s position that “statements speak us, we do not speak them” (Shapiro 1981, 141). Peter McLaren’s formulation represents another version of this position. He states, “Language is not a disembodied mode of communication but rather constitutes what Denys Turner calls ‘an intensification of the bodily powers’ as well as an extension of these powers. By being inserted into the abstractive power of language, our bodies become intensified and extended” (1991, 154).

It becomes apparent from such talk that in ideological production concepts become fetishized; moreover, as the production of articles and books continues, the ideology functions as a kind of “currency”—a medium of exchange among ideologists. One consequence of course is that the ideologist accrues financial and other benefits from the production of ideology.

A more important consequence however, when texts are written with emancipatory intent, as are Giroux’s and McLaren’s, is that the process tends to legitimate the production of theoretical discourse as political ‘struggle’. While language can be, as Bakhtin (1981) has suggested, an important form of political resistance, the extreme valorization of abstract theorizing ignores the great power of more direct political activity (of the kind, say, of which recent events at the Berlin Wall and in the former Soviet Union are an example). What gets lost in the production and promotion of abstract theory is the power of people fighting for change in concrete situations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF Socially USEFUL THEORY

I have argued that postmodern and poststructural theories are flawed in ways that reduce their emancipatory uses in education; in some cases one
could argue that the theory serves primarily the interests of those who produce it. I want to suggest now that the task confronting progressive scholars in this historical period is to develop theoretical approaches that will be of real help in the fight for a better world.³

In what follows I assume that the goal (the social struggle in which I would use a theory) is the working out of Marxist and socialist-feminist hopes for economic democracy. By naming this project, I recognize and want to emphasize that the particular program for which a theory is actually used is not a matter of epistemology or other theoretical criteria, but of political values.

Toward politically useful theory then, I offer the following characteristics that, I suggest, would enhance the ability of postmodern and post-structural as well as Marxist theories to make significant contributions to our emancipatory efforts.

Categories of a socially useful theory would not be produced primarily by reference to other theories. Rather they would result from a dialogue between concepts of one’s goal or vision, and people’s current activities and problems. As C. Wright Mills (1959) argued long ago, “One great lesson that we can learn from its systematic absence in the work of the grand theorists is that every self-conscious thinker must at all times be aware of—and hence be able to control—the levels of abstraction on which he [or she] is working. The capacity to shuttle between levels of abstraction, with ease and with clarity, is a signal mark of the imaginative and systematic thinker” (34).⁴ Such thinkers do not make a fetish of the text (or of concepts) nor do they glorify empirical “facts” (or practice).

Useful theory would be neither total (and therefore seamless and deterministic) nor completely ad hoc and applicable to only one locale. Rather, it would acknowledge the complex narratives that connect larger social structures and daily life, and would seek what sociologists have long called middle-range theories—those that connect local activity to widespread societal constraints. It is important that middle-range theories could elucidate social origins and contours of people’s problems without suppressing a sense of personal agency—because these theories do not impose a totalizing, overdetermined view of the system in which changes are sought.

A penultimate characteristic of socially useful theory is that the theoretical recommendations put forward must be capable of enactment. Moreover, these recommendations should embody the values and ultimate goals of the theory. Thus, a theory that urges the integration of theory and practice must develop types of praxis that exemplify this; a theory that urges, as does Marxism, the end of oppression, must not oppress others.

Related to the preceding characteristic is a final attribute: A theory that would be useful in changing society will identify direct actions to be taken. Useful theory will have as a primary goal not the refinement of concepts, but successful political activity. Useful social theory ought to be (in part) “read out of” social activity, just as it ought to feed back into and direct future activity.
I would like to mention work in which I am engaged as an example of activity that attempts to be useful in the ways I have just recommended.

I am involved in educational reform efforts in a city that is characterized by extreme poverty and racial marginalization. I carry out cooperative learning staff development workshops with teachers, and follow up in their classrooms to coach them in the new strategies. I am also doing qualitative research on the effects of this and other, more comprehensive, educational reforms in the district (e.g., administrative restructuring, training for teachers and administrators in shared decision making, and nongraded primary classes, among others). I am finding that massive amounts of money and effort of the last four years have not made significant changes in the schools.\(^5\)

I have recently begun to theorize from this failure, and from failures reported by research on school reform in other parts of the country (Sarason 1990; Collins and Hanson 1991; Wehlage, Smith, and Lipman 1992; Rothman 1993). Various aspects of my attempt to arrive at useful theory are briefly described below and will be reported in two forthcoming publications (Anyon 1994a,b).

In these articles, I read out of unsuccessful reform activities theoretical assumptions embedded in them. I argue that these assumptions (say, about the relations between educational and other institutions) have implicitly guided recent reform efforts. I argue that educational reform has failed in part because the theoretical constructs underlying the reforms have provided misdirection.

Based on analysis of data I have gathered as a participant in reform efforts, I deconstruct a basic conceptual apparatus which structures the way schools and school reforms have been conceptualized. As a result of this deconstruction, and in conjunction with my own visions for change, I formulate theoretical assumptions about school reform that I feel would be useful. On the basis of these assumptions I argue that significantly different activities should be undertaken in the effort to upgrade schools in American cities.

In Anyon 1994b I describe a plan by community groups (in the city I am studying) that reflects theoretical assumptions I have identified as potentially useful. In the article I discuss that in order to assess the usefulness of this reconstructed theory the activities themselves will need to be tested to see if they are successful (see also Anyon, n.d.). This empirical assessment will give some indication whether the underlying constructs have in fact provided useful social theory.

NOTES

This paper benefited enormously from critiques of earlier versions. I want to thank Fran Bartkowski, Deborah Britzman, Janet Miller, Diane Poland, and Gary Roth for their comments on earlier versions. I want to thank my daughter, Jessie Anyon-Bird, for her very valuable assistance in this project.
1. In contrast to the claims of postmodern and poststructural theorists about their work, I do not claim that my own thinking is free of binary oppositions (e.g., useful/not useful theory). As the analysis of postmodern and poststructural theories in this article demonstrates, it is very difficult to leave the baggage of structuralism behind.

2. It is important to acknowledge that I do not bring the voices of “Others” into my own text. However, I do not claim to be doing so, and I do not claim that it is important to do so.

3. My own attempt to lay out criteria for a theory that is politically useful in struggles for social justice contrasts with Bauman’s (1992) effort to delineate analytical criteria for a sociology that would successfully account for major features of what he and others have called “postmodernity.”

4. C. Wright Mills’s own *The Sociological Imagination* is an example of this kind of work.

5. My findings are corroborated by a recent district survey, and by a state evaluation of the district.

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