

CAN CRITICAL THEORY SAVE ADULT EDUCATION FROM POST-MODERNISM?¹

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Abstract

This article is written for adult educators who have become intrigued by the increasing amount of discourse and publications in our field, promoting 'critical theory', 'critical pedagogy', 'critical adult education', 'critical thinking' and the like. The aim of the article is to offer an interpretive framework which makes sense out of this trend towards the 'critical'. The recent controversy between critical theorists in philosophy, education generally and particularly adult education, and post-modernism will be used here as the background against which this trend towards the critical can not only be understood, but moreover should be evaluated.

Résumé

Cet article s'adresse aux éducatrices et aux éducateurs d'adultes dont la curiosité a été piquée par le nombre croissant de discours et de publications qui ont fait leur les concepts de «théorie critique», de «pédagogie critique», d'«éducation des adultes à la critique», de «pensée critique», etc. Le but de l'article est de fournir un cadre interprétatif susceptible de mieux faire comprendre ce courant axé sur la notion de «critique». La récente controverse—que ce soit en philosophie, en éducation ou plus spécifiquement en éducation des adultes—entre, d'une part la théorie critique et, d'autre part, le post-modernisme, est utilisée ici comme toile de fond à partir de laquelle ce courant axé sur la notion de «critique» peut non seulement être compris mais devrait également être évalué.

The penetration of critical social theory into education and more specifically into adult education has reactivated a debate about the relation of adult education to society. The last time such a debate took place was in the late 1960s and the early 1970s in the context shaped by the counter-culture and the New Left movements. Adult education's major, and probably only

¹ The assistance of Margaret Riordan and Brent Snow is gratefully acknowledged.

institutionalized program, the program of 'lifelong or permanent education', stems from this time. After the decline of the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and the institutionalization of lifelong or permanent education, debates about socio-political issues and goals of adult education diminished as well. However, adult education did not become a less social or less political activity.

Since the beginning of the 1980s a somewhat similar situation arises in a different socio-cultural context. It is a context shaped, among others, by growing individualism which some qualify as post-modern. As a consequence, critical theory in philosophy and education today plays a very different role from the role it played in the 1960s: instead of intellectually accompanying the social movements of the time, critical theory now fights for the ideals of the 1960s against some intellectuals who try to express the general climate of the 1980s.

The goal in this article is to identify what critical theory still can offer to adult education in the context of today's post-industrial or post-modern societies. In order to do that, I will first characterize post-modernism, as well as why it is being attacked by critical theorists. This will allow me to highlight what answers critical theory actually proposes to adult education. Finally, I will discuss what the most likely outcome of critical adult education in a post-modern context will be.

Critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical (adult) education probably are adequate responses to the new challenges our societies increasingly will have to face. Nevertheless, my attitude towards critical theory remains ambiguous. Critical theorists are some of the only persons who today still ask political as well as technical questions. Critical adult educators are the small minority who conceive of adult education practice in a broader perspective than one of technical training or humanistic personal growth. However, the esoteric language and the level of abstraction of this very debate often repels the few colleagues who are interested in reexamining our profession's relation to contemporary society. Nevertheless, in the absence of a social movement that would make critical theory and therefore this debate socially meaningful, this may be the best we can expect in the 1980s and 1990s.

What is post-modernism and why is it being attacked by Critical Theorists?

Post-modernism is a movement which has its origins in art and literary critique, as well as in architecture (e.g. Jencks, 1977; Welsch, 1987). In architecture, post-modernism means a mix of all possible and imaginable styles; in literature, it is an exact as possible description of reality that is in itself destructured and incoherent. Art and literature originally were part of the project of modernity and contributed to the

enlightenment of the citizen through culture and elevation of his/her spirit; however, their post-modern versions seem to have given up this project. Post-modern art, literature and architecture simply contemplate, express or, at best, provoke. In short, post-modernism in these fields has become synonymous with the absence of structure, with incoherence and with the loss of criteria.

Philosophy is probably the academic discipline which comes closest to literature. Observing post-modernism in literature, philosophers, by the end of the 1970s, seem to have gone through a general awareness process and detected post-modern tendencies even within philosophy (e.g. Berman, 1982; Kolb, 1986). In philosophy, post modernism is said to have its origins in subjectivism, i.e. mainly in phenomenology and hermeneutics (e.g. Cahoone, 1988). It is obvious, however, that post-modern tendencies in philosophy relate to a more general evolution of the way philosophy has come to view the relation between the subject or the mind on the hand, and reality on the other hand. Even without explicitly referring to phenomenology and hermeneutics, the academic discipline of philosophy has undergone since the Second World War a significant transformation, which some have come to call the 'linguistic turn'. As a consequence, today's mainstream philosophy has become almost identical to the analytic philosophy of language. Now, this linguistic perspective is in itself highly relativistic and subjective: 'language games' replace meta-narratives or philosophical systems. Contemporary philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend has probably best summarized this tendency by stating: 'Anything goes!' (Feyerabend, 1975 & 1987).

Several mainly French philosophers have become famous for defending post-modern positions. Several more socially oriented ones among them have conceptions relevant to adult education. Jean-François Lyotard, in his book on *The Post-modern Condition* (1984), is probably the first one of these philosophers to have become an engaged defender of post-modern trends in philosophy. For him, philosophical post-modernism means the dissolution of what he calls 'metanarratives'. *Metanarratives* are unifying philosophical systems or projects, such as liberalism and Marxism. According to Lyotard, they are the result of evolving information technologies (mainly computers and media). Consequently, post-modern society and individuals have to face the explosion of knowledge, multiple language games, as well as scattered or 'little narratives' (Kellner, 1988a). Any re-combination of knowledge now becomes possible and even justifiable. As a consequence, any form of *unifying* criteria, discourse or philosophical framework becomes obsolete, which in turn promotes fragmentation and individualization. Each individual can now build a narrative of his/her own, one that fits itself best.

Jean Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b, 1983c) comes to similar conclusions by focusing on different aspects. According to him, the main cause of post-modernism is not so much information technology as the underlying process of technological acceleration. Indeed, technological growth accelerates socio-cultural life and ultimately leads to what Baudrillard calls the 'implosion of meaning'. Not only does this acceleration not have any meaning in itself, but, moreover this very process erodes the still existing meanings. Baudrillard's conclusion of the 'end of meaning' is therefore more pessimistic than Lyotard's fragmentation.

For both Lyotard and Baudrillard, post-modernism is possible only because there is an underlying evolution towards a post-industrial society. According to Daniel Bell (1973 & 1976), the famous American sociologist and theorist of post-industrialism, the passage from the an industrial to a post-industrial society is the shift from a society which produces material goods to a society whose main focus is on the production of knowledge. This evolution is accompanied by the growing autonomization of the cultural sub-system, i.e. the system in which post-war individuals increasingly find their self-fulfillment. Once separated from the techno-economic and the politico-administrative sub-systems, the cultural sub-system has no limits, and is purely expressive. Anything goes. Personal self-fulfillment in a post-industrial society is therefore simply a matter of individuals expressing themselves. The characterization of the post-industrial or the post-modern individual needs to be pursued, since it is this individual who is the focus of today's adult education practice (Kade, 1989).

In the 1980s, several authors followed up on Bell's conceptual framework, focusing in particular on what the individual of the end of the 20th century might look like. French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (1983 & 1987), for example, identified a unique process of growing individualization and personalization. This process is mainly composed of two tendencies, both of which shape the nature of the post-modern individual. First, there is the tendency towards aesthetics and eroticism: the logic of argumentation is increasingly being replaced by the logic of images, a logic that, Lipovetsky says, favors seduction, show and look. Secondly, there is the passage from public to the private, where everything becomes referred to the individual alone. The outside world becomes psychologized. Increased narcissism is the overall result.

According to the American historian Christopher Lasch (1979 & 1984), Narcissus appears to be the figure that best characterizes the post-modern individual. For Lasch, the emergence of Narcissus announces a new stage in the evolution of individualism, since this post-modern

individual has a new relationship to itself and to its body, as well as to other individuals. One of the key characteristics of Narcissus is a the loss of a sense of history. The desire to live 'here and now' becomes dominant and gradually eradicates considerations about the past and the future. Baudrillard has best characterized this post-modern individual (1989: 20):

The individual continues but its idea has disappeared..... It is the end of something, not in an apocalyptic or a pessimistic sense. It is the end because something has come true. This is a much more final end than something that dies tragically.... This individual is not about to disappear, because it forms one single unity with the functioning of the masses, with the functioning of the network.... For sure this individual will not disappear . But it does not have much interest anymore; it does not have any strategic value; *I don't see what one could do with it, how a political order could be planned on it, or a disorder, or a subversive perspective, a revolution.* Remains an individual without alternative, without others. (emphasis added)

It is obvious that, with such an individual, the big projects of modernity - be it liberalism or Marxism - could not be achieved. Understandably, this post-modern discourse is not acceptable to almost any socially committed person. However, only critical theorists, a form of radical philosophers, have since the beginning of the 1980s raised their voices. They have become the only ones to publicly defend their philosophical 'metanarrative' of modernity against the post-modern discourse. By doing so, critical theorists have transformed the defense of modernity into a philosophical, abstract, and ideological debate. Unfortunately, they have made the 'discourse on post-modernism' become the object of the debate, as opposed to what this discourse actually reflects. But, in their critique of post-modernists and their ideas, the critical theorists do not appear to be very original. In fact, they attack post-modernism for mainly two reasons.

First, they say, post-modernists have abandoned any perspective for social change. Indeed, post-modern philosophers have a very cynical perspective, which hardly leaves any hope for social change, at least not for a change that fits into the main philosophical metanarratives. Secondly, by having abandoned any perspective for social change, post-modern philosophers and philosophies are said to be conservative or neo-conservative (Habermas, 1981). For critical theorists, post-modernism is nothing really new, simply a brand of a particularly alienating discourse or ideology. This critique, of course, neglects the

underlying socio-cultural phenomenon which post-modernism expresses and highlights.

What do critical theorists then propose to adult education?

Though critical theorists vigorously react against post-modern discourse in philosophy, they do not address the challenge. Instead, they propose an updated version of Marxism, i.e. precisely critical theory, as the only answer. In the absence of anyone else speaking up against post-modernism, critical theorists have become today the only ones to defend the ideals of Enlightenment and modernity: freedom, justice, democracy and emancipation. This is at least the case in philosophy, in education generally, and in adult education in particular. However, it is questionable whether these ideals of modernity are an adequate answer to the type of problems which, as post-modern philosophers point out, are precisely the product of modernization. In order to assess the potential of critical theory for adult education today, it is necessary to briefly present its origins and evolution.

The very beginning of critical theory was an intellectual reaction against rising fascism in Germany. A group of Marxist intellectuals of Jewish origin gathered in the 1920s around the newly created Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt (Jay, 1973). They interpreted rising fascism, not as an accident in history, as most of the social scientists and social philosophers did at that time, but as an intellectual challenge to the foundations of mainstream philosophy (liberal and Marxist), which, in essence, predicted the inevitable ascent of human spirit and Reason (i.e. the process of Enlightenment). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the most typical representatives of this first generation of critical theorists, came out of this experience highly sceptical (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1974): their critical theory of society expressed serious doubts about whether the individual, as shaped by modernization, would actually be capable of making the ideals of modernity come true. However, they saw no alternative to Enlightenment.

But, if philosophers and educators refer today to critical theory, they do not have in mind Adorno, Horkheimer or other critical theorists of the first generation. Their key reference is the second generation critical theorist, Jürgen Habermas (1972, 1974, 1984, 1987a, 1987b). Habermas's context of reference is very different from that of the first generation. It is the context of the Germany of the 1960s, the Germany of the students' movements, of the New Left and of the extra-parliamentary opposition. These movements were understood by Habermas at that time, as well as by many other intellectuals, as an expression of society moving towards more freedom, more democracy

and emancipation. The movements' optimism, intellectualism, rationalism and, at times, elitism and individualism, translated into Habermas's critical theory. His whole work is an attempt to outline a rational theory of emancipation, conceived as a cognitive consciousness-raising process among socially interacting individuals. Unlike the first generation of critical theorists, Habermas does not see any other obstacles to emancipation other than ideologies, false belief systems and distorted communication patterns, all of which can be overcome by consciousness raising.

Habermas's critical theory is what critically-minded intellectuals in philosophy and education mainly refer to today. If they react against post-modernism, this is also in reference to his critical theory. For post-modernism puts into question the two most basic assumptions of critical theory. Indeed, Habermas's critical theory must assume an underlying coherent ideology or belief system against which or from which emancipation, in the form of consciousness-raising, actually can take place. In the Marxist tradition, this underlying coherent ideology takes the form of oppression, of domination, and of alienation. Secondly, Habermas's critical theory automatically assumes the existence of a project which guides consciousness-raising. Again in the Marxist tradition, it is assumed that this is a project of emancipation. More generally, in the tradition of Enlightenment, this is the project of modernity, i.e. the project of freedom, justice and democracy. From this perspective, it is understandable why Habermas conceives post-modernism as a particularly alienating form of discourse, belief-system or ideology. But, this supposes first, that post-modernism is a coherent discourse, against which or from which one can liberate him/herself. It secondly poses that post-modernism is only a discourse and nothing more than that. This, however, seems to be a distortion of contemporary empirical reality. Such a distortion may be of minor concern for philosophers, but it should be of major concern for educators who, by definition, deal with persons living in and therefore shaped by empirical reality, be it post-modern or not.

In the field of education, critical theory has been translated into **critical pedagogy**. This can mainly be observed in Germany since the 1970s (e.g. Bühner & Birnmeier, 1982; Friesenhahn, 1985; Hoffman, 1978; Oelkers, 1983; Paffrath, 1987; Peukert, 1983; Rohrmoser, 1983; Stein, 1979; Witschel, 1983) and in the English speaking language area (England, Australia, United States) since the 1980s (e.g. Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Gibson, 1986; Giroux, 1983a & 1983b). If the German critical pedagogy also refers to the first generation of critical theorists and in particular to Adorno (1969), its English speaking counterpart almost exclusively refers to Habermas and his English speaking disciples (e.g. Bernstein, 1985; Fay, 1987). This is also true of **critical adult education**, whose emergence is

even more recent (e.g. Evans, 1987; Griffin, 1988). As part of the Habermasian tradition, critical adult education to date is primarily a socio-philosophical discourse about adult education. Its conception of adult education is modeled after Habermas's ideal of the cognitive consciousness-raising process among socially interacting individuals. Central to the success of this consciousness-raising process, many critical adult educators like Habermas have focused on the political, institutional and other social conditions that allow or prevent this process from taking place. As a result, few of the existing practical examples of critical adult learning today can be related to this new school of critical adult education.

The first practice, Paulo Freire's (1972, 1973 & 1974) **conscientization**, has not been developed by translating critical theory into adult educative practice. Even if it probably comes closest to what critical adult educators have in mind, it is a practice that has been theorized *a posteriori*. Conscientization does have certain limits, the most important one stemming from the fact that it has been elaborated in developing countries, that is, in non-post-industrial societies. Even there it is applicable only with (culturally) oppressed adults. If methods of conscientization are applied in post-industrial societies, they remain limited to the oppressed and underprivileged. In fact, serious questions have been raised as to whether conscientization, as a method of critical adult education, can really be applied in the first or developed world (Bendit & Heimbucher, 1977).

Stephen Brookfield's (1987) *Developing Critical Thinkers* is another attempt to translate principles of critical theory into adult education practice, especially in post-industrial societies. Brookfield has been heavily criticized by critical adult educators for having perverted the spirit of critical theory (e.g. Griffin, 1988). Intellectually, one can agree with this critique, since Brookfield has reduced 'critical thinking' to a tool or technique for individual personal growth in a humanistic perspective. However, what Brookfield has come up with may be the best one can do when translating principles of critical theory into educative practice with highly individualized adults in post-industrial societies.

Can critical adult education make a difference in a post-modern society?

Critical theory, in the context of today's fragmented societies composed of individualized, hedonistic and narcissist individuals, is not translatable into an educational practice that would do justice to the critical theory. If one nevertheless persists, not only is perversion of the theory the most likely outcome, but critical adult education may reinforce and accelerate today's trend towards post-modernism: in the

absence of any coherent discourse, worldview or ideology from which to become emancipated, critical adult education may exacerbate individualism, fragmentation and the loss of criteria. This is because critical adult education is modeled after Habermas's conception of social learning as an individual and collective cognitive learning process, leading to an ever bigger awareness of those ideological constraints that prevent emancipation. Being theoretically disconnected from practice and life, this process either ends in an empty loop, or becomes inbuilt, as a simple tool or technique, into various processes of individualization. If critical theory wants to make a difference to adult education, it can only do this as a philosophical and theoretical discourse which would have to address the challenge of post-modernism.

One of the main reasons why critical theorists cannot support this assessment, stems from the fact that they do not take post-modernism seriously. Indeed, they have treated post-modernism to date essentially as another discourse or fashion and attacked it on a purely ideological and philosophical level. However, post-modernism should be taken as an expression of an empirical reality, that is, as an expression of today's crisis. Being an expression of today's crisis, post-modernism should be looked upon as a part or even as an outcome of the process of modernization itself. As such, post-modernism simply continues and exacerbates the key characteristics of modernization. Critical theory, however, wants to come back to the original project of modernity. But, to stick to the ideal of a free and emancipated subject in the context of fragmented post-modern reality will worsen the case: it will accelerate individualism, fragmentation and loss of criteria even further.

This difficulty would not matter very much if critical adult education were only a discourse of some rare intellectuals. However, the essence of adult education's foundational program and discourse since the 1970s - i.e. lifelong and permanent education as promoted by UNESCO and the Council of Europe (e.g. Faure, 1972; Lengrand, 1975) - is rooted in the very same radical philosophy as critical theory. Its ultimate goal is liberation, freedom, autonomization, emancipation and the full development of all the potentialities of the individual. Even Ivan Illich (1971), the most radical critic of institutionalized education, shares the same goal and therefore presents no alternative. In other words, adult education does not have any other project from which to refer its position than the one of modernity, which is the one critical adult educators are today the only ones to defend.

Adult education, like education, generally, as well as philosophy, is therefore in deep trouble. It is impossible to go back to the initial project of modernity, since, in the context of post-modernism, this

would only precipitate the crisis. Shall we, in adult education, then simply float on the post-modern river of uncoordinated symbols, and go wherever the flow takes us? Or does a third way exist? There is definitely a need in our field for a debate about these issues. This would be a debate that clarifies adult education's relation to today's society. The only debate we have today is conducted on a purely philosophical level. But even if it was conducted in a more down-to-earth language, it would still be outdated, especially if one looks at the new environmental issues, which are just appearing and increasingly ask to be addressed by adult educators. From this perspective, the question is no longer: How can we promote the ideals of modernity against the post-modernists? Rather it is: How can we save some ideals of modernity (like freedom, justice and democracy) beyond the threatening global environmental crisis and without closing our eyes to the post-modern trends in our societies?

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