

**POSTMODERN TIMES:
READINGS FOR ADULT EDUCATORS**

THE CONDITION OF POSTMODERNITY

D. Harvey. 1989. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

HIDING THE LIGHT: ON IMAGES AND THINGS

D. Hebdige. 1988. London: Routledge.

POSTMODERN THEORY: CRITICAL INTERROGATIONS

D. Kellner and S. Best. 1991. London: MacMillan.

FEMINISM/POSTMODERNISM

L. Nicholson (Ed.). 1990. London: Routledge.

I

Despite the efforts of many to repudiate it, postmodernism stands firmly as one of the most significant theoretical developments of the late twentieth century. Its impact on contemporary thought is impressive. Rarely does a concept spur such heated debate across such a range of disciplines or stimulate such rethinking of some of the most cherished ideas of contemporary society. In adult education, though, the varied discourses of postmodernism have yet to cause a consequential stir. This is not because postmodernism is unimportant for adult education. On the contrary, I would suggest that postmodernism is of *profound* importance and that adult educators can ill afford to put off exploring its implications for the theory and practice of the field. The problem is that adult educators are woefully ill-prepared to embark on this exploration. The theoretical trajectory of the discipline (mainly psychologistic) carries adult education away from the theoretical traditions that have spawned postmodernism. As such, we have to work to become familiar with the concepts, authors, disputes, and problems of postmodernism. The following offers four examples of a rapidly growing mountain of books that can help adult educators find their way into the postmodern discourse so they can prepare for the challenge of postmodern times.

Many authors lament the difficulty of writing a generally accessible text on postmodernism. Not only are the multitude of discourses of postmodernism heterogeneous but little consensus exists amongst these discourses about postmodernism's most basic features. Moreover, speculations about its implications for contemporary society vary wildly. To further complicate matters, many proponents of postmodernism insist that any desire to bring order to the varied discourses of postmodernism invariably springs from an attachment to the totalizing discourse of modernity—the very thing that postmodernism sets itself against. Looking for the origins, foundations, or past traces of postmodernism, striving to make its complexity as transparent as possible, or attempting to classify for understanding all transgress the sensibilities aroused by postmodernism. At the same time, however, it is difficult to see how one can appreciate postmodernism without some understanding of its basic underpinnings.

II

Douglas Kellner's and Steven Best's awareness of this contradiction makes their book, *Postmodern theory: critical interrogations* particularly good for adult educators wishing to explore the discourses of postmodernism for the first time. While Kellner and Best commit to a clear expostulation of the basic features of postmodernism, they neither gloss over its ultimate indeterminacies or complexities, nor allow themselves to be swept away uncritically by the power of postmodern rhetoric. With a firm anchor in the tradition of critical theory, they do not dismiss postmodernism's contributions or ignore its immense implications for contemporary society. Rather, they offer a sophisticated and fair-minded account of the origins, ideas, contributors, and implications of postmodernism.

Kellner and Best investigate postmodernism by reviewing the work of some of its most notable contributors: Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Jameson, and Laclau and Mouffe. In each case they explore how the theorist conceptualizes and criticizes modernity, how he or she envisions an escape from modernity's hold on ways of understanding the world, how the theorist depicts postmodernity, what alternative postmodern theories he or she develops, and what notions of postmodern politics he or she posits.

At every turn in *Postmodern theory*, adult educators can gain insight into interesting and oftentimes disturbing elements of postmodernist discourse. *Postmodern theory* presents Foucault's claim that modern forms of power and knowledge do not serve to end domination but to transmute it into new and more pernicious forms; Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the branching and indeterminate *rhizome* as a counter-image to the determinate and hierarchical forms of social analyses or of the postmodern *nomad* as an entity that "attempts to free itself of all roots, bonds, and identities, and thereby resists the state and all normalizing powers" (p. 103); Baudrillard's contention that we now live in a simulacra where mass media representations of reality have become more real than reality, itself; Lyotard's critique of totalizing and universalizing meta-narratives of modernity—of progress, of emancipation, of liberating reason; and, Jameson's and Laclau and Mouffe's efforts to work out the beginnings of a postmodern variant of Marxism including notions of post-Marxist politics of interest to those who still believe that adult education has a meaningful role to play in social change.

In each case, Kellner and Best not only offer readily understandable descriptions of the ideas of the various authors but provide a critical basis for analysing the strengths and weaknesses of their postmodern positions. Drawing on the work of Adorno, Habermas, and other critical theorists, Kellner and Best argue strongly that, despite the importance of many of its insights into our contemporary situation, postmodernism is fraught with contradictions and limitations. For them, postmodernism rightly challenges the totalizing tendencies of modernity. It forces us to attend to the diversity and complexity

of our modern social reality and to realize that economic or developmental macrotheories that suppress difference and uniqueness must be relegated to the past. Kellner and Best also argue, however, that in undermining the great theories of modernity postmodernism also undermines our capacity to come to terms with the massive social changes that are currently taking place in late-capitalism and destroys the bases we have for meaningful political action. Postmodernism leaves us politically quiet and subdued in face of the great tribulations currently upon us. Adult educators should be deeply unsettled by the devastating nature of postmodernism's criticisms for the theory and practice of their discipline and even more unsettled by the fact that postmodernism's major theorists offer only cynicism and quietude in the face of postmodern times.

The postmodernism of the theorists Kellner and Best discuss has stimulated great controversy in a range of theoretical traditions. Marxism, feminism, and cultural studies have all been forced to examine anew the presumptions underlying their perspectives. In turn, the intersection of these traditions with postmodernism has illuminated important aspects of postmodernism and drawn out implications that otherwise may have gone unnoticed. Adult educators can learn much from attending to the debates that have taken place in these arenas.

III

David Harvey's, *The condition of postmodernity*, stands as a significant recent reflection on postmodernism within the Marxist tradition. Like Kellner and Best, Harvey, too, acknowledges that "in its concern for difference, for the difficulties of communications, for the complexity and nuances of interests, cultures, places, and the like, [postmodernism] exercises a positive influence" (p. 113). His concern, however, is that with its emphasis on the separateness of the other, its nihilistic deconstructionism, its suspicious explanations of expansive political-economic processes, its preference for art over reason, "aesthetics over ethics," and diversity over consensus, postmodernism reaches "beyond the point where any coherent politics are left" (p. 116).

More specifically, Harvey believes that postmodernism's focus on the fragmentary, the partial, and the ephemeral undermines its ability to confront new forms of global domination that emerge with late-capitalism. As they criticize modernist meta-theoretical accounts of larger phenomena, postmodernists often are not willing to admit that some of these meta-theories are highly nuanced, complex, and sensitive to fragmentation and difference. Harvey contends that, while Marxism, for instance, can benefit from the postmodern critique of its universalistic leanings, it can also continue to play an important role in understanding the social forces that are associated with the cultural changes addressed by postmodernism.

To salvage a political perspective in postmodern discourse, Harvey introduces a useful distinction between *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*. *Postmodernity* refers to the political-economic/cultural configurations that have arisen over the

past two decades to replace the configurations of modernity. *Postmodernism*, on the other hand, names the many discourses that attempt to come to terms with this reconfiguration. Harvey wishes to develop an account of postmodernity that does not turn abruptly away from the political-economic analyses of Marxism as do other variants of postmodernism. His contention is that, even though it may not be deterministic, there is a "necessary relation between the rise of postmodern cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of 'time-space compression' in the organization of capitalism" (p. vii).

Harvey analyzes thoroughly the sea-change that is taking place in capitalism. For much of this century, he says, capitalism has been dominated by the accumulation regime of Fordism, a regime which developed around the mass production of goods in highly concentrated, large scale, industrial enterprises which employed an army of blue collar workers. By the early 1950's, having joined with Keynesian state managerialism, Fordism began to yield the relatively stable political economy of the middle two decades of the century.

The economic crisis of 1973, the development of computers and telecommunication technology, as well as the advent of efficient containerized transport systems have provided the conditions for capitalism to undergo a rapid transformation. The regime of accumulation that is taking Fordism's place is flexible and mobile. Rather than focusing on the production of goods for mass consumption, capitalist enterprises are increasingly focusing on the nuanced or flexible production of services or other rapidly consumed products for discrete markets. Production units are small, highly specialized, and dispersed throughout the entire world. With sophisticated communications and information processing capacities, capitalist enterprises can now exploit even minute differentials in labour costs and can control the labour process from afar. The new regime is characterized by the development of entirely new production processes, markets, and financial services. Although capitalism has always stimulated creativity and change, this most recent round of capitalist development produces an amazing acceleration of technological and organizational innovation.

Harvey's description of the transition from Fordism to more flexible means of accumulation provides an excellent basis for adult educators to understand the changes sweeping their field. For one, it provides fresh insight into the clarion call for ever more flexible forms of adult education to meet the rapidly diversifying needs of the economy. For another, it elucidates how, for the first time, wide-scale trends towards cultural commodification makes adult education a profitable activity rather than a costly social service (explaining why adult education is suddenly a growth industry). The advantage of Harvey's analysis, however, is that his account of postmodernity is not simply descriptive. By providing an analysis of how the new versions of capitalism persist as systems of domination, Harvey offers adult educators a critical basis for assessing the current trajectory of their discipline.

Here Harvey's argument hinges on his assertion that a "fundamental and all-pervasive source of social power" is the command over space and time, concepts whose nature is often taken-for-granted (p. 226). Harvey, however, eschews this taken-for-granted nature, and posits instead that dominant forms of production in society shape the concepts of space and time. Today, the new regime of flexible accumulation transforms the grid of space and time dramatically from that of Fordism. Harvey identifies the dramatic compression of space and time as central to this change. Never before has the world been so small or have its inhabitants lived such a frantic pace. Capitalism's quest for ever shorter turnover time has led to the increased production not of durable goods, but of ephemeral and volatile products that disappear with consumption. Media images, fashions, and services now form the bulwark of capitalist production. Many people now work in the frantic environment of cultural enterprises (adult education being one of these) that compete worldwide. A kaleidoscope of complex and heterogeneous commodities (including cultural commodities such as ideas, images, information, meanings) bombard consumers who are unable to integrate them meaningfully. According to Harvey, the speed and scope of postmodernity are so intense that they overwhelm any capacity to formulate a resistance to capitalism's advances. To dominate in the age of flexible accumulation is to create a space and time so compressed that neither time nor place exists from which to struggle back.

Harvey criticizes postmodernism because it capitulates to the fragmenting force of contemporary capitalism. Within the horizon it creates by its celebration of the particular, postmodernism is incapable of coming to terms with expansive events like the emergence of the regime of flexible accumulation or its domination of space and time. Harvey's concern is that postmodernism actually plays into the hand of neo-conservative social forces by exacerbating the incommensurability of various cultural, racial, occupational, or gender groups which then undermine any potential they might have to unify and resist the imperatives of a capitalist system run wild. Following his admonition, adult educators need to take care when turning to postmodernism. While it may provide a powerful basis for liberating adult education from totalizing theoretical perspectives of the last twenty years, it has little capacity to deliver a means for continuing adult education as an emancipatory political practice.

IV

Postmodernism receives a thoughtful and penetrating analysis in the hands of feminists. *Feminism/postmodernism*, edited by Linda Nicholson, gathers together reflections on the relevance and implications of postmodernism for feminism by some of its most notable contemporary theorists. In their efforts to come to terms with postmodernism, the contributors to this volume not only offer lucid and accessible accounts of what postmodernism is, but also provide very insightful and challenging assessments of its strengths and weaknesses.

Feminists increasingly recognize an affinity between the discourses that dominate their movement and those of postmodernism. Those who criticize the meta-narrative of patriarchy contend that the oppressive gender relations, posited as natural and essential by patriarchy, actually are sustained by power. And to reveal the groundlessness of its supposed truths feminist projects deconstruct patriarchal discourse. Historically, to do this feminists posited their own essentialist accounts of gender to compete with the essentialisms of patriarchy. In her introduction to *Feminism/Postmodernism*, editor Linda Nicholson observes how these counter-essentialisms, often developed by heterosexual, white, middle-class, women of European descent, are themselves under fire from all sides from lesbians, women of colour, poor women, and women from the Third-World. This tide of criticism has carried many feminists from a critique of patriarchy's essentialisms to a much more postmodernist suspicion of all essentialisms.

The various contributors to *Feminism/postmodernism* debate the implications of this move. Jane Flax stands out as most unremittingly enthusiastic about the convergences of feminist and postmodernist theory. She argues that postmodernism guards against the reinstitution of dogmatic gender meta-theories that can turn women's liberation into new forms of oppression. She insists that "feminism, like other forms of postmodernism, should encourage us to tolerate and interpret ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity as well as to expose the roots of our needs for imposing order and structure no matter how arbitrary and oppressive these needs may be" (p. 56). Others, like Christine DiStefano, Sandra Harding, and Seyla Benhabib, hesitate to follow postmodernism as far. For example, Benhabib argues that it is still possible to "insist on minimal criteria of validity for our discursive and political practices" (p. 125). DiStefano more pointedly contends that, while men can afford to be humbled at the altar of postmodernism, women, whose oppression is still palpable and who are only beginning to gain a positive sense of who they are, cannot benefit from the postmodern impulses that threaten to relativize historical gains.

Many feminists share David Harvey's concern that postmodernism undermines the possibility of positive political action. While contributors to *Feminism/postmodernism* like Nancy Hartsock, Susan Bordo, Elspeth Probyn, Iris Marion Young, or Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (co-writers of the volume's lead article) might disagree with Harvey that theorizing requires a renewed focus on political economic developments to offset the limitations of postmodernism, all would likely agree that postmodernism's tendency to particularize obscures the larger social processes that perpetuate relations of domination in the world. Postmodernism leaves little basis for women to unite to resist oppression (which, feminists would argue, cannot be limited to the oppression of capitalism, but must extend to patriarchy, racism, and other forms of domination).

In addition to Anna Yeatman and Judith Butler who explore the implications of postmodernism for identity, Donna Haraway offers a fascinating contribution. She argues that the tremendous intrusion of the machine into our lives breaches that thing we might call human identity, including our identity as gendered beings. She cites the science fiction image of the cyborg, that daunting blend of machinery and human flesh, as descriptive of who we have actually become. For Haraway, politics in postmodern times involves "taking responsibility for the social relations of science and technology" which "means refusing an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology, and so means embracing the skilful task of reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all our parts" (p. 223). There is now no way back to the universalisms of the organic life that preceded the grafting of the chip into our brains, believes Haraway. The task for us cyborgs is to find some way to resist humanity's final assimilation into the new totalization of the machine. In the end, the politics of the cyborg is all that is left.

A rather curious, though in the end worthwhile, contribution to *Feminism / Postmodernism* is Andreas Huyssen's influential essay, "Mapping the postmodern." Aside from a rather oblique reference to the women's movement, Huyssen does not deal with the relationship between feminism and postmodernism. What he does provide, though, is a clear and straightforward depiction of postmodernism that augments the more critical deliberations that comprise the rest of the volume.

In sum, Nicholson's book is important for adult educators who want to understand postmodernism and its intersection with the discourse of feminism. At every turn the contributors debate issues of relevance for adult education, issues like epistemological implications of postmodernism and the possibility or desirability in postmodern times of having or transmitting any forms of positive knowledge. While they explore the implications of postmodernism for politics and question what grounds still exist for action that brings about positive social change, they also investigate the effect of postmodernism on identity and ask how one remains integrated in light of the fragmentations and dislocations of postmodernity. Their insights are more accessible to adult educators thanks to the sophisticated body of feminist theory that already exists in adult education, and because these and other feminists diligently link highly theoretical perspectives to the very practical context of gender. Feminism's engagement with the problematics of postmodernism is long, productive, and eminently practical. Adult educators would do well to explore the relevance of *Feminism / postmodernism's* insights for their field of practice.

V

I hesitate making my next selection, *Hiding in the light: On images and things*, by Dick Hebdige, because the theoretical tradition of cultural studies from which it emerges—unlike critical theory, Marxism, and feminism—miraculously and, I would suggest, to the great detriment of our field of practice, receives scant

attention in adult education literature. Perhaps this is so because a psychologistic/behavioristic theoretical paradigm dominates adult education, leaving culture seldom thematized as a focus, and leaving adult educators ill equipped to deal with important cultural developments like postmodernism. My purpose in proposing Hebdige's book to adult educators is two-fold. For the purpose of the current review, *Hiding in the light* offers a highly impassioned, impressively creative, and deeply insightful account of postmodernism. My second purpose is to propose that cultural studies, especially as it has developed under the influence of the journal *Cultural Studies* and the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and as exemplified in books like Hebdige's, has much to offer adult education. Owing to the newness of the terrain, adult educators' initial forays into cultural studies would undoubtedly be tentative and difficult. In the long run, however, incorporating cultural studies into the theoretical corpus of adult education would benefit in terms of deepening a preparedness to deal with complex cultural issues like postmodernism.

Hebdige divides *Hiding in the light* into four sections. To begin at the end, Section Four, Hebdige focuses most expressly on postmodernism. Perhaps more than those writers already considered, Hebdige most tenaciously pushes towards the inexorable and almost unbearable conclusions of postmodernism. He presents three great negations of postmodernism: the negation of totalization, of teleology, and of utopia, and with dramatic prose and unremitting forthrightness insists that the implications of each be acknowledged. In a world devoid of universal claims, notions of progress, or hope for collective destination, Hebdige shares his own sense of panic/exhilaration at being deprived of the assurances of modernism. He pushes us to the edge of the abyss of postmodernism where we can see most clearly the profound depth and breadth of its implications.

Hebdige balances his insistence on postmodernism's seriousness with an insistence on the perils of nihilism. Because he is willing to exercise to the extreme Gramsci's exhortation, "Pessimism of the intellect; Optimism of the will," he is able to identify a response to postmodernism that takes its criticisms seriously but that does not abandon hope of positive political action. Very generally, Hebdige presents the neo-Gramscian orientation articulated by British culture studies intellectuals like Stuart Hall. Incorporated into this political orientation is a "mix of conjunctural analysis and strategic intervention" where social struggle is waged between complex "alliances of 'dominant' and 'subaltern' class fractions over and within a heterogeneous range of sites" (p. 203).

The remainder of Hebdige's book is a record of his own explorations of the "living textures of popular culture," of the conflicting "alliances of 'dominant' and 'subaltern' classes." Section One examines how youths resist the surveillance of dominant society. They convert surveillance into the pleasure of being watched using extreme dress and behaviours. Section Two explores how consumers do not uniformly receive mass products of both industry and the

media. On the contrary, media images (e.g., American advertising) and durable goods (e.g., Italian scooters) become the basis of a rich iconography that is mined in different ways by different sub-cultural groups. In Section Three, Hebdige analyses two notable postmodern texts: the Cartoon *Bif*, and the magazine *The Face*. While he commends their creativity and power, Hebdige worries about the refusal of these texts to pursue issues any deeper than that permitted by a flashing image.

Together, Hebdige's various analyses, with their plethora of photographs and graphics that underline the heterogeneity of the popular, constitute a veritable feast of the postmodern. At the very least, from these analyses, adult educators will deepen or renew their awareness of the complexity of postmodern times, of the vast differences that exist between cultures, of the unpredictability of meaning formation in subcultural contexts.

VI

Postmodernism stands as a dramatic challenge to adult education. Adult educators may want to dismiss it as a fad or to avoid its dramatic implications but it is unlikely that postmodernism will disappear. Unfortunately adult education has not yet developed a body of literature to help meet postmodernism's challenges. The task then is difficult, that of exploring without familiar landmarks a strange and confusing terrain. It is my strong sense, however, that for many adult educators this will not prove too daunting a task. With excellent books at hand, like those reviewed above, it should be possible over the next short while for adult educators to develop a firm postmodern sensibility.

D.T. Plumb

University of Alberta

BLACK AND BLUE ALL OVER

ADULT EDUCATION: EVOLUTION AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN A DEVELOPING FIELD OF STUDY

John M. Peters, Peter Jarvis and Associates (Eds.). 1991.

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

The publication of *Adult education: Evolution and achievements in a developing field of study* has sparked a furor on the North American scene. What appeared to be a straight-forward symposium on the new "black" book at the AERC meetings held in Saskatoon in May ended up in a donnybrook. Symposium participants, each a chapter contributor, were subjected to angry criticisms. How was it possible, at this historical moment, that only **two** of the essayists were women, and white women for all that? How was it possible for the multiple voices of African-Americans and Hispanics to be excluded from these hallowed pages? The critics were outraged, one man even suggesting that the