

Aronowitz, Stanley & Henry A. Giroux. *Postmodern Education: Politics, Culture and Social Criticism*, Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, \$20.50 paperback.

The current fascination with discourse theory has left many advocates of social change apologizing for "Grand Narratives" while the American Right has appropriated much of their radical critique of public education. Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux's *Postmodern Education* takes aim at both the morally indignant "Crisis of Excellence" that is dictating educational policy and also at the potential intellectual opposition to this onslaught. They use the language of postmodernism to give a new shine to critical pedagogy in an attempt to reintroduce these timely concerns to an audience that has dismissed anything remotely "Marxist" at a stroke in order to frolic in its simulacra.

Giroux was a secondary school teacher and Aronowitz once worked in a steel mill: they know that most students and workers cannot afford to celebrate the death of history. There is no Panic Schoolmarm here, no spectacle, no obscure jargon let loose to play in the footnotes. Yet, even as they "refuse to reduce social structures to discourse" (p. 160) in their examination of the transcendental notions that inform much of postmodernist discourse, Aronowitz and Giroux create an excellent comprehensive introduction to postmodernism.

Before examining *Postmodern Education*, readers versed in cultural theory might benefit by consulting a renowned educational journal (*Kappan* is popular among school teachers). Since Humanism is still in vogue with "Progressive" educators, Aronowitz and Giroux are cautious in their exploration of postmodernism. The valorization of the everyday, for instance, is emphasized not to encourage individual self-discovery but instead to define and legitimate the specific struggles of marginalized students. A parallel criticism of prevalent theoretical inclinations posits that "the political economy of the sign does not displace political economy" (p. 116); turning postmodernism on itself, the authors alternately praise or condemn this ouroboros in their quest to empower teachers and students for the creation of "democratic public spheres" (p. 89).

The book begins by contrasting progressive and postmodern ("postmodern" as critical theory in this instance) approaches to social change by analyzing Bennet's drug and education offensives. "Textual Authority, Culture and the Politics of Literacy" politicizes the theories of Bloom and Hirsch in a critical investigation of knowledge and power. "Postmodernism and the Discourse of Educational Criticism" provides an excellent introduction to postmodernism, noting in particular how Rorty's and Baudrillard's directions hinder the creation of a critical pedagogy.

Aware that curriculum "functions to name and privilege particular histories and experiences" (p. 96), Giroux continues in the fourth chapter to examine the role of teachers as transformative public intellectuals. Foucault's notion of counter-memory is used in "Border Pedagogy in the Age of Postmodernism" to explore how students can understand and struggle for the possibility of social transformation.

Cultural Studies is criticized for its ahistorical turn in chapter six while "Working Class Displacements and Postmodern Reflections" examines the myth of the disappearance of the working class. The conclusion's warning that "an apolitical postmodernism articulates perhaps unwittingly with a right-wing political agenda" (p. 190) and plea to go beyond "a politics of discourse and difference" (p. 192) exemplify the authors' struggle with the liberating and reactionary potential of postmodernism.

It is unfortunate that this significant analysis of contemporary education must manipulate -- and in turn become a critique of -- postmodernism so that critical thought and social responsibility somehow become "modernist ideals" (p. 57) and "postmodernism points to solidarity, community, and compassion as essential aspects of how we develop and understand the capacities we have for experiencing the world" (p. 117). Nevertheless, refusing to abandon history, Aronowitz and Giroux broach their emancipatory "Postmodernism" not only as an alternative to the ahistorical carnival of "The Postmodernism", but also, above all, as a strategy to establish a critical theory and practice of education.

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