No Outside History: Reconsidering Postmodernism

Is postmodernism really a threat to history?

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In this paper, I want to explore the relationship between postmodernism and history. I will argue that postmodern theory, far from killing history as its critics suggest, is a profoundly historicist mode of thought that extends the gaze of the historian so nothing escapes it, not even themselves. This is its great challenge to the historian and history educator. Although it may seem a little late to be defending postmodern theory in history education, I am motivated in this task by the bad press postmodernism continues to receive, particularly whenever school curricula are brought up. While I share some of the concern shown by historians, educators, and social theorists towards aspects of cultural postmodernism, I offer a more sympathetic reading of postmodern theory (philosophical postmodernism) than is typical among historians and history educators.

The Problem of Postmodernism

Even before it has been fully implemented nationwide, the Australian Curriculum (and by implication the Australian Curriculum: History) will be ‘reviewed’ by Kevin Donnelly, a well-known ‘conservative educationalist,’ and Kenneth Wiltshire, a ‘conservatively inclined business academic.’ This review, initiated by the Federal Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, demonstrates the conservative concern that school curriculum has ‘hidden “cultural-leftist” influence at every turn.’ Such concerns are not new. To some extent they motivated John Howard’s call for a national curriculum back in 2006, when he is quoted as claiming that schools were ‘falling victim to postmodernism and political correctness,’ echoing the anxieties of conservative media commentators who asserted that postmodernism was damaging English education. Donnelly himself has claimed that postmodern theory’s rejection of absolutes or truths has resulted in a population of young people who ‘are morally bereft and know nothing of civility or respect for the common good.’ Even one of Australia’s premier ‘black armband’ historians, Henry Reynolds, has declared postmodernism to be history, quoted by Justine Ferrari as saying that postmodernism ‘just goes round and round, with lots of lights and colours and doesn’t get you anywhere.’
Within educational literature, discussions of postmodernism, and its implications for history education, are limited in scope and number. Arguably, postmodernism has been accused of encouraging the proliferation of revisionist histories, fostering cultural relativism, and providing fertile ground for historical denial. As a philosophical force in history and historiography, postmodernism has been described as an attack on historical reason, and an assault on the epistemological foundations of history as a discipline, while wilfully obscuring and politically paralysing, while having little to do with professional historians, and nothing to offer serious historiography.

**Cultural Postmodernism or the Logic of Postmodernity**

Notoriously difficult to define, postmodernism is an elusive concept used to signify both our experience of a new social order, and a widespread crisis in contemporary ways of knowing. Distinguishing between the cultural and the philosophical – two related but different ways of thinking about postmodernism – is important to the argument I wish to develop; and follows a well-accepted distinction between historical and methodological postmodernism.

Cultural postmodernism, as a historical social condition, is sometimes argued to be the result of a transformation from nineteenth-century industrial society to late-twentieth century information society. The argument goes that new technologies for travel, telecommunications and information transfer, have transformed our experience of history. According to Gianni Vattimo, the present appears to involve a dehistoricisation of experience, especially through the work of television (where we can see reruns of I Dream of Jeannie alongside the latest episode of Game of Thrones, for example), so ‘everything tends to flatten out at the level of contemporaneity and simultaneity.’

As a result, Vattimo believes we no longer experience a strong sense of direction in worldly events. This collapse of the past into the present also reflects postmodernism as a cultural, artistic and literary style.

As a style in literature, postmodernism involves tendencies towards self-conscious irony and disruption, in the form of fabulism and metafiction (techniques that involve abandoning ‘realism’ and/or experimenting with ways of allowing the narrator to intrude into the text to make visible its constructed nature), and an increased emphasis on ‘intertextuality’ (or the ‘borrowing’ of phrases and motifs from other texts making ‘authorship’ a complex phenomenon). As an artistic style postmodernism involves anachronism, collage, allegory and pastiche. It is sometimes defined by the idea of ‘the end of art’ because of its tendency to mix and recycle older artistic forms in iconoclastic ways.

Cultural postmodernism would appear to place our sense of history, and certainly our ideas about historical development, under threat. However, observations of the postmodern milieu might suggest that far from being erased, history is encountered everywhere. It may well be that the burgeoning trade in historical television dramas such as The Borgias and The Tudors; the explosion of interest in Family History research encouraged by programmes such as Who Do You Think You Are and its web-based sponsor, Ancestry.com; the retro-futurist Steampunk literary and music phenomenon; and the continued popularity of television documentaries, and print-based historical fiction and cultural histories, demonstrate a strong public interest in keeping history alive. Perhaps the postmodern moment in contemporary society, in triggering a profound sense of historical disorientation, has been precisely the catalyst for history’s re-assertion and renewal, albeit in recycled forms.

**Philosophical Postmodernism or Postmodern Theory as a Form of Historicism**

Philosophical postmodernism (or postmodern theory) is neither a systematic methodology, nor is it a single intellectual position. In his book Postmodernism and History, Willie Thompson describes it unflatteringly as ‘a quasi-theological form of discourse, repellent to all but the initiated and which will certainly come to figure as no more than a bizarre curiosity about whom or what we should believe. Certainly, any attempt at defining philosophical postmodernism will inevitably be partial, and we will always face the problem that many theorists we associate with postmodern thought, such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, actively disagree, and resisted being labelled postmodernists. However, I think it is possible to come to some kind of definition or understanding of philosophical postmodernism – while recognising that not everyone will agree with my characterisation – and that it rests on the three main ideas or motifs inseparably associated with it. In the exploration of these three key ideas below, I will attempt to show how each notion in turn, is based on a strong sense that our knowledge, our values, and ourselves as human beings, are historically constituted.
Philippe graphô

The End of History (or Post-Universalism)

Let’s begin this exploration of the key ideas commonly associated with philosophical postmodernism by examining the most counter-intuitive notion of ‘the end of history.’

This ‘post-universalist’ position manifests as the rejection of ‘totalising discourses’ or ‘grand narratives.’ Philosophical postmodernists generally think of discourses as ‘authoritative statements.’

Authoritative statements are utterances that make claims about the world, and have either been written or spoken by some ‘authority’ or have become repeated so often that they are now part of every day ‘commonsense’ (and their authoritativeness is assumed).

A statement such as ‘women are more emotional than men’ is this kind of authoritative statement or discourse. It appears to be talking about a phenomenon that can be observed in the ‘real’ world, but it ignores exceptions. Take the famous Azaria Chamberlain case of the 1980s, for example. Lindy Chamberlain, Azaria’s mother, was accused and convicted of murdering her baby by a Northern Territory court (a conviction that was later quashed). She maintained throughout her defence that her baby daughter was taken by a dingo. However, because Lindy remained stoic throughout the trial, and therefore didn’t show the emotion expected by the media, the national press constructed her as ‘abnormal,’ which certainly split public opinion about her perceived guilt. Arguably, Lindy may have been the victim of the ‘women are more emotional than men’ discourse, a common-sense concept in our society. Like all authoritative statements, this discourse shapes, directs, and coerces particular forms of gendered behaviour; and where a person deviates from the expected behaviours, they are regarded with suspicion. Such is the seductive power of discourse.

When philosophical postmodernists reject ‘universalising and totalising discourses,’ what they are sceptical of are authoritative statements that attempt to cocoon diverse phenomena inside an all-encompassing narrative or model, that claims to unproblematically mirror a real world outside our systems of representation. These grand narratives (or meta-narratives as they are sometimes called) present themselves as History (historical or ‘real’ descriptions of the world), or a singular truth about the world, always and everywhere true, avoiding any attention to historical or geographic variation, and all the time ignoring their historicity as a statement coming from someone located within a specific disciplinary or interpretive tradition and holding a particular sociocultural standpoint. This rejection of the appeal to explain diverse phenomena via a totalising discourse or grand explanatory narrative is what philosophical postmodernists are thinking of when they proclaim ‘the end of History’ with a capital ‘H.’

Philosophical postmodernists also remain suspicious of notions such as ‘progress’ and ‘development’ where these concepts are used to explain historical changes across human social systems, in terms that suggest a movement towards a moment of final emancipation or a utopian future, recognising that such grand representations are inevitably underpinned by selective interests. In other words, it is always necessary to determine who decides what constitutes successful progress. When philosophical postmodernists present accounts of historical change, they are typically characterised by a respect of the specific, local, different and peculiar, and are usually provided tentatively, cautiously, and reluctantly, as descriptions from the author’s own viewing position. Where possible, they will resist talking in absolutes. Thus, from a philosophical postmodernist position, authoritative statements are read as necessarily partial and through that partiality, constitute and construct, incite and induce, rather than simply document and describe, the reality we come to know and experience. It is not so much that there is no truth, but that any map of the world we use will be incomplete. Take a road map, a topographical map, and a weather map of the same area. All may be ‘true’ depictions of the world they claim to represent, but each only offers partial information about that world. You can’t use a topographical map to get directions to a friend’s house; nor can you use a weather map to figure out your geographic location; and you certainly can’t use a road map to tell you whether you need to wear warm clothes outside. Thus, the philosophical postmodernist critique of ‘master narratives’ challenges us to approach knowledge as partial and socio-historically constructed. This does not mean that all ‘representations’ and ‘interpretations’ are equal, or that anything goes, but it does mean acknowledging that our understanding of the world around us is always limited by the knowledge and communication systems we use to make sense of it; and these systems are themselves by-products of historical human cultures. Thus, the idea of the ‘end of history’ is used ironically to remind us to remain sceptical of all claims that we can have some perfect ahistorical description of the world, and reaffirms that all the stories we tell about the world are to some degree conditioned by our sociohistorically situated ways of knowing.

The Death of the Author (or Post-Foundationalism)

The second of the three ideas or motifs associated with philosophical postmodernism can be described as a ‘post-foundationalist’ position, and is linked to ‘the death of the author.’ This position concerns how one’s authority to make judgements about the world is established and maintained. A ‘foundation’ in philosophy is a viewpoint or standpoint from which all judgements are made. Philosophical postmodernism involves a rejection of foundations or viewpoints that claim to be true for all people in all places and times. In other words, it rejects all metaphysical platforms based on claims that it is possible for a human being
‘The main critics of postmodernism are often worried that its view implies moral relativism in which anything goes. This is a caricature of postmodern thought.’

to view the world from outside their human culture and history. Friedrich Nietzsche is sometimes identified as an inspiration for postmodern thought. Like Nietzsche, philosophical postmodernists reject claims that there can be a set of principles or values that are beyond human invention. Schools of philosophy, social theory, or religious belief that assume a set of values that have not developed historically, and/or are believed to be universally true and applicable, are considered forms of metaphysics by philosophical postmodernists, requiring a position of judgement that has its foundations outside the historical world. All such metaphysical positions are treated sceptically in philosophical postmodernist thought. Rejecting all metaphysical platforms, the philosophical postmodernist argues that an author’s authority to speak does not come from a divine source, and thus must be achieved through historical, political or rhetorical means. Authority is understood to be achieved through precise and complex rhetorical procedures, and may be established through crafting text that recycles, repeats, and recombines discourses already in circulation. The politician, for example, may attempt to give authority to their attack on a political opponent by rehearsing or repeating discourses that are already in circulation that place their opponent in an unfavourable light.

Coined by the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes in 1968, "the death of the author" concept was used to signal that after the author of the text has put their pen down and passed their text into the hands of a reader, the reader inevitably interprets (or re-authors) the text for himself or herself, furnishing it with meanings derived from their unique life experiences and historically- and culturally-shaped reading positions. Thus, an author has little control over how their work will be read. Jacques Derrida makes a parallel argument about authors themselves when he acknowledges that their dependency on the conventions of language makes it necessary for one text to always refer to, or draw from, other texts to make sense. This results in each text having a series of interdependent or intertextual relationships with other texts. It leads to the understanding that an author can never be said to be the sole creative agent behind the meanings in a text, since that text is reliant on other texts for its existence. Thus, the author is never considered, from a philosophical postmodernist point of view, to be the sole giver of meaning to a text, and readers remain unable to recover any ‘original’ meaning of a text, since their interpretation of the text is always the result of a unique reading position.

Taking a post-foundational orientation means accepting no authoritative meaning can be anchored in a text outside the text’s establishment of an author’s authority to speak. Likewise, there is no truth or meaning that can derive from a text that does not in part derive its construction from reference to other texts; and involve some interpretation (or re-authoring) by the reader. Thus, each idea attached to ‘the death of the author’ is underpinned by the notion that not only are communication and interpretation historical acts, but the authority they command is also sociohistorically determined, since there can be no absolute foundation or metaphysical platform outside history or discourse from which to cast authoritative statements.

The End of Man (or Post-Essentialism)
The third orientation shared by philosophical postmodernists is a ‘post-essentialist’ position. The post-essentialist position is an expression of ‘the end of man’ motif (sometimes referred to as ‘the death of the subject’). Here philosophical postmodernism borrows from feminism, rejecting the privileged status of the singular, white, masculine subject. This subject is made the norm against which we are all judged; and, of course, if we are not a white masculine subject ourselves, we are often found wanting. This disembodied transcendental hero of the European Enlightenment masquerades as ahistorical, asexual, acultural and classless, all the while being a projection of white, masculine, middle-class subjectivity. In other words, when we think of what it means to be human, the philosophical postmodernist suspects that we unconsciously conjure up a white, masculine subject.

In place of this white, masculine ideal (or transcendent) subject, philosophical postmodernists propose a fluid, historical self. This historically-constructed self can be understood only across categories. Philosophical postmodernists cautiously approach standpoint theories that define human subjects by their class, race, ethnicity, or gender, as they frequently derive from a form of essentialism that defines the subject in rigid categories. For example, a statement such as ‘men are stronger than women’ may be true of many men, but there are certain to be some men weaker than some women. The same problem arises when Australian authorities begin to talk about Indigenous people as a singular cultural group, eliding differences among the many linguistic groups that make up the Aboriginal community as it is understood today. Further, this problem is compounded when people can be in more than one category simultaneously as we find with a once-married and
now divorced gay white woman. The assigning of essential characteristics to specific categories, and the placing of people in those categories, is thus considered problematic by philosophical postmodernists. One of their main concerns is that such categories may operate as a means by which individuals may be ‘interpellated,’ literally hailed or called upon to behave or be understood in particular ways by the categories they are inscribed within. Divergence from a categorical norm is often understood as a deficiency of the individual, rather than a problem of the category. What is rejected by philosophical postmodernism through its post-essentialist position is not using categories altogether – though one would always remain suspicious of their limitations – but a universal unchanging human nature. Philosophical postmodernists hold the view that human subjectivity is a fluid process in which a person may fall inside and outside various categories, and may be contradictory from one moment to the next. Such a position involves a rejection of the idea that there is, or can ever be, a universal human subject divorced from the shaping effects of history, culture and society.

**Philosophical Postmodernism, the Historiographic Gaze, and History Teaching**

The three ideas associated with philosophical postmodernism outlined above demonstrate that philosophical postmodernist thought adopts a radically historicist way of viewing the world. For the philosophical postmodernist, ‘reality’ is never known outside our sociohistorically constituted systems of knowing. Representations are thought to construct the way we view reality rather than simply mirroring it. Authority is understood to be historically, politically, and rhetorically constructed. Human subjects are understood to be historical beings, shaped by the circumstances in which they have lived, and resisting over-determined categorisations. While certain aspects of cultural postmodernism may be cause for caution, philosophical postmodernism offers historians a form of panoptical historicism, in which far from demolishing history, the philosophical postmodernist extends the gaze of the historian so nothing escapes it. Not even themselves. If one accepts and adopts such a position, then this has particular implications for history teaching. Let me conclude then, by considering what all this might mean for history educators.

It has frequently been assumed that postmodernism would have little to say to the teaching and learning of history. However, if philosophical postmodernism is taken seriously as a historicist philosophy, then several things become important. Firstly, philosophical postmodernism would suggest that all the historical narratives we encounter are coloured by their sociohistorical circumstances, even highly ‘empirical’ histories, since they too are determined by what historical questions are, or are not asked; what evidence is collected, or is ignored (functions at least partially determined by which historiographic tradition the historian finds themselves situated within). This would suggest that systematic induction into historiography becomes important, because historiography is how we come to understand the history of the various historical representations we encounter. If we take on a historiographic approach to teaching history, we need to understand that historical representation emerges from within particular historiographic traditions (such as Feminism, Marxism, Social History, Intellectual History, Cultural History, etc.), and hence is marked ‘historically’ by the biases of those methodological traditions. Understanding the historiographic frame within which a historical narrative has been constructed becomes the first step towards understanding the historian’s value-laden assumptions; disposition towards particular forms of interpretation; and concern with different forms of evidence. Thus, it is not enough to determine whether a given explanation fits the facts, but to consider what questions the historian has decided to investigate; what approach they have taken to selecting the evidence; and how they have chosen to represent their findings. Different traditions of historical scholarship, faced with investigating the same historical events, will have different answers to these questions. These answers are likely to result in different plausible interpretations (remember the example of the road map, topographical map, and weather map of the same area). To do this well requires that we expose students to a variety of secondary sources, not just the primary sources prized in many history classes. It means treating these secondary sources as interpretations that demand interrogation in the same way we would interrogate primary sources. This includes understanding even school history textbooks, or historical films and documentaries, are secondary interpretations that should be approached with the full arsenal of our critical faculties and historical inquiry skills. Rather than ‘background noise’ in the postmodern history classroom, these various historical media become important as interpretations.

What also becomes important if we take the historicist vision of postmodern theory seriously, is that we must recognise how our acts of reading and interpretation
are prejudiced by the methodological biases of the historiographic traditions we have been initiated into; our sociohistorically situated experiences; and the various historical sense-making methods we have accumulated. Certainly some scholars may want to consider how historically-determined our modes of thought are, and I accept that this is something that should be treated carefully and cautiously. However, the main critics of postmodernism are often worried that its view implies moral relativism (in which anything goes). This is something of a caricature of postmodern thought. Rather than placing the teacher and their students in a moral vacuum, understanding philosophical postmodernism as a historicist philosophy means locating all views in their sociohistorical contexts; understanding how our views have been sociohistorically shaped; and making moral judgements that recognise there is no outside history for any of us. Practically speaking, this could involve a strong emphasis on values clarification tasks that encourage students to understand their views, and how they may differ from both people in the past, and historians writing about that past. There is little new in such an approach for the history educator, except awareness that the purpose of such activities is to reveal that our thinking is strongly imprinted by our histories.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that historians or history educators should not summarily dismiss postmodernism. I have argued that the cultural conditions under which we live in post-industrial societies may have led to various forms of historical dislocation, but that these forms of historical disorientation may have been the impetus for the strong cultural turn towards history that we are experiencing, in the genealogical research explosion, historical fiction boom, and even in the recycling of the past that can be observed in steampunk’s popularity. I have also argued that the three key motifs of postmodernism – the end of history (post-universalism), the death of the author (post-foundationalism), and the death of the subject (post-essentialism) – can be read as offering a strongly historicist view of human subjectivity, that amounts to extending the gaze of the historian so that nothing escapes it, not even themselves. Understood in this way, postmodernism does not sound the death knell of history, but asks us to understand ourselves as historical beings for whom there is no outside of history.

**Endnotes**

3. Ibid.
25 Anyone interested in the Gothic and Science Fiction influenced Steampunk culture need only do an Amazon search to see the explosion in Steampunk-inspired literature in the last few years; and a quick visit to steampunkmusic.com will reveal the plethora of contemporary bands claiming allegiance to the retro-futurist aesthetic that defines the Steampunk culture.
26 I am using the term ‘historicism’ loosely in this paper, to refer to a mode of thought that places importance upon history and historical interpretation. I am not using it in the teleological sense rejected by Karl Popper, The Poverty of Historicism (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1957/1980). Popper’s critique of Hegelian dialectical historicism is clearly shared by postmodernists.
29 Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 27.
30 Alicia de Alba et al., Curriculum in the Postmodern Condition (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 128.
33 For an excellent genealogy of the concept of discourse, as used in contemporary theory, see: R. K. Sawyer, ‘A Discourse on Discourse: An Archaeological History of an Intellectual Concept,’ Cultural Studies 16, no. 3 (2002).
35 Jenkins, Why History?: Ethics and Postmodernity.
43 The critique that IQ tests are culturally biased towards the white middle classes as an explanation of why Black Africans have historically scored lower on such measures, comes to mind here as a practical example of the way the invisibility of the norm comes into effect, judging everyone who is different to the norm as deficient or deviant. This is a complicated problem in IQ testing, but see for example, Stephen F Cronshaw et al., ‘Case for Non-Biased Intelligence Testing against Black Africans Has Not Been Made: A Comment on Rushton, Skuy, and Bons (2004),’ International Journal of Selection and Assessment 14, no. 3 (2006).
45 A parallel argument, explored from the point of view of the female, Indian academic, is provided in: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
48 A similar argument is put forward by: Avner Segall, ‘What’s the Purpose of Teaching a Discipline, Anyway?’, in Social Studies, ed. Avner Segall, Elizabeth E Heilman, and C H Cherryholmes.
49 For further discussion of the place of historiography in history teaching, see the arguments in: Robert J Parkes, ‘Teaching History as Historiography: Engaging Narrative Diversity in the Curriculum,’ International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research 8, no. 2 (2009).
50 K Yilmaz, ‘Introducing the “Linguistic Turn” to History Education,’ International Education Journal 8, no. 1 (2007);