

Book Reviews

Peters, M. (1996). *Poststructuralism, politics and education*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, (Softcover).

The term poststructuralism often evokes heated responses among academics. In a recent book on European philosophy, for example, Barry Smith (1994) charges leading poststructuralist thinkers with inspiring relativism, political correctness, and a state of crisis in North American universities. Jürgen Habermas (1993), a staunch defender of the emancipatory impulse in the project of modernity, has labelled Foucault, Derrida, and Bataille "young conservatives." Marxists sometimes argue that poststructuralist theories are politically naive in downplaying the overwhelming importance of class as the cornerstone of oppression in capitalist societies. Traditional literacy critics object to, and occasionally deliberately mock, the (allegedly) opaque and difficult style of writers such as Derrida. Others (e.g., Bloom, 1993) dismiss the present interest in poststructuralist ideas as a fad – as currently fashionable but of no lasting significance.

For those who sense that some of these criticisms have been advanced for less than ideal scholarly reasons – but who lack the theoretical resources necessary for a rigorous response – Michael Peters' book *Poststructuralism, Politics and Education* is likely to prove invaluable. This book integrates and extends Peters' writings on an impressive range of (related) poststructuralist themes over the past decade. Recognized internationally for his work on Lyotard in particular, Michael Peters has emerged as one of the most prolific and perceptive contemporary commentators on education, poststructuralism, and the postmodern condition. In *Poststructuralism, Politics and Education*, Peters attempts to provide "something of an introduction to Poststructuralism by examining a range of interrelated themes central to the field of education focussing upon the critique of reason and the problematic of the subject" (p. xiv). He stresses that he wants to "make no claims ... [about the] originality, comprehensiveness or ... completeness of the essays in the book and does not see the text as a systematic introduction to French theory" (p. xiii). A reading of the Introduction and the ten chapters that follow suggest that Peters has been rather too modest in these preliminary comments.

For students seeking to understand what is at stake in the critique of subject-centred reason, the Introduction and chapters one and two in this

book collectively provide an exceptionally lucid overview of the relevant literature(s) and pivotal debates. Chapters three and ten furnish a powerful antidote to attacks on popular culture, pluralism, multiculturalism, political correctness, and contemporary education by traditionalists keen to preserve the enlightenment dream of absolute reason, universal truth, and liberal democratic values. Chapters five, six, and seven make innovative use of poststructuralist insights to analyze architecture and the politics of space, ethics 'after Auschwitz,' and the development of the (so-called) Information Society. Matters of policy, while not the central focus of this text, are addressed in chapter four (where Peters provides a Focauldian critique of New Right policies and practices premised on the neoliberal construction of humans as rational, autonomous, utility-maximising individuals) and, to a lesser extent, chapter seven. Chapter eight reassesses Vattimo's 'end of history' thesis, while chapter nine employs the metaphor of Hermann Hesse's *Glass Bead Game* as a framework for examining the history of cybernetics and the role of the university in the emerging world of cyberspace.

In *Poststructuralism, Politics and Education*, Peters provides a strong defence of poststructuralism thinkers against various liberal and conservative attacks. The success of Peters' defence rests in considerable measure on three scholarly attributes. First, while concerned to mount a robust counter-critique against some of the harshest critics of French thought, Peters avoids lapsing into a defensive or wounded posture. He pays respectful (detailed and balanced) attention to Habermas's views, for example, while nonetheless favouring Lyotard's position in the debates over modernity, the enlightenment, and emancipatory politics. Second, Peters, unlike many other commentators and critics, builds his poststructuralist analysis of educational problems and issues on a thorough reading of the original writings underpinning contemporary 'post' theorizing. Finally, Peters' defence is, in part, a rebuttal of the very parameters within which philosophical problems and positions have been defined. Specifically, Peters avoids a one-dimensionalising of Poststructuralism – where complex layers in a multifaceted tapestry of ideas (drawing on Nietzsche, Heidegger, structural linguistics, etc.) are reduced to a single theory – and repudiates the binary thinking that plagues many commentaries on poststructuralism and postmodernism. He notes:

Frankly, I do not believe that Marxist tradition is dead or that the power of Marxist political economy has diminished. Nor do I believe that Poststructuralism stands opposed to contemporary forms of Marxist analysis. Such alleged opposition is a product of

a kind of binary thinking that Poststructuralism is an attempt to escape. (p. 13)

While I have no major criticism of this book, two minor reservations may be worth mentioning. The first relates to the ordering of chapters. I think chapters three and ten could have been kept together (in that order, but perhaps with chapter three moved to a later point in the book). Also, when I first read *Poststructuralism, Politics and Education*, chapter four seemed somewhat out of place. This impression was less marked on my second reading, but didn't entirely disappear. Chapter four certainly provides an excellent example of critical educational policy analysis, but many readers – in New Zealand at least – may already be aware of Peters' (extensive and well-respected) work in this area. The distinctive contribution of this book, for this reader, lies in its focus on a series of issues pertaining to culture, philosophy, and intellectual life. In short, I believe chapter four could have been eliminated without loss to the substance of Peters' argument, the result being an even more cohesive exploration of related poststructuralist themes.

Second, I wondered whether a conclusion might have been a useful addition. To my way of thinking this was especially important in a work addressing such a complex theoretical terrain and broad array of contentious topics. Constant links between chapters can be made, but it might also have been worthwhile for Peters to have included a final statement indicating how the movement from the critique of reason to the defence of multiculturalism and the politics of difference has been made, why discussion of these issues might matter, and what remains to be addressed in further theoretical (and practical) work on poststructuralism by philosophers, educationists, and others.

Poststructuralism, Politics and Education provides a rich, exhaustively researched, and carefully crafted examination of one of the most vigorously contested domains in contemporary intellectual discourse. Peters exceeds his stated aims. This book is original in both its synthesis of what might otherwise be divergent currents of thought and its application of poststructuralist ideas to diverse contexts, debates, and problems. Moreover, even if it is true that more detailed accounts of 'French theory' can be found in other texts, this book does offer a comprehensive introduction to poststructuralism: One which is accessible to the uninitiated, but which is also likely to be of interest to scholars well versed in the literatures that inform Peters' study. *Poststructuralism, Politics and Education* is a well-written, timely, thought-provoking book. It ought to enjoy a wide readership among academics and students in education, philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, and other fields.

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McLean, J.E. (1995). *Improving education through action research: A guide for administrators and teachers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 72 pp., softcover.

This book is one of The Practicing Administrator's Leadership Series, edited by J.J. Herman and J.L. Herman. The book and series titles, plus the editors' comments in the foreword, make it clear that the book is meant as a handbook for practicing teachers and administrators. In fact, the editors state, "here is the handbook that will demystify the research process and allow teachers and administrators to improve their teaching, schools, and school districts by using an action research approach" (p. vii). Although the author and editors have altruistic motives, the book does little to guide educators or promote action research.

This book presents a very narrow view of action research yet it implies that it provides *the* way to conduct such research. McLean suggests that action research consists of three phases: conceptualization, implementation, and interpretation. He emphasizes that this sequence cannot be altered and gives the impression that the process depends primarily upon statistical analyses of quantifiable data. This is a misrepresentation of action research and, even if it were accurate, the author fails to mention most of the limitations usually included in discussions of statistical analyses. For example, the effects of small sample sizes are not sufficiently noted even when one example used in the book demonstrates support for important curricular decisions made on the basis of comparisons between the scores of a group of 14 students and the scores of a group of 15 students. Furthermore, according to McLean, the primary new skill educators need in order to implement his model is "the ability to compare the performance levels of groups of students" (p. 7).