

**Response to Peters and Burbules, Poststructuralism and Educational Research  
(Rowman and Littlefield, 2004)  
AERA, 2004, San Diego**

Given my interest in putting the post to work, I welcome this opportunity to respond to Michael Peters and Nicholas Burbules' Poststructuralism and Educational Research (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004). Michael's comments this afternoon provide a good frame for the book, with his focus on the limits of reason and, particularly, the implications of such a limit for educational research. In my remarks, I raise three questions in the hope of focusing our discussion: 1) What are the ends of poststructuralism? 2) Is the poststructural turn away from the human sciences and toward philosophy or, rather, toward a fuzzifying of the borders between science and philosophy or, perhaps more precisely, between doing and knowing, practice and theory: praxis? and, finally, 3) what would be added to the analysis if the post of postcolonial were included as a key part of the articulation of "the post"?

**What are the ends of poststructuralism?**

In wrestling with the limits of poststructuralism in my own writing these days, I am reading Christopher Norris (1996) who rails much about the ends of Xtreme postmodernism (NRC, 2002, p. 25) as the levelling of value distinctions by an ultra-relativist orthodoxy, the collapse of truth claims in the face of epistemological skepticism, and the disastrous effects of anti-foundationalist argument on the truth-seeking enterprise.

As I read Norris, I find myself asking how he can read the same people I read to such different effect. While he makes distinctions between good deconstruction (derrida) and bad postmodernism/poststructuralism (baudrillard, rorty, foucault, lyotard especially), I imagine he would read Peters and Burbules as keeping "bad company" with the likes of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Barthes, etc. This would be despite what I see as a key distinction being made between "the end" of this or that (e.g., truth, objectivity and progress) and what Peters terms, importantly, "a philosophical corrective" that might engender examination and reconstruction "in the face of the demise of epistemological foundationalism."

In Peters' argument, the ends of poststructuralism are about complicating reference, not denying it. Through a profound vigilance regarding how language does its work, it is a skepticism not about the "real," but about "when a language is taken to be what being itself would say if it were given a tongue" (Caputo, 1997:17).

This is the sort of working "under erasure" that is key in "post" logic, a logic that involves simultaneously troubling and using the concepts we think we cannot think without. It entails keeping something visible but crossed out in order to avoid universalizing or monumentalizing it, keeping it as both limit and resource.

Why is it that the critiques of truth in Nietzsche, self-presence in Freud, referential language in Saussure, and metaphysics in Heidegger are so resisted in the social sciences? What allows the traditional foundations of knowledge to continue to undergird so much of contemporary research in the human sciences? What is the persistence of this traditional world view in the face of the loss of its plausibility given twentieth century turns toward epistemological indeterminacy? Why is contemporary interest in situatedness, perspective, relationality, narrative, poesis and blurred genres met with so much resistance? Perhaps most specifically for our purposes here today, how can the sort of scientism that characterizes recent federal efforts to legislate scientific method be intelligible let alone desirable given this philosophical context?

### **What is the poststructural turn a turn away from and toward?**

Peters quotes Alan Schrift's characterizing of poststructuralism as a turn away from the human sciences "and toward philosophical-critical analysis" of various sorts across the usual pantheon of Euro-thinkers: Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard, Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous.

While this might be the case for what Chapter One terms "first-generation poststructuralists" (p. 8), it is, precisely, as the chapter goes on to note, the ways such work has cross-fertilized a wide range of fields that makes it a lively contemporary presence. This is in spite of what some term a "post-post theory" movement captured in such book titles as life.after.theory (Payne and Schad, 2003), After Theory (Docherty, 1996), Beyond Poststructuralism (Harris, 1996) and Post-Theory (McQuillan et al, 1999).

Schad, for example, writes that "the moment of 'high' theory appears to have passed" including "Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristevan feminism, Althusserian Marxism, Derridean deconstruction and Foucauldian history" (2003, p. ix). This death is attributed to many things including the excesses of "careless readers of Nietzsche everywhere" (p. 79), and a "hopeless skeptical impasse" (p. 113) quite unprepared to deal with the shifting terrain of right-wing political and neo-Christian movements. Such a death of poststructural theory is held to be hastened by neo-liberal audit culture and its demand for transparent and quantifiable value. Such theory is, Schad writes, "busy declining in a university 'near you' in the second half of the nineties."

In the face of such post-post talk, it is, I argue, and as the "exemplars" section toward the end of the book makes clear, the "on the ground" efforts to put such theory to work that are key in giving the lie to the premature announcement of the demise of poststructuralism.

To summarize this point, my argument is that the turn that matters in this moment of the post is away from abstract philosophizing and toward concrete efforts to put the theory to work. No one says this better than Gayatri Spivak in her appendix to A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (1999), entitled "The Setting to Work of Deconstruction." Arguing for Derrida as most importantly about "an other-directed swerve away from mere

philosophical correctness” and toward “a greater emphasis on ethics and its relationship to the political” (p. 426), she terms “the affirmative call or appeal to the wholly other” as the second and present phase of deconstruction, a “setting to work that cannot be defined within the system” (p. 428).

Here philosophy “gives rise to restricted but useful debates” (p. 429) given its seeming inability to break the frame of “the formalizing calculus specific to the academic institution” (p. 431). Given “the othering of deconstructive philosophy” (p. 429) and its need to be accessible and intelligible to related academic disciplines, this may be the best philosophy can manage for now, but attention must be paid to those corners that “break hesitantly into active resistance to the inexorable calculus of globalization,” a “risk of deconstruction without reserve” (p. 430) at the site of postcolonial or “development” struggles.

This brings me to my final question: **What work does the marginalization of postcolonialism do in the analysis?**

I was a reviewer for the book proposal to Rowman and Littlefield in 1997 and I wrote there:

Chapter one should include some reference to postcolonial issues. Whatever is going on in France and Germany in terms of the "roots" of poststructuralism, postcolonial issues are a key part of its articulation. Chapter two: Again, I recommend adding a section on "theories of difference" as they are a particularly pertinent site of the working out of poststructuralism in the educational arena. Chapter four: critical race theory and some of the recent work on coloring epistemologies is pertinent.

None of this showed up in the final version and, of course, one wants to be careful to review the book that the authors wrote, not the book one might have written oneself. And the important question is not the politics of the bibliography, but, rather, how inclusions/exclusions worked in ways that both enabled and limited the analysis. What, for example, might have opened up if the proliferation of identity based epistemologies had been addressed? What work gets done by confining the analysis to, in Spivak’s terms, the first phase of the argument from difference, the “making indeterminate” (p. 426).

The book situates itself very much within the first phase of the European development of poststructuralism. It notes that poststructuralism is now, “in its third or fourth generation,” spreading out across areas, including education (Giroux, Lather and Ball are the examples), and no longer “largely a French affair” as it is developed and applied, increasingly, around the world (p. 30).

Perhaps, given the resurgence of the hold of positivism on educational research, this sort of “first-generation” treatment of the post is precisely what is needed now in order to

generate an intelligibility for poststructuralism in educational research circles that might foster a very different sort of inquiry out of twentieth century turns toward epistemological indeterminacy. There are limits on the formalization of a problematic in terms of the work of justice; perhaps this is the situation of philosophy as both limit and resource, its position as what Spivak terms “a halfway house toward the open end of a ‘setting to work’ (1999:427). To open to the margins is to set philosophy on a journey toward an indeterminacy that is not about relativism but about responsibility in not knowing. Here ‘responsible deconstruction’ is to ask “what would it be to learn otherwise, here” (Spivak, 1994, p. 62) in order to set to work anew, wanting “more and other” in terms of the relations of places of thought, welcoming the horizon of alterity that necessarily haunts all projects of responsible criticism.

I leave it to the audience to discuss these matters further.

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