Postmodernism and poststructuralism: the implications for the teaching of history at secondary level.

Introduction

The two terms, 'postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism', are frequently used as if they were synonyms. There is no easy way to define the terms: there is no single, recognised, authoritative text and as we shall see, the concepts involved challenge the very notion of pinning a single, accepted meaning to any such labels. Therefore, the definitions and commentaries which follow must be taken as personal interpretations.

Although postmodernism and poststructuralism are virtually synonymous, the two terms come from different areas of study. Poststructuralism mostly originates from literary criticism and postmodernism started from a more general cultural critique.

Poststructuralism, as the word implies, draws upon the earlier ideas of structuralism. Structuralism is:

> "a method of analysis in which individual elements are considered . . . in terms of their relationship within the system in which they function . . . . . structuralism attempts to examine the structure of such systems from a more 'impersonal' or 'scientific' perspective than that of the perceiving or intending subject. Poststructuralism might be said to be suspicious of the apparent ease with which this 'decentering' of the subject is carried out" (Bennington and Young, 1987:1)

Structuralism owes much to Ferdinand de Saussure and his theories about language (see Culler, 1986). Saussure suggested that a language was a system of signs, each sign containing a signifier and a signified. For example, the English word dog is a linguistic sign. This sign has two elements. The graphic image of "dog", the lines of ink on paper which you see before you, this is the signifier. The concept of *dog*, the four-legged animal, is the signified. What makes dog a linguistic sign is its difference from other signs (words). The signifier, "dog" is different from "bog", "cog", "fog", "hog", "jog" or "log" because it has the consonant 'd' as its first letter. There is nothing of intrinsic value in the sign, its value is wholly extrinsic and the use of "dog" as a signifier is entirely arbitrary: so long as there was widespread agreement, "zog", or even "@#$", would work equally well as a replacement for the signifier, "dog". It is argued that the signified element of a sign is just as arbitrary as the signifier element. For example, why have the specific concept of a thing which is a *dog* and things which are not: it would be no less reasonable to have two signs, one for large dogs and one for small dogs. Or we could use one sign for both dogs and wolves. Different languages do divide the world in different ways: Polish has two words for blue; in Polish, these two words (signs) signify two entirely different colours. Language is a system, a structure, and elements of that structure are defined by their relationship to other elements in that structure.

Structuralism and the science of signs (semiotics) has been applied to many disciplines. Some of the most important contributions to recent discussions have been made by Jaques Derrida (see Derrida, 1976). Derrida has done much to put the post into poststructuralism. Derrida argues that we can only ever know things through the medium of language and that there can never be any direct correspondence between language and the world it attempts to represent. Derrida accepts that language is a system of signs but he suggests that there can never be a final signified: all signifieds turn out to be other signifiers. If one looks up a word in a dictionary, one only finds other words. Language uses signs and these signs are unstable. If each sign is defined by its relationship to others, then it is defined by what it is not: dog is dog because it is not bog, or log and blue is blue because it is not green or yellow. If a sign is defined by what it is not, then it is defined by its context within the structure of language. A changed context would change the meaning of a sign. A simple example will illustrate the point: in an essay on poststructuralism, the word sign has quite a different meaning from the same word used in the *Highway Code*.

Derrida leads us to another contemporary academic buzzword, deconstruction. Derrida has read writers such as Rousseau extremely carefully. In these close, careful readings, Derrida has pinpointed parts of the text where the writer uses a metaphor to secure an argument. By taking such metaphors seriously and literally, Derrida turns the argument of a writer upside down. Derrida does this with Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure argues that in language, speech comes first and that writing is little more than a parasitical offshoot of speech. At one point though, Saussure uses writing as a metaphor to show the nature of speech. The result of what Derrida does is that "writing . . . turns out to be the best illustration of the nature of linguistic units. Speech is to be understood as a form of writing." (Culler, 1986:141).This gives us "a new concept of writing: a generalized writing that would have as subspecies a vocal writing and a graphic writing." (Culler, 1986:142). What Derrida does to Saussure and Rousseau is known as deconstruction.

Christopher Norris offers the following as a definition of the verb, to deconstruct:

> "an ambivalent or middle-voice verb, one that between the active sense 'to read texts with an eye sharply trained for contradictions, blindspots, or moments of hitherto unlooked-for complication' and the alternative (non-interventionist) account according to which it is always *the texts themselves* that undermine more traditional, naive ways of reading, so that criticism only has to keep track of this progress - i.e., remain alert to the tell-tale signs of inbuilt textual resistance - and thereby demonstrate its non-complicity with an otherwise ubiquitous Western 'logocentrism' or 'metaphysics of presence'." (Norris, 1991:137)

Norris correctly points out that the term deconstruction is used more and more frequently, resulting in a variety of other meanings/interpretations of the term. These other meanings/interpretations vary from deconstruction as "thinking that systematically challenges consensus values from a sceptical, dissenting or oppositional standpoint" (Norris, 1991:136), to deconstruction as taking things apart "in a spirit of game-playing nihilist abandon and without the least concern for constructing some better alternative" (Norris, 1991:137). This explains the "idea that deconstruction is basically just another variant of the current 'postmodernist' turn across various fashion-prone areas of thought." (Norris, 1991:148).

So what is postmodernism? To answer this, it is easiest to look at one person's interpretation of postmodernism. One of the better known proponents of postmodernism is Jean-Francois Lyotard (see Lyotard, 1992). Lyotard presents a history of the death of belief in intrinsic values. In pre-modern societies, it is argued that social hierarchy was based on 'intrinsic' values such as divinity, race or lineage. The rise of the bourgeoisie however, was accompanied by a person's value being located externally. People were to be valued by what they owned and by what they helped to create: value was located in private property. Industrial workers took this further and argued that value was to be located not in the object made, not in what was produced but in the labour used to produce it. Indeed, private property should be abolished. Here we have the development of socialist and communist theory. Lyotard goes on to suggest that belief in socialism and belief in bourgeois capitalism have both diminished. Stalinism and the general oppressive nature of Russian communism lead to widespread disillusionment in socialism. Meanwhile, liberal capitalism has been subjected to a series of dehabilitating critiques. Capitalism has been forced to show its true basis, which for a long time remained hidden by talk of liberal values. Under capitalism, all values, moral, scientific or aesthetic, are determined by market forces.

According to Lyotard, these developments have serious consequences for knowledge. First, the revelation that capitalism allows market forces to determine all values has been accompanied by technological changes: we live in an increasingly computerised society. As the world becomes increasingly computerised, knowledge becomes increasingly quantifiable. Social and technological change leads to changes in what is considered to be legitimate knowledge. At the most basic level, knowledge must be reduced to the 0s and 1s of binary code: that is, knowledge has to be translated into computer language. This echoes the work of Michel Foucault (see Foucault, 1980). Foucault argues that knowledge is constructed by society: what is legitimate knowledge is what is allowed by society. As Madan Sarup puts it, Foucault believes that "modern societies control and discipline their populations by sanctioning the knowledge claims and practices of the human sciences" (Sarup, 1988:80) and that "knowledge is a power over others, the power to define others"

(Sarup, 1988:73). Second, as values are determined by market forces and as market forces change, there are no longer any fixed values. There is no longer any comprehensive, complete and consistent explanation of the world in which we live. To use Lyotard's terminology, there are no metanarratives. The postmodern age is defined by its "incredulity towards metanarratives". (Lyotard, 1992:intro.) Examples of metanarratives include Marxism, Humanism, Science, Christianity and Liberal Democracy. Certain narratives which claim to be metanarratives are prominent because they are put forward by those who are in a position to do so: in other words, explanations of the world depend not on intrinsic truth but on power. Other narratives are on the fringes; 'marginal discourses' exist because groups with little power exist.

Postmodernism can be best summarised by a sketch of general characteristics. There is a fundamental rejection of 'logocentrism', of any belief in an immutable absolute upon which everything can be based. Postmodernism also rejects any belief in a meaningful correspondence between the physical, external, 'real' world and attempts to describe this world. One explanation/description/discourse is ultimately unable to claim greater validity/truth than competing explanations/descriptions/discourses. Postmodernists often produce work which is self-referential and which tries to openly acknowledge its own construction and mechanisms. Postmodernist art borrows in a seemingly indiscriminate manner from other styles and philosophies and this is why postmodernism is often associated with pastiche. If no particular style/ narrative/philosophy can claim to be more valid than all others, then one is free to pick and choose as required.

From now on in this essay, postmodernism and poststructuralism will considered to be synonyms. The term postmodernism will be used, unless specific textual and literary connotations wish to be evoked.

Postmodernism and the study of history

So what are the implications for the discipline of history? Saussure believed that a language could be studied synchronically or diachronically. A synchronic approach meant, "the study of the linguistic system in a particular state, without reference to time" (Culler, 1986:45) and a diachronic approach meant, the "study of [a language's] evolution in time" (*ibid*). Saussure's focus on the relationship between linguistic units within a structure explains why Saussure emphasised the synchronic analysis of language. As Saussure's theories were applied to disciplines other than linguistics, it follows that his synchronic emphasis should threaten the discipline of history. Any theory which operates "without reference to time" (*ibid.*) must endanger the study of history: "the structuralist use of Saussure's distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic appears to allow for the effacement of history altogether." (Bennington and Young, 1987:1). If one pursues this line, developments in poststructuralist thought act as supports for history. The importance of difference has already been discussed; that linguistic signs are defined by their difference from other linguistic signs. Derrida argues that what makes an individual sign different from all other signs is its place in time as well as its place within a text. For example, most of us have read a particular novel or poem twice. On the second reading, we see things which we missed the first time and we pay less attention to aspects which, on the first reading, we considered important. Linguistic signs within the text have changed meaning because their temporal context has changed. Derrida argues that, when we re-read a novel or poem, we do not read the same text twice but in fact read two different texts which have some resemblance to each other. Time has once again become an important part of explanation and the discipline of history has apparently been saved: "it could be said that the 'post' of post-structuralism contrives to reintroduce [historicity]" (*ibid.*) because "Derrida calls attention to the process by which difference operates temporally as well as spatially" (*ibid*).

What has actually happened is more or less the opposite of what has just been suggested. Many historians have felt far more threatened by postmodernism than they have by structuralism. The main reason for this is that many feel that postmodernism casts doubt upon everything. Therefore, the historian is no longer able to state anything with any certainty: history loses all claim to be a vehicle for any kind of truth.

During the 1970s, the American historian Hayden White began to apply poststructuralist analysis to historiographical issues. White has largely concentrated on studying 19th century historiography. He argues that the conventional "folklore of historiography" (White, 1978:3) states that a great theoretical and methodological revolution occurred in the study of history during the 19th century. This conventional view also states that whilst there are many grounds on which to criticise positivism, it was still responsible for the development of modern methodology. White argues that this conventional interpretation is wrong:

> "What did take place in the early 19th century was a revolution in the style of historical writing . . . . . this change was seen as a liberation of historical writing from rhetoric in general. Actually, however, the change involved only a shift from one rhetorical register to another." (White, 1978:4)

White's main point is that history and historians are totally dependent on rhetorical device and that this cannot be avoided.

The thing which distinguishes history from all other disciplines is its object of study: that is, the past. This defining characteristic of history also gives history a major obstacle. The past, by definition, has been and gone. The historian cannot bring the past back in order to verify her or his interpretation. According to White, this obstacle explains history's, and the historian's, dependence on figurative language:

> " "The cat sat on the mat" has nothing figurative in it if it . . . can be verified or falsified by observation - if, in short, the verbal formula can be checked against visual or other perception. But of course, this is precisely what we cannot do with verbal propositions whose referents exist in the past . . . . . Every verbal proposition about a particular thing . . . existing in an absolute past . . . refers us to an entity which we *know* only through another verbal proposition." (White 1978:7)

This argument clearly resembles Derrida's point that all signifieds turn out to be other signifiers: instead of an unending succession of signifiers, we are faced with an unending succession of verbal propositions. White decides that "all historical discourse can be shown on analysis to be a set of figurative statements." (*ibid.*) White also echoes Derrida in points made about the use of metaphor. What appears to be a series of tightly-knit propositions so often turns out to be a sentence, paragraph or article which is held together by metaphor. For example, in the previous two sentences, "echoes", "appears", "tightly-knit" and "held together" are all metaphors. In other words, White deconstructs texts.

White writes that "Historians regard rhetoric as being in some way opposed to logic; and . . . they certainly wish to believe that their arguments or explanations have the force of logic behind them." (White, 1978:4). So what is the principle on which historical arguments are based? White's answer is that the historian's subject matter is the practical life and:

> "in the practical life, unlike the dianoetic . . . logic [has] to be violated . . . . . *life as lived* by the agents in the historical drama . . .[is] more suitably *represented* in rhetorical discourse, where the enthymeme rather than the syllogism [holds] sway as paradigm." (White, 1978:14)

The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines enthymeme as "*Rhet.* An argument based on probable premisses, as distinct from a demonstration" and syllogism as "*Logic.* An argument expressed or claimed to be expressible in the form of two propositions called the premisses, containing a common or middle term, with a third proposition called the conclusion, resulting necessarily from the other two". Thus, in a long-winded way, White makes two rather obvious but connected points: people in the real world do not react and relate to each other in forms which mirror the operations of formal logic and hence, history does not possess the accuracy or rigour of formal logic. The principal on which historical arguments are based is rhetoric, or as White would say: "it is the enthymeme rather than the syllogism which is the structural principal of historical discourse, and . . . rhetoric rather than logic is the organon of this discourse" (White, 1978:16).

White's views can be broadly summarised as follows:

> "all . . . professions of antirhetoricity are always themselves a rhetorical ploy, the substitution of the rhetoric of antirhetoric for the rhetoric of rhetoric. The *topoi*, figures and tropes of rhetoric are still used, but now hidden; they no longer draw attention to themselves on the surface of the discourse, but work nonetheless, unobtrusively and insidiously, behind the surface of literalness . . . . . by concentrating on history writing as rhetorical exercise, we can identify more clearly the ideological biases or perspectives which inform the discourse . . . If rhetoric is the politics of discourse, as discourse is itself the politics of language, then there is no such thing as politically innocent historiography . . . until historical discourse is submitted to rigorous rhetorical analysis, this ideological and political aspect of it will remain undisclosed". (White, 1978:16-24)

White is suggesting a direction for the historian to take. The historian should use the tool of deconstruction and she or he should recognise that no history is neutral: all historians, and therefore all history, is ideologically positioned. In the name of honesty and like all good postmodernists, the historian should acknowledge and display the contrived nature of his or her work. There are also implications for history as a distinct discipline: the textual analysis that White uses comes straight from the world of poststructuralist literary criticism. If one accepts that history and the historian depend primarily on rhetoric, does history have any claim to be considered separately from literature?

Another postmodernist historian who distinguishes between the past and history is Keith Jenkins. This distinction is crucial for Jenkins. He claims that although the historian studies the past, the historian can never recreate the past. The past has gone and there are far too many obstacles to be able to bring it back: "the sheer bulk of the past precludes total history" (Jenkins, 1991:11). The fact that the past can never be recreated is a reason why there are different historical interpretations: "there is a multiplicity of types of history whose only common feature is that their ostensible object of enquiry is 'the past' " (Jenkins, 1991:3). As the 'real' past is unobtainable, then there are no criteria for claiming one history is more true than another:

> "the real past, an objective past about which . . . accounts are accurate and even true . . . such certaintist claims are not - and never were - possible to achieve . . . . . there is no fundamentally correct 'text' of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are". (Jenkins, 1991:10-11)

So the past may be the ostensible object of study but "History is an inter-textual, linguistic construct." (Jenkins, 1991:7).

In explaining why there are so many different historical interpretations, or in fact so many different histories, Jenkins gives an account of how an academic history is made. Between the past and the historian, there are so many obstacles. Historians cannot escape their own personal values, ideologies or positions. The historian is also directed by their own specific epistemological and methodological suppositions. Each historian has their own routine when working: the specific skills needed to write history vary from person to person. The historian is always limited by the materials available, including any traces of the past which may still exist. The specific use the historian makes of the materials also affects the history being constructed. Academics have egos: the historian wants to find the elusive original thesis. When all preparation has been done, the history still has to be written: the historian is influenced by pressures from home, work, and the publisher. For example, many historians are constrained by a word limit. When writing their own history, the historian has to read other people's histories: "texts also have to be read; consumed . . . no two readings are the same . . . each reading is another writing . . . any text, in con-texts, can mean many things." (Jenkins, 1991:24). This takes us straight back to Derrida's claim that the same text read twice is in fact two different texts. This account of how academic history is constructed helps to explain why an objective, definitive history is impossible.

The point has been made about the "sheer bulk" (Jenkins, 1991:11) of the past. Jenkins argues that the size and random nature of the past ensures that any historical interpretation is inevitably an imposition of

subjective meaning. Historical accounts are narratives: in other words, historians tell stories about the past. The problem with this is that:

> "to see people in the past or the past *as such* in story form is to give the past . . . an *imagined* series of reasons or points or meanings . . . [this is] to read *into* the past narrative structures and coherences it never had . . . there are *no stories in the past to correspond to.* In fact, the only stories that the past has are those that historians *et al* put there (confer) by their various emplotments, thus making any theory of correspondence self-referencing". (Jenkins, 1994:11)

Again, history as a subject separate from literature is threatened: if history is the writing of imagined stories, then how does it differ from literary fiction? However, Jenkins does say that: "this doesn't at all mean that events and situations in the past did not happen . . . but simply that they did not happen as stories; that is what is 'fictional' about history." (*ibid*). Here, it seems that Jenkins is making an unsustainable distinction between historical facts and historical interpretation. What are "events and situations in the past" (*ibid*)? To decide that an event or situation did actually occur in the past is an interpretive act: For example, a belief in the landing of William I in England in 1066 is based on interpretation of traces of the past and on trust of the writings of various historians. Even if one accepts that an event did actually occur, the decision to spend time looking at an event involves selection: it is interpretation which decides that the William's arrival in England is a historical fact.

The conclusion from Jenkins is that there is no objective history. Talk of bias is unhelpful in the study of history because all history is biased: "there is clearly no unpositioned criterion by which one can judge the degree of bias." (Jenkins, 1991:37). If it is impossible to judge which history is more objective, then why are some histories more prominent in our society than others? The answer is power: some groups have the power to decree that their history is true and other groups do not: "truth is dependent on somebody having the power to make it true." (Jenkins, 1991:31). All history is ideologically positioned: "History is always history for someone" (Jenkins, 1994:14). Professional, academic historians are not positioned beyond the ideological conflict, "but as occupying very dominant positions within it" (Jenkins, 1991:20) and "bourgeois history articulates its interests in ostensibly objective, unbiased and 'disinterested' ways" (Jenkins, 1994:14).

What Jenkins says about the existence of many histories mirrors what Lyotard says about the death of metanarratives: history is not only just one discourse, one narrative amongst many competing narratives: it is also many competing narratives within itself. There is no history, only histories. Some narratives and some histories are marginalised because they are the histories and narratives of groups with little power. Jenkins' claim that society defines and constructs history reflects Lyotard's and Foucault's views on how society defines and constructs knowledge. And the way in which some history is presented as being objective is highlighted by White's work on rhetoric. The conclusion once again is that some historians are less mystifying than others, "as they deliberately call attention to their own processes of production . . . . . The only choice is between a history that is aware of what it is doing and a history that is not." (Jenkins, 1991:68-69).

Postmodernism and the National Curriculum

There are three ways in which the National Curriculum contained in the 1988 Education Reform Act must be examined. First, if we are living in the postmodern world, then what is the postmodernist interpretation of the history of the National Curriculum. Second, does the National Curriculum show any signs of sympathy for postmodernism: does it show a self-awareness, "of what it is doing" (*ibid*)? Finally, regardless of the second point, can and should the National Curriculum be used for consciously postmodernist ends.

Jenkins and Brickley (1991) put forward a postmodernist account of the development of the National Curriculum. They argue that the National Curriculum is a product of the postmodernist age, despite the

wishes of Margaret Thatcher:

> "what Thatcher would have liked for history was an interpretation we might call *certaintist* . . . . . Champion of free trade, Thatcherism would ideally close down the market place on competing historical commodities (interpretations) erecting just one stall from which everyone would purchase authorised historical products all stamped with the legend, 'Made in Britain' or better still, 'Made in England'." (Jenkins and Brickley, 1991:9)

Instead, it is argued, a very different National Curriculum has come about. The National Curriculum is riddled with internal tensions which have helped to produce an almost 'neutral' document. The tensions are best illustrated by putting the National Curriculum into its legal context. The 1988 Education Reform Act contains elements which ostensibly take power from the centre, such as Grant Maintained Schools. Other parts of the Bill suggest an intention to bring market forces into state education: for example, *per capita* funding of schools, combined with league tables of performance (which, incidentally, could be viewed as proof of the postmodernist drift towards wholly quantifiable knowledge) and the parents' 'right' to send children to the school they choose, should introduce competition amongst schools for students. In this legal context, the National Curriculum appears as a centralising, homogenising contradiction. The National Curriculum was made law by an ideologically divided Conservative Government. Some on the Right, such as Stuart Sexton, the Institute for Economic Affairs and the Adam Smith Institute, want wholesale privatisation of the state education system. Others on the Right, such as Roger Scruton and the Hillgate Group, are more concerned for the preservation of, "moral standards, religious understanding and a respect for British institutions" (The Hillgate Group, 1986:1) and the, "increasing assault on traditional values" (The Hillgate Group, 1986:4). Others again on the Right, are concerned with ensuring that the state education system properly equips students to satisfy the demands of a modern economy. To these various pressures must be added the demands of the political Left and Centre, public opinion and the views of education workers (teachers, academics, administrators, civil servants etc). Hence, the National Curriculum, pulled in all directions by competing narratives, is unintentionally and by default, postmodernist:

> "Clearly the Working Group . . . has not constructed some certaintist version of 'our island story' . . . . . The *Report* [the History National Curriculum Working Group's original proposals] encourages diverse interpretations, cultural and ideological heterogeneity, and it legitimates one crucial advantage over previous and current school histories, *the placing at the centre of the agenda of historiographical and methodological procedures*" (Jenkins and Brickley, 1991:9)

In the sense that the National Curriculum is the product of political compromise, one can argue that the resultant contradictions make it a neutral, by default, postmodernist document. One could claim though, that such explanations over-complicate the obvious: the National Curriculum was created in the real world by real people doing political deals. Government legislation is often contradictory because people are contradictory: one does not need a theory of postmodernism to understand this. If one does feel the need for esoteric interpretations, there are others to chose from. For example, the work of Jurgen Habermas (see Harland, 1988), suggests that recent Government intervention in education is motivated by the need of the state to justify its existence. As the public loses confidence in the central authorities, the central authorities take on more powers and responsibilities to prove how much people need them. In other words, the National Curriculum can be seen as a symptom of the state's legitimation crisis.

One of the most striking aspects of both the 1988 Act and the history National Curriculum is the lack of any clearly stated aims. Some may argue that the lack of any stated aims, values or criteria add to the neutrality of these documents. Postmodernism teaches though, that there is no such thing as an unpositioned text or an unbiased view. The National Curriculum's lack of self-awareness or clear explanation of purpose is an ideological statement. It is obvious that to come to any decision, one must have criteria upon which to decide. To create a National Curriculum, to give content and structure to a history National Curriculum, one must have reasons and criteria. To not publicly state these criteria is not to be neutral but merely to be dishonest. The failure to state criteria can be interpreted either as evidence of a hidden agenda or as an illustration of some on the Right's distrust of theory. As Jenkins says, for a postmodernist the, "choice is between a history that is aware of what it is doing and a history that is not." (Jenkins, 1991:69). The history

National Curriculum shows no conscious sympathy for or awareness of postmodernism and the controversies surrounding the history National Curriculum show that it is not neutral. It is not postmodernist by default because the lack of any clear statement of purpose is indicative of a particular ideological position.

Although the history National Curriculum is not, in any concrete way, a postmodernist document, this does not necessarily mean that it cannot be put to postmodernist uses. One argument is that actual areas of historical study, on the school timetable or elsewhere, are irrelevant. If we are faced with different interpretations and different areas of study, none of which can claim to be more truthful, objective or representative, then which particular area(s) of study to include is not important. The important thing is how history is delivered by the teacher in the classroom: once again, the crucial point is not whether the history is true but whether its subjectivity is being overtly recognised. This argument is valid up to a point. It is correct to say that stipulating areas of study to be included in a history course cannot guarantee that a certain interpretation will be adhered to. This though, is at best a negative freedom for the teacher. The present history National Curriculum, pre- or post-Dearing, still squeezes out of the timetable content which a teacher may deem to be important. For example, the teacher can (in theory) teach British history according to which ever interpretation she or he chooses. However, there will be much European and other World history which will not be taught, whatever the interpretation. At key stage three, even with Dearing's new, slimmer National Curriculum, the teacher does not have the option to deliver a mainly World, or non-British, history course: the statutory units leave too little time. Although the postmodernist may claim that there are no objective criteria with which to choose areas of study, if there is to be a National Curriculum then a choice must be made. The options include stipulating no particular area of study but this option is still a choice which would be governed by criteria.

The area within the history National Curriculum in which postmodernist theory is most useful is the attainment targets. The inclusion of the attainment targets within the National Curriculum places an emphasis on structure. It is an emphasis on structure which is reminiscent of Bruner. Bruner claims:

> "Grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully. To learn structure, in short, is to learn how things are related." (Bruner, 1969:7)

This is obviously in the world of structuralism. Bruner cites various examples of the importance of structure in a child's education. For example:

> "The often unconscious nature of learning structures is perhaps best illustrated in learning one's native language. Having grasped the subtle structure of a sentence, the child very rapidly learns to generate many other sentences based on this model though different in content from the original sentence learned. And having mastered the rules for transforming sentences . . . the child is able to vary his sentences much more widely. Yet, while children are able to *use* the structural rules of English, they are certainly not able to say what the rules are." (Bruner, 1969:8)

This theory of language clearly resembles Saussure. Like Saussure's theory, this theory is to be applied to other disciplines, including the teaching of history. History should be taught so that students can learn, even if unconsciously, how to use its structures with varying subject matter. The ability to use these structures will be developed by returning to them periodically:

> "A curriculum as it develops should revisit these basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has the full formal apparatus that goes with them . . . There is much still to be learnt about the "spiral curriculum" that turns back on itself at higher levels". (Bruner, 1969:13)

The History National Curriculum Working Group's original proposals made specific reference to the spiral curriculum. The attainment targets, either as the three separate targets or as the one post-Dearing attainment

target, focus attention on the structure of history. Setting out targets for knowledge and understanding of history, interpretations of history and the use of historical sources brings methodology to the foreground of history teaching in schools. The point at which Bruner, the structuralists and the history National Curriculum differ from the postmodernists is at the assumption that history has one identifiable, coherent and objective structure. The postmodernists reject this assumption and argue that:

> "different kinds of history course produce different kinds of historical explanation . . . The point is that the setting - the structure which determines what shall count as historical explanation - comes not from what is being looked at; rather it is imposed from outside." (Brickley, 1994:20)

Once again, the point is made that there is no single objective history, only differing histories. The postmodernist welcomes the attention given in the history National Curriculum to methodology as a means to highlight the subjective nature of history. For this reason, the postmodernist particularly approves of the old attainment target two, interpretations of history, now subsumed within the one history attainment target.

Postmodernism in the history classroom

At first glance, the subtitle above looks ridiculous to anyone who has taught the bottom set year 9 on Friday afternoon. Developments and changes in intellectual paradigms do however matter. History teaching in Britain has changed enormously during the twentieth century. These changes have occurred for a number of reasons, including more widespread education, increasing democratisation and population changes. For example, the existence of large minority ethnic groups in many British cities has helped to highlight the jingoistic nature of some old text books. Changing attitudes to methodology have also affected the teaching of history at secondary level. Elements of the work done by groups such as the Schools History Project can be traced back to discussions in the 1960s, such as the famous exchanges between Elton and Carr. The average secondary school history course of 1994 contains far more work on historical sources than the average secondary school history course of 1974. Developments in the intellectual world do affect the bottom set year 9 class. Another development in history teaching during the last twenty years or so has been the replacement of history as a distinct discipline by combined humanities courses: postmodernism encourages this change by doubting that history was ever really a distinct discipline in the first place.

So how can postmodernism change the practices of the secondary school history teacher? One possibility for the post-16 year old student is simple: "some of the text and references [of postmodernism] can be employed as teaching materials in, for example, 'A' level methodology modules." (Brickley, 1994:17). The intricacies of postmodernist historiography are not, however, a viable option for the 11-16 age group.

Jenkins and Brickley (1991) offer a number of suggestions for the history teacher sympathetic to postmodernism. As history teachers, we should:

> "[1] always explain to our pupils why the history they are getting is the one they are getting (for there are lots of others of course) and why they are getting it in the way they are . . . . . explain to our pupils how . . . [2] we will 'personally' interpret every HSU, making explicit the readings we prefer and the selections and emphases we will make. That we express our own methodological and ideological preferences . . . . . [3] we both insist upon and yet relativise (unprivilege) our own positions by placing them explicitly within as many historiographical, ideological, interpretive frameworks we know . . . . . [4] that we encourage, throughout, the pupils to do develop positions for themselves." (Jenkins and Brickley, 1991:13-14)

The most important point is that:

> "a post-modern approach, and indeed any kind of sensible and honest historical methodology, will build into the explanation some reference to the discourse to which it owes its validity." (Brickley, 1994:21)

Three questions can be put to these suggestions: are they desirable, are they practicable and are they really suggesting anything original? Certainly [1] above seems desirable. Teaching children history can them help to develop a critical faculty. If children are to develop their critical abilities, they must be encouraged to question what they are doing in the classroom. To this extent, [2], [3] and[4] are also desirable. Such an approach, aside from aiding the intellectual development of children, is the most honest. There are, however, practical difficulties. How much time can the history teacher be expected to devote to questioning what is being done? If one is constantly explaining motives and highlighting 'bias', will one ever actually teach any 'real' history? Also, by claiming absolute truth for nothing whatsoever, is the teacher both undermining her or his own position and confusing the students? Hopefully, the teacher is able to preserve his or her own authority by remaining in command intellectually: even without truth, one can still perhaps have experts. The danger of confusion is more serious: many teachers have observed that students like certainty; they feel security in thinking of things as being true, correct and real. Maybe though, this is a result of the present education culture, orientated towards right and wrong answers: postmodernism offers the challenge of educating children to understand uncertainty. The final question was, does such a programme for secondary teaching offer anything original? There is nothing new in teaching students to question sources and accounts, or in teaching them that different historians have different interpretations. What is perhaps new is the concept that nothing can be said to be definitely true. Another particular characteristic of postmodernism is its theory of power. If students can be successfully taught to question why certain accounts are put forward and who benefits from their acceptance, then a real liberation will have occurred.

This essay will finish with an examination of a specific classroom situation. During my teaching practice at a village college in Cambridgeshire, I taught the pre-Dearing key stage three core study unit 5, the Era of the Second World War, to two year 9 classes. Part of this course included three lessons about Communism, Fascism and Democracy. These lessons were extremely difficult to teach. First, I felt unsure, within such controversial subjects, where an appropriate 'balance' lay. Second, many of the students found the subject matter too abstract. I now see that postmodernism has something to offer here. If the lessons were delivered by looking at who stood to gain from each doctrine and how proponents of each ideology portrayed their own and other doctrines, the need to strike some sort of 'balance' would be reduced. Written defences of the ideologies could stand for themselves and the lesson could examine why different groups of people adhered to different ideologies. Such an approach may also lessen the abstract inaccessibility of the subject matter: by examining interest groups and their needs, students would have more concrete, human motives as explanations of the ideologies. For example, looking at a case study of a Russian peasant or a German owning a small business would relate Communism and Nazism to real people. In other words, the three doctrines could be examined as examples of competing narratives whose legitimacy was derived from power. It would also be better to make clear one's own bias as often as possible: one should constantly warn the students of what they are being told, rather than strive for an impossible, illusory 'balance'.

However, postmodernism also has some potentially awful implications for the classroom. The committed postmodernist teacher should encourage the students to, "develop positions for themselves." (Jenkins and Brickley, 1991:13-14). What if one or more of the students (genuinely) developed the position, within the same core study unit, that the holocaust did not happen? Or alternatively and worse, what if one or more of the students (genuinely) decided that the holocaust had occurred but that it was also justifiable? I do not feel that my job as a secondary school history teacher includes students learning factual inaccuracies: the holocaust did happen, whatever the postmodernist may argue. If a student really concludes that the holocaust was justifiable, should any teacher really admit that this belief may be correct? It seems to me that teaching includes a moral responsibility. Is it morally defensible to implicitly condone the death of six million people on the grounds that students should, "develop positions for themselves" (*ibid*)? What sort of message would such a teaching approach send to Jewish students? This is not to say that students should not be encouraged to think for themselves. It is to say however, that independent thought for students is only one aim, although an extremely important aim, for the history teacher. Very occasionally, other educational aims will have to take priority. The same danger applies also to the teacher. Should a teacher be allowed to, "insist upon" (*ibid.*) their own position if that position is that the holocaust was a good thing? Does such a situation become acceptable if we, "relativise (unprivilege) our own positions by placing them explicitly

within as many historiographical, ideological, interpretive frameworks we know" (*ibid*). In other words, is it acceptable for a teacher to claim that the Nazis were right to kill six million people, so long as he or she lets the class know that there are other opinions? Is such tolerance to Nazi sympathizers morally justifiable?

The obvious objection to the last paragraph is that it discusses an extreme and deliberately emotive possibility. This objection is true but beside the point. The point is that such a possibility is a possibility. The example is also intended to illustrate the logical implications of postmodernism. If there are no criteria by which to judge an historical account, or indeed no objective criteria for any claims to truth, then everything is open to question. If one pursues this route, one either endlessly deconstructs one's own position and therefore gets precisely nowhere, or one concludes that power is everything. Either route is extremely depressing and not viable as a teaching strategy.

All this is to merely say that postmodernism does not offer all the answers. It does however, as I hope I have shown, help with some problems and issues of teaching history at secondary level. It may not be philosophically defensible to be a postmodernist only in places but it is defensible as a teaching strategy: "[postmodernism's] ideas should be in the intellectual armoury of all history teachers." (Brickley, 1994:17).

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