

*Global Capital, Postmodern/Poststructural Deconstruction and Social Change: a Marxist Critique**

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ABSTRACT *In this paper I begin by taking a brief glimpse at the current state of global capitalism. I then look at attempts in Britain and the United States to argue the case, within educational theory, that postmodernism and poststructuralism can be forces for social change and social justice. Concentrating on some of the work of Elizabeth Atkinson, Patti Lather and Judith Baxter, I argue that such claims are illusory. I make the case that Marxism remains the only viable option in the pursuit of social change and social justice*

Introduction

In this paper, I begin with a brief overview of the current state of world capitalism. I then go on to examine postmodernist and ‘feminist poststructuralist’ claims that postmodernism and poststructuralism are forces for social change and social justice [1]. I look firstly at some of the work of Elizabeth Atkinson, then at some of Patti Lather’s work and finally at a recent article by Judith Baxter.

Leading British postmodernist, Atkinson (2002) addresses herself to some recent writings on educational theory from within the Marxist tradition: specifically Marxist critiques of postmodernism (and, in particular, some of the work of Dave Hill, Jane Kelly, Peter McLaren, Glenn Rikowski and myself; namely, Cole and Hill, 1995; Cole *et al.*, 1997; Hill *et al.*, (Eds.) 1999; Kelly *et al.*, 1999). Atkinson concentrates on our claims that one of the greatest problems with postmodernism is that it lacks an agenda for social change and social justice. Her argument is that, ‘through the acceptance of uncertainty, the acknowledgement of diversity and the refusal to see concepts such as “justice” or “society” as fixed or as governed by unassailable

“truths” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 73), postmodernism, far from lacking such an agenda, is, in fact, a powerful force for social change.

Arguing in a similar vein, in a critique of an article by Peter McLaren (1998) [2], foremost American thinker, Patti Lather suggests that the progressive potential of feminist poststructuralist analysis lies in its rejection of ‘economistic Marxism’ in favour of ‘a praxis of not being so sure’ (derived from Jacques Derrida’s ‘ordeal of the undecidable’). Finally, British poststructuralist, Judith Baxter makes the claim that ‘feminist post-structural analysis’, is an effective tool *both* to deconstruct cultural processes responsible for oppression *and* to ultimately promote social transformation.

My argument is that neither postmodernism nor feminist poststructural analysis are conducive to the pursuit of social change or social justice and that, in the context of global capitalism today, Marxism provides the only viable option in that pursuit.

Global Capitalism Today

I would like to begin with a few recent and current facts about the current state of globalized capitalism in the United States, the United Kingdom and the 'developing world'. As far as the US is concerned, during the 1980s, the top 10 percent of families increased their average family income by 16 percent, the top 5 percent by 23 percent, and the top 1 percent by 50 percent. At the same time, the bottom 80 percent all lost something, with the bottom 10 percent losing 15 percent of their incomes (George, 2000, cited in McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana, 2001, p. 208). The poverty rate rose from 11.3 per cent in 2000 to 11.7 per cent in 2001, while the number of poor

increased also by 1.3 million to 32.9 million (US Census Bureau, September 24th 2002).

In Britain, the latest figures show that the wealthiest 1 percent own 23 percent of wealth, while the wealthiest 50 percent own 94 percent (Social Trends, 2002, p. 102). This means that the poorest half of the population own only 6 percent of all wealth (Hill and Cole, 2001, p. 139). With respect to income, in Britain, the bottom fifth of people earn less than 10 percent of disposable income and the top fifth over 40 percent (Social Trends, 2002, p. 97). Over one in five children in Great Britain do not have a holiday away from home once a year because their parents cannot afford it (ibid., p. 87).

As far as the so called 'developing world' is concerned, for two decades poverty in Africa and Latin America has increased, both in absolute and relative terms. Nearly half the world's population are living on less than \$2 a day and one fifth live on just \$1 a day (World Development Movement, 2001). The turning over of vast tracts of land to grow one crop for multinationals often results in ecological degradation, with those having to migrate to the towns living in slum conditions and working excessive hours in unstable jobs (Harman 2000). There are about one hundred million abused and hungry 'street kids' in the world's major cities; slavery is re-emerging, and some two million girls from the age of five to fifteen are drawn into the global prostitution market (Mojab, 2001, p. 118). It was estimated that over 12 million children under five would die from poverty-related illness in 2001 (World Development Movement, 2001). Approximately, one hundred million human beings do not have adequate shelter and 830 million people are not 'food secure', i.e. hungry (Mojab, 2001, p. 118). It has been estimated that, if current trends persist, in the whole of Latin America apart from Chile and Colombia, poverty will continue to grow in the next ten years, at the rate of two more poor people per minute (Heredia, cited in McLaren, 2000, p. 39).

In fact, the world is becoming polarized into central and peripheral economies, with the gap between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless, growing so large that, by the late 1990s, the 300 largest corporations in the world accounted for 70 percent of foreign direct investment and 25 percent of world capital assets (Bagdikian, 1998, cited in McLaren, 2000, p. xxiv). At the start of the twenty-first century, the combined assets of the 225 richest people was roughly equal to the annual incomes of the poorest 47 percent of the world's population (Heintz & Folbre, 2000, cited in McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001, p. 345) and eight companies earned more than half the world's population (World Development Movement, 2001).

Today, 125 million children cannot go to school and 110 million children, young people and adults have to leave school before they have completely acquired the basic skills of reading and writing. At the same time, the global education market is estimated to be worth more than 3,000 billion Euros (National Union of Education, Research and Culture, General Confederation of Labour, France, 2002, p. 4).

The Ordeal of the Undecidable

If postmodernism and poststructuralism can be forces for social change and social justice, then one would assume that they could in some way redress these global injustices. Atkinson (2002) begins her arguments by advocating Stronach and MacLure's (1997) concept of the postmodernist as 'a responsible anarchist'. They, in turn, borrowed this 'anarchic position' from Schurmann (1990) in an attempt to argue that the 'acceptance of disorder should not be mistaken for passivity or acquiescence' (Stronach and MacLure 1997, p. 98). Responsible anarchism involves 'standing against the fantasies of grand narratives, recoverable pasts, and predictable futures' (Atkinson, 2002, pp. 73-4). I will take these propositions in turn [3]. First, as I will

argue later, I believe grand narrative (Marxism), albeit amenable to critical interrogation, is essential in the promotion of social justice. Second, as far as 'recoverable pasts' are concerned, I would suggest that, while it is not possible nor necessarily desirable to return to the past *per se*, there have been events in the past from which we can learn as we plan for the future (e.g. Marx and Engels 1977, pp. 31-32) [4]. Third, with respect to 'predictable futures', Marxists do not *predict* the future but merely have a vision of how societies *could* be run [5].

Atkinson then challenges the view that 'it is essential to choose one theoretical perspective or course of action over another' (2002, p. 75). This is derived, *inter alia*, from the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's concept of the 'ordeal of the undecidable' has been developed by Patti Lather in her attempt to counter what she refers to as Marxists' 'insistence on the "right story"'. The 'ordeal of the undecidable' has 'obligations to openness, passage and nonmastery'; 'questions are constantly moving and one 'one cannot define, finish or close' (Lather 2001, p. 184). Derrida's (1992) position is that 'a decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision' (cited in Parrish, 2002, p. 1). Richard Parrish explains:

[A]ny claim – discursive position – is a universal claim that in order to be universal must continually re-found itself. Any position, even the position that universal positions are impossible, is a universal claim and is therefore considered iterable universally. This universal iterability denies in its structure the legitimacy of counter-claims made by others, thus denying others as independent sources of meaning (ibid.)

Lather attempts to link Derrida with Marx by reminding us that in her book, *Getting Smart*, she ended the section on 'postmarxism' with Foucault's prophecy that 'it is clear, even if one admits that Marx will disappear for now, that he will reappear one

day' (Foucault, cited in Lather, 1991, p. 45). However, she rejects what she sees as Marxists' 'discourse of mastery/transparency/rationalism and repositioning of economic Marxism as the "master discourse of the left"' (Lather, 2001, p. 187). Rather than return to historical materialism (the belief that the development of material goods necessary to human existence is the primary force which determines social life), Lather's interest is in 'a praxis of not being so sure' (ibid., p. 184), 'a praxis in excess of binary or dialectical logic' (ibid., p. 189) a 'post-dialectical praxis' which is about

ontological stammering, concepts with a lower ontological weight, a praxis without guaranteed subjects or objects, oriented towards the as yet incompletely thinkable conditions and potentials of given arrangements (ibid., p. 189).

In fact, Lather's adoption of such a 'praxis' does not reposition Marxism; it leaves its domain entirely (see below for a discussion of dialectical praxis in the context of the Labour Theory of Value). For Lather, however, nothing is certain or decided. Citing Derrida, Lather asserts that undecidability is 'a constant ethical-political reminder' 'that moral and political responsibility can only occur in the not knowing, the not being sure' (Lather, 2001, p. 187).

Her academic efforts are informed by Alison Jones (1999), who concludes 'with a call for a 'politics of disappointment', a practice of 'failure, loss, confusion, unease, limitation for dominant ethnic groups"' (Lather 2001, p. 191)). Lather and Jones are claiming to be anti-colonialist in supporting Maori students in their wish to break up into 'discussion groups based on ethnic sameness' (ibid., p.190). While it is *always* vital to challenge the colonialism and racism of dominant groups, it is not clear how Jones' list of negative politics and practices (disappointment, failure, loss, confusion, unease and limitation) is helpful in such a quest. In addition, since Lather also believes that all 'oppositional knowledge is drawn into the order against which it

intends to rebel' (1998: 493), it is difficult to see what possible progressive potential is entailed in hers and Jones' anti-colonialism or indeed in Lather's overall project. Are these Maori students destined to be drawn into the dominant order (colonialism)? In the meantime, is 'undecidability' all poststructuralist or postmodernist teachers have to offer them? In fact, all that Lather can offer, by way of conclusion, is an assertion that there are 'forces already active in the present' and that we will 'move toward an experience of the promise that is unforeseeable from the perspective of our present conceptual frameworks', in the pursuit of 'a future that must remain to come' (ibid., p. 192).

Any defender of social injustice would surely be delighted to hear that Patti Lather who, like so many of her poststructuralist/postmodernist contemporaries was arguing in the 1980s that 'feminism and Marxism need each other' (Lather, 1984, p. 49) and that 'the revolution is within each and every one of us and it will come about' (ibid., p. 58), now posits the contradictory position that the future is an open book, with some progressive potential, and in which all opposition is drawn into the dominant order. This is neither conducive to progressive social change nor to social justice. It is indicative of the way in which poststructuralism/postmodernism acts as an ideological support for national and global capital (Cole and Hill 1995, 2002).

Truth and Social Justice

Citing Jane Flax, Atkinson argues that postmodernism calls into question 'the discovery of some sort of truth which can tell us how to act in the world in ways that benefit or are for the (at least ultimate) good of all' (2002, p. 75). This is reminiscent of Derrida's assertion that 'truth is plural' (1979, p. 103), the implication being that the 'truth' of the exploiter is equally valid to the 'truth' of the exploited. For Derrida, 'difference' is in each and not between the two. While I would agree that knowing the 'truth' is not a question of describing some 'true' ontological essence, it is also not a

function of an endless round of language games as some would lead us to believe (e.g. Lyotard, 1984). A Marxist analysis of truth rejects both plurality and ontological essentialism in favour of ‘a dialectical understanding of the dynamic relations between superstructure and base; between ideology ... and the workings of the forces of production and the historical relations of production’ (Ebert, 1996, p. 47; for an analysis, see Allman, 1999, p. 136)

Referring specifically to the *concept* of ‘justice’, Atkinson states that ‘postmodern theorists ... invite us to consider concepts such as “justice” as “effects of power”’ (2002, p. 75). ‘[S]ocial justice agendas’, she implies, need to be deconstructed in order to reveal ‘their own underlying assumptions and beliefs’ (ibid.). No Marxist would, of course, disagree with this (something which Atkinson acknowledges (ibid.)). The underlying assumptions and beliefs in the concept of ‘justice’ as employed by, for example, George W. Bush or Tony Blair is very different from that employed by, say, Noam Chomsky or John Pilger.

It needs to be pointed out at this stage that whether or not Marx had a theory of justice has been an issue of great controversy and has generated an enormous literature, particularly among North American philosophers [6]. The crux of the matter is that, as Callinicos has put it, on some occasions Marx eschews ethical judgements, and, on others, apparently makes them (1989, p. 13). This was because he was confused about justice (Cohen, 1983), or to put it another way, ‘Marx did think capitalism was unjust but he did not think he thought so’ (Geras, 1989, p. 245; see also Cohen, 1983; Pennock and Chapman, 1983; Lukes, 1982; Callinicos, 2000). His materialist conception of history entailed a relative, rather than a universal account of ethics,

since morality was seen as reflective of the prevailing mode of production. He was also unable to contextualise his own morality. As Callinicos explains:

Marx's erroneous meta-ethical theory prevented him from seeing universal moral principles as anything but the expression of historically specific class interests and therefore from recognizing the basis on which he himself condemned capitalist exploitation (2000, p. 28).

Callinicos gives several clear examples of Marx's inherent belief in some universal principle of justice: 'the burning anger with he describes the condition of the working class'; 'the ostensibly egalitarian "needs principle", 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!' (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*); his description of capitalist exploitation as the 'the theft of alien labour time' (the *Grundrisse*), which, since Marx makes it clear that this does not violate capitalist property laws, must, as Callinicos points out, imply an appeal to some transhistorical principle of justice (Callinicos, 2000, p. 28); his moral position on the collective ownership of land (*Capital Vol., 3.*) (ibid., p. 29) and his implication that treating unequals equally is unjust (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*) (ibid., p. 82)).

Whatever Marx's relationship to the *concept* of justice, the important point for Marxists is that Marx's vision of a socialist society allows us to look beyond the multiple injustices of global capitalism. As Geras has put it, 'the largest paradox here is that Marx, despite everything, displayed a greater commitment to the creation of a just society than many more overtly interested in analysis of what justice is' (1989, p. 267) [7]

Callinicos is quite unambiguous as to his *own* views on the relationship of capitalism to social justice. Recalling what is distinctive about Marx's account of capitalist exploitation, namely that the *appearance* of a free exchange between worker and capitalist is nullified by the unequal distribution of the productive forces (owned solely by the latter), Callinicos argues that 'exploitation is directly unjust ... because workers are illegitimately *compelled* to work for the capitalist', in order to receive a wage. Unlike slavery and serfdom, where illegitimate compulsion is obvious, this *appearance* of freedom is masked by what Marx referred to as 'the silent compulsion of economic relations' (Marx, 1976b, p. 899), whereby workers working for a wage, if not directly coerced, have no viable legal alternative but to perform surplus labour for the capitalist [8]. Furthermore, as Callinicos points out, the exploitative relationship *indirectly* contributes to injustice in the massive polarisation between rich and poor, which is largely the result of excessive extraction of surplus value of workers by capitalists (*ibid.*, p. 68) (see below for a discussion of the Labour Theory of Value).

Whereas postmodernists engage in an endless and relatively ahistorical process of deconstruction (see below), Marxists look to history to understand both underlying assumptions with respect to social justice *and solutions to social injustice*. A fundamental premise of Marxism is that from the dissolution of primitive communism to the overthrow of capitalism, there is no social contract that the ruling class or their representatives will enter into with the subordinate class, except as a result of a defeat in struggle or as a tactical and temporary retreat to preserve long-term interests. For example Marx would say that no aristocracy would voluntarily reduce feudal obligations, no capitalist would reduce the length or pace of the working day, except

in the face of revolt or other mass action, or to gain a short-term advantage. Allied to this, no peasantry or proletariat has accepted an economic arrangement for long without challenging it. Accordingly, improvements in the relative position of the working class cannot, for Marxists, be brought about by appeals to any universal sense of justice (Miller, 1989, pp. 209-210). In addition, as Miller points out:

Even when such a sense exists, no appropriate consensus can be achieved as to whether the demands of justice have in fact been fulfilled. For instance, capitalists, as a class, have always insisted that a proposed reduction of the working day ... would do immeasurable harm to workers by destroying the capitalist economy on whose existence workers' welfare depends (1989, p. 210)
[9]

Another fundamental premise of Marxism is the notion that the capitalist class is a class whose interests are served by all the major institutions in society. While the role of the state in capitalist societies has been a vigorously debated issue within Marxist theory (for an overview, see Jessop, 1990; for a brief summary, see Hill, 2001 and Cole, 1992, pp. 33-35), there is a consensus among Marxists that 'the state' is a complex of institutions, rather than just central government, and that both apparatuses of the state, the ideological and the repressive (Althusser, 1971, pp. 121-73) are not neutral, but act, to varying degrees, albeit with some disarticulations, in the interests of capitalism [10]. For these reasons, the creation of true social justice within capitalism is, for Marxists, not viable. The capitalist state must, therefore, be replaced rather than reformed.

Deconstruction and Social Change

Whereas for Marxists, the possibility of postmodernism leading to social change is a *non sequitur*, for Atkinson, postmodernism is 'an inevitable agent for change' in that

it challenges the educator, the researcher, the social activist or the politician not only to deconstruct the certainties around which they might see as standing in need of change, but also to deconstruct their own certainties as to why they hold this view' (2002, p. 75)

This sounds fine, but what do these constituencies actually *do* to effect meaningful societal change once their views have been challenged? What is *constructed* after the deconstruction process? Atkinson provides no answer. Nor does Patti Lather (nor, as we shall see, does Judith Baxter). This is because neither postmodernism nor poststructuralism is capable of providing an answer (Hill, 2001; Rikowski, 2002, pp. 20-25; Hill, 2003). Deconstruction 'seeks to do justice to all positions ... by giving them the chance to be justified, to speak originarily for themselves and be chosen rather than enforced' (Zavarzadeh, 2002, p. 8). Indeed, for Derrida (1990), 'deconstruction *is* justice' (cited in *ibid.*) (my emphasis). Thus, once the deconstruction process has started, justice is already apparent and there is no discernible direction in which to head. In declaring on the first page of the Preface of her book *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/In the Postmodern*, her 'longtime interest in how to turn critical thought into emancipatory action' (1991, xv), Lather is, in fact, wasting her time. After over two hundred pages of text, in which indications are made of the need for emancipatory research praxis; in which proclamations are made of how the goals of research should be to understand the maldistribution of power and resources in society, with a view to societal change, we are left wondering how all this is to come about.

Postmodernism cannot provide strategies to *achieve* a different social order and hence, in buttressing capitalist exploitation, it is essentially reactionary. This is

precisely what Marxists (and others) mean by the assertion that postmodernism serves to disempower the oppressed [11]

According to Atkinson, postmodernism ‘does not have, and could not have, a “single” project for social justice’ (2002, p. 75). Socialism then, if not social change, is thus ruled out in a stroke [12]. Atkinson then rehearses the familiar postmodern position on multiple projects (ibid.).

Despite Atkinson's claims that postmodernism views ‘the local as the product of the global and *vice versa*’ and that postmodernism should not be interpreted as limiting its scope of enquiry to the local (2002, p. 81), since postmodernism rejects grand metanarratives and since it rejects universal struggle, it can, *by definition*, concentrate only on the local. Localised struggle can, of course, be liberating for individuals and certain selected small groups, but postmodernism cannot set out any viable mass strategy or programme for an emancipated future. The importance of local as well as national and international struggle is recognised by Marxists, but the postmodern rejection of mass struggle ultimately plays into the hands of those whose interests lie in the maintenance of national and global systems of exploitation and oppression. Furthermore, ‘as regards aims, the concern with autonomy, in terms of organisation’, postmodernism comprises ‘a tendency towards network forms, and, in terms of mentality, a tendency towards self-limitation’ (Pieterse, 1992). While networking can aid in the promotion of solidarity, and in mass petitions, for example (Atkinson, 2001), it cannot replace mass action, in the sense, for example, of a general or major strike; or a significant demonstration or uprising which forces social change. Indeed,

the postmodern depiction of mass action as totalitarian negates/renders illicit such action.

Allied to its localism, is postmodernism's non-dualism (Lather, 1991). This does have the advantage of recognising the struggles of groups oppressed on grounds in addition to or other than those of class. However non-dualism prevents the recognition of a major duality in capitalist societies, that of social class (Cole and Hill, 1995, pp. 166-168; 2002; McLaren and Farahmandpur, 1999; Sanders *et al.*, 1999; Hill *et al.*, 2002). This has, I believe, profoundly reactionary implications, in that it negates the notion of class struggle.

Marxism, on the other hand, allows a future both to be envisioned and worked towards. This vision can and has been extended beyond the 'brotherhood of man' concept of early socialists, to include the complex subjectivities of all (subjectivities which the postmodernists are so keen to bring centre stage). Socialism can and should be conceived of as a project where subjective identities, such as gender, 'race', disability, non-exploitative sexual preference and age all have high importance in the struggle for genuine equality (Cole and Hill, 1999a, p. 42).

In her attempt to present the case that '[p]ostmodern deconstruction ... is not the same as destruction' (2002, p. 77), Atkinson cites Judith Butler (1992) who argues that

[t]o deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term ... to a reuse or redeployment that previously has not been authorized' (cited in Atkinson *ibid.*)

This is precisely what Marxism does. The difference is that Marxist concepts such as, for example, the fetishism inherent in capitalist societies, whereby the relationships between things or commodities assume a mystical quality hiding the real

(exploitative) relationships between human beings, provide a means of both analysing that society, understanding its exploitative nature *and* pointing in the direction of a non-exploitative society. The Marxist concept of the Labour Theory of Value is a good example (see below for a discussion).

Drawing on a study of girls' and boys' speech and arguing in identical vein to Atkinson and Lather, but in a much more self-effacing, almost apologetic tone, Judith Baxter (2002) sets out to show how the use of feminist poststructural analysis can 'produce powerful insights about gendered discourse that 'ultimately may prompt social and educational transformation' (2002, p. 5)

She begins her article by suggesting that:

Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis is much more than simply an effective tool with which to deconstruct the cultural processes responsible for constituting structures of oppression. It ... ultimately may prompt social and educational transformation (Baxter, 2002, p. 5)

Acknowledging that poststructuralist enquiry has been described as 'a "fallacy", as nihilistic, cynical, serving a loose philosophy of "anything goes" and even as a "grand narrative" itself' (ibid., p. 8), Baxter presents three reasons why she believes that post-structuralism has 'potentially transformative possibilities' (ibid.). First, poststructuralism is anti-essentialist. It cannot be pinned down. Second, its quest is 'to create spaces to allow the voices of marginalised groups, such as women, the disabled, or the gay community to be heard with ringing clarity' (ibid.). It is not, she claims, 'just about deconstructive critique' (ibid., p. 9).

It must also have a libertarian impulse to release the words of marginalised or minority speakers in order to achieve the richness and diversity of textual play that only emerges from the expression of different and competing points of view (ibid., p. 9)

Third, Feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FDPA), unlike modernist feminism, is capable of describing the complexities of the experiences of numerous women/girls. '[I]t equips feminist researchers with the thinking to "see through" the ambiguities and confusions of *particular* discursive contexts where women/girls are located as simultaneously powerful and powerless' (ibid.). 'FDPA potentially provides them with a "proper platform" on which to be heard' (ibid.).

After seven and a half pages of discourse analysis, Baxter reiterates her belief in the emancipatory potential of poststructuralism. Emphasising poststructuralism's lack of closure, she argues that it should incorporate Derrida's concept of 'supplementarity', 'where no voice is suppressed, displaced by, or privileged over another, but rather, each voice complements, enhances, and at the same time undercuts the other' (ibid., p. 17). Explaining 'supplementarity', Zavarzadeh comments that the politics of deconstruction, 'in which the "margin" rearticulates the "center" by 'supplementing' it ... constructs semiotic "power" for the economically exploited "marginal"' (2002, p. 4). However, as he goes on, 'this is merely an idealist discursive freedom in lieu of the material emancipation that the "center" has refused the marginal' (ibid.). Thus 'supplementarity' is merely a device by which that which is denied workers by the mechanisms of the free market is given back to them in the form of a freedom of 'phrases' (ibid.). Like other concepts derived from postmodernism, 'supplementarity' acts *ideologically* to disempower the working class [13].

Citing Alison Jones (1993), Baxter acknowledges that '[t]he attempt to utilise the more complex ideas of post-structuralism can indeed lead to "a paralysing ambivalence for feminist activists"' (ibid.). However, this is 'not because such ideas produce disillusionment. Rather, it is the difficulty in living up to Derrida's [concept of 'supplementarity'] by demonstrating the possibility of such ideas through research practice' (ibid.). 'Might it be in the practice rather than the theory than [sic] feminist post-structuralist analysis fails to succeed?' is Baxter's conclusion. We will only know the answer 'when more feminist researchers take up the FPDA cudgels' (ibid., p. 18). So there we have it. According to Baxter, poststructuralism may ultimately promote social and educational transformation because it listens to all voices, and because it deconstructs. However, as she acknowledges, it is unconvincing in practice and can only (possibly) become convincing if more feminist researchers take it up. Of course, no indications are given of how the promotion of transformation might occur.

Conclusion

Atkinson's main argument seems to be that the strength of postmodernism is that it 'comes as something of a shock' (2002, p. 78) [14] and reveals sub-texts and textual silences (ibid.). Well, so does Marxism on both counts. The difference is that with the former, after our shock, there is not much else to do, except at the local level. One of the great strengths of Marxism is that allows us to move beyond appearances and to look beneath the surface *and* to move forward. It allows us to transgress Derrida's 'ordeal of the undecidable', Lather's 'praxis of not being so sure', and Baxter's 'paralysis of practice'.

Marx's Labour Theory of Value (LTV), for example, explains most concisely why capitalism is objectively a system of exploitation, whether the exploited realise it or not, or indeed, whether they believe it to be an issue of importance for them or not. The LTV also provides a *solution* to this exploitation. It thus provides *dialectical* praxis – the authentic union of theory and practice.

According to the LTV, the interests of capitalists and workers are diametrically opposed, since a benefit to the former (profits) is a cost to the latter (Hickey, 2002, p. 168). Marx argued that workers' labour is embodied in goods that they produce. The finished products are appropriated (taken away) by the capitalists and eventually sold at a profit. However, the worker is paid only a fraction of the value s/he creates in productive labour; the wage does not represent the *total* value s/he creates. We *appear* to be paid for every single second we work. However, underneath this appearance, this fetishism, the working day (like under serfdom) is split in two: into socially necessary labour (and the wage represents this) and surplus labour, labour that is not reflected in the wage. This is the basis of surplus value, out of which comes the capitalist's profit. While the value of the raw materials and of the depreciating machinery is simply passed on to the commodity in production, labour power is a peculiar, indeed unique commodity, in that it creates new value. 'The magical quality of labour-power's ... value for ... capital is therefore critical' (Rikowski, 2001, p. 11). '[L]abour-power creates more value (profit) in its consumption than it possesses itself, and than it costs' (Marx, 1966, p. 351). Unlike, for example, the value of a given commodity, which can only be realised in the market as itself, labour creates a new value, a value greater than itself, a value which previously did not exist. It is for this reason that labour power is so important for the capitalist, in the quest for capital accumulation. It is in the interest of the capitalist or capitalists (nowadays, capitalists may, of course, consist of a number of shareholders, for example, rather than outright owners of businesses) to maximise profits and this entails (in order to create the greatest amount of new value) keeping workers' wages as low as 'acceptable' in

any given country or historical period, without provoking effective strikes or other forms of resistance. Therefore, the capitalist mode of production is, in essence, a system of exploitation of one class (the working class) by another (the capitalist class)

Whereas class conflict is endemic to, and ineradicable and perpetual within the capitalist system, it does not always or even typically take the form of open conflict or expressed hostility (Hickey, 2002, p. 168). Fortunately for the working class, however, capitalism is prone to cyclical instability and subject to periodic political and economic crises. At these moments, the possibility exists for socialist revolution. Revolution can only come about when the working class, in addition to being a ‘class-in-itself’ (an *objective* fact because of the shared exploitation inherent as a result of the LTV) becomes ‘a class-for-itself’ (Marx, 1977, p. 341). By this, Marx meant a class with a *subjective* awareness of its social class position, that is to say, a class with ‘class consciousness’ - including its awareness of its exploitation and its transcendence of ‘false consciousness’.

Marx argued that, if the working class has become a ‘class-for-itself’, it has the potential to seize control of the means of production, the economy and take political power. Seizure of the economy would constitute such a socialist revolution (Hill and Cole, 2001, p. 147). This, of course, is not an easy option, but it is the working class that is most likely to be at the forefront of such a revolution.

As Michael Slott has put it with great clarity:

Marxists have understood perfectly well that there are many obstacles to the working class becoming a universal agent for socialism. At the same time, Marxists have argued that, because of the particular interests, collective power, and creative capacities that are generated by workers’ structural position in society, the working class is more likely to be at the core of any movement of social transformation (2002, p. 419) [15].

For Marx, socialism (a stage before communism, when the state would wither away and we would live communally) was a world system in which 'we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx and Engels, 1977, p. 53). Such a society would be democratic (as such, socialism as envisaged by Marx should be distanced from the *undemocratic* regimes of the former Soviet bloc) and classless and the means of production would be in the hands of the many, not the few. Goods and services would be produced for need and not for profit [16].

Postmodernists and poststructuralists are clearly capable of asking questions, but, by their own acknowledgement, they have no answers. As Glenn Rikowski has put it, this leads one to ask; just what is the postmodernist attitude to explanation?

Truly political strategies require explanation (of what went wrong, why the analysis and/or tactics failed etc.) so that improvements can be made. Do postmodernists have a notion of improvement (of society, of political strategies)? If they do, then they need explanation. I don't think they are interested in either, and hence can't have a political strategy for human betterment (cited in Cole, 2001, p. 77).

To this I would reiterate that postmodernism and poststructuralism could be liberating to individuals and to localised groups. But to be politically valid, an analysis must link 'the small picture' to 'the big picture'. Postmodernism and poststructuralism, again by their protagonists' acknowledgement, cannot do this. They are, thus, not merely unable to promote social justice and social change, but, albeit by default, act, as ideological supports for capitalism, both within nation states and globally.

Bringing Marxism back to the forefront is not an easy task. Marxists must incorporate 'social justice' in their analyses [17]. They must also break through the 'bizarre ideological mechanism, [in which it is claimed] *every* conceivable alternative to the

market has been discredited by the collapse of Stalinism' (Callinicos, 2000, p. 122), whereby the fetishization of life makes capitalism seem natural and therefore unalterable and where the market mechanism 'has been hypostatized into a natural force unresponsive to human wishes' (ibid., p. 125) [18]. Capital presents itself 'determining the future as surely as the laws of nature make tides rise to lift boats (McMurtry, 2000, p. 2), 'as if it has now replaced the natural environment. It announces itself through its business leaders and politicians as coterminous with freedom, and indispensable to democracy such that any attack on capitalism as exploitative or hypocritical becomes an attack on world freedom and democracy itself' (McLaren, 2000, p. 32) [19]. As Callinicos puts it, despite the inevitable intense resistance from capital, the 'greatest obstacle to change is not ... the revolt it would evoke from the privileged, but the belief that it is impossible' (2000, p. 128).

Challenging this climate requires courage, imagination and willpower inspired by the injustice that surrounds us. Beneath the surface of our supposedly contented societies, these qualities are present in abundance. Once mobilized, they can turn the world upside down (ibid., p. 129)

To reiterate, Marxism is about dialectical praxis. Such praxis is outside the remit of poststructuralism and postmodernism. Neither is able to address the global social injustices outlined at the beginning of this paper. By their very essence, poststructuralism and postmodernism are about neither theory nor practice. They fail in both and remain an academic practice, based on deconstruction alone, with no practical implications for social or educational transformation. Indeed, deconstruction without reconstruction, typifies the divorce of the academy from the reality of struggle on the ground (Cole and Hill 1999b; Hill *et al* (Eds.) (1999), Hill *et al* (Eds.) 2002).

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NOTES

[1] The terms postmodernism and poststructuralism are not synonymous. In fact, the former grew out of the latter. Poststructuralism has two interrelated forms. One form of poststructuralism is primarily concerned with the role of language in forming individual subjectivity. Whereas *structuralists* aimed to discover uniform linguistic patterns that gave order and coherence to human existence, *poststructuralists* highlight the unstable patterns of linguistic and therefore subjective and social order (Seidman, 1998, p. 221). The other form of poststructuralism is associated with the work of Michel Foucault, and concerns the relationship between discourse and power; in particular, the notion that power is everywhere and not just located centrally. Postmodernism broadened the concerns of poststructuralism to cultural critiques of ‘modernist’ forms of art and general theories of contemporary society. In some cases, advanced capitalist societies were redesignated as ‘post-Fordist’, ‘postindustrial’ or ‘postcapitalist’ (Callinicos, 1989, pp. 2-3; Green, 1994, p. 68; Cole and Hill, 1995, pp. 165-6; for a list of the central features of postmodernism, see, for example, Atkinson, 2002, p. 74). What poststructuralists and postmodernists have in common is a rejection of any notion of order and coherence in society, and a refusal to accept binary oppositions. Thus, notions of a class struggle (workers versus capitalists) are rejected. The possibility of an ordered socialist society or world is therefore also rejected; so too is any notion of a united feminist struggle against the structure of patriarchy (as in traditional feminism). Accordingly, postmodern and poststructural *feminists* propose replacing unitary images of woman with a focus on women’s multiple identities. Socialism and traditional feminism are seen as the product of a bygone age - the modern era (or modernity). The focus of this paper, however, is not these conceptual distinctions - thus, the fact that Atkinson identifies specifically with *postmodernism*; Baxter identifies with *feminist poststructuralism* and Lather describes herself both as a ‘postmodern materialist feminist’ (e.g. 1991, p. xix) and as a *feminist poststructuralist* (e.g. 2001) (see below) is not of concern. Here I am interested in their common claim that poststructuralism and postmodernism can be forces for social change and social justice. I am also not specifically concerned here with feminism *per se*. Suffice it to say that I believe that the liberation of women cannot be divorced from the pursuit of a socialist future (for recent defences of Marxism, rather than postmodernism, as best representing the interests of women, see, for example, Kelly 2002a, 2002b; Zavarzadeh, 2002).

[2] For a defence of the recent work of McLaren, particularly in the light of Lather’s critique, see Cole, 2003b

[3] The arguments in this section draw on Cole (2001). For Atkinson’s reply to them, see Atkinson (2001). My ability (Cole 2001) to comment on Atkinson’s (2002) paper before it was published and her ability to respond to my critique relates to the fact that Atkinson kindly provided me with a copy of her (2002) paper while it was ‘in press’.

[4] Marx and Engels attempted to learn from the experiences of the Paris Commune of 1871 in their Preface to the German Edition [1977] (1872) of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. In fact, the whole Marxist project is based on the belief that history

is progressive. Thus, for example, we can learn from the earliest forms of primitive communism, but in the context of a dialectic of accumulative progressive change.

[5] Alex Callinicos has written of the requirement to revive ‘utopian imagination – that is ... our capacity to anticipate, at least in outline, an efficient and democratic non-market form of economic co-ordination’ (2000, p. 133) – ‘to give serious attention to models of democratic socialist planning ... [to] a much more decentralized system of planning in which information and decisions flow horizontally among different groups of producers and consumers rather than vertically between centre and productive units’ (ibid., p. 123). By contrast, the notion of the possibility of the existence of a benign form of global capitalism, as advocated, for example, by Tony Blair and others, represents ‘an utterly ridiculous utopia’ (Allman, 2001, p. 13; Cole, 2003c).

[6] Norman Geras (1989), for example, has a whole page of footnotes citing writings by those for and against the notion that Marx criticised capitalism as unjust (pp. 212-213).

[7] Marx was, of course, suspicious of philosophers who had ‘interpreted the world in many ways’. For him, the point was ‘to change it’ (1976a). Marx, however, had a more overtly *political* objection to basing socialist demands on principles of social justice; namely that this tends to limit these demands to social reform rather than socialist revolution. Focusing on the redistribution of income rather than the conditions of production fuel social democratic rather than socialist solutions (Callinicos, 2000, p. 29; see also p. 34).

[8] This argument needs to be modified slightly, given the large growth in self-employment (builders, decorators, plumbers etc.). Many such workers, however, tend to be on low to medium incomes and their economic and social position is reminiscent of skilled workers through most of the twentieth century. Various welfare programmes, in many cases now being minimised or phased out, also mean further modification of the argument.

[9] This is reminiscent of the Tory arguments, before the election of New Labour, that adopting the European minimum wage in Britain would ultimately be detrimental to workers' interests. The general Marxist position advanced does not preclude the fact that social democrats and socialists in capitalist parliaments are, at times, able to force issues that are in workers' interests, the European minimum wage being one such example. In addition, there have, of course, been rare historical exceptions among the ruling class – philanthropic capitalists, for example.

[10] Atkinson (2001) agrees that ‘the state’ is a complex of institutions, but, rather than applying this multiple model to capitalism, she uses it to look at ‘systems of control beyond the economy and the labour market, focusing in particular on control beyond the economy and the labour market, focusing in particular on control, and ‘self-control’, within education systems’ (p. 88). Her analysis, therefore, is divorced from capitalism and thus unable to theorise it.

[11] This was brought home starkly to me on a trip to South Africa in 1995, I was asked to present a Marxist critique of postmodernism at a seminar attended by some

leading (South African) postmodernists. Having spent considerable time in the townships and squatter camps, where Marxism clearly had some purchase on how to move forward, I asked what postmodernists could do for their inhabitants and was met with stony silence.

[12] Atkinson's response to this point first made in Cole (2001) was '[w]ell, possibly Socialism with a capital S' (although I would suggest, "considered as one of many possibilities" rather than "ruled out") (Atkinson, 2001, p. 90).

[13] Ideology, where false ideas mask reality, is a meaningless concept for postmodernists, since, for them, language cannot represent reality.

[14] Surrealism and other art forms performed and continue to perform similar functions, as do, for example, certain alternative comedians. However subversive these may be, they do not provide directions for change

[15] Slott's paper is an interesting critique of postmodernism. It is somewhat marred, however, by his labeling of Peter McLaren as a 'critical postmodernist'. Although Slott does provide an endnote citing two works by McLaren, as signifying 'a return to Marx' (2002, Endnote 2, p. 424), this endnote in no way attests to the impact of McLaren's work over the last decade in making Marxism visible in educational debates throughout the United States and elsewhere (for a discussion, see Cole, 2003b).

[16] It is ironic that the West falsely designated the countries of the former Soviet bloc 'communist'. In reality (despite the fact that many had a number of positive features - full employment, housing for all, free public and social services, safety for women to walk the streets at night and so on) they were undemocratic dictatorships with special privileges for an elite and drudgery for the many. If anything, these Eastern European societies were deformed socialist states, far removed from Marx's vision of 'the higher phase of communist society' (Marx, Critique of the Gotha Programme 1875, cited in Bottomore and Rubel, 1978, p. 263) that would come after the temporary phase of socialism. As Marx put it,

In the higher phase of communist society, when the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and with it the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; when labour is no longer merely a means of life but has become life's principal need; when the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then will it be possible completely to transcend the narrow outlook of the bourgeois right, and only then will society be able to inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs (ibid.)'

In a communist world, the 'original goodness' of humanity is realised, and 'the private interest of each' coincides 'with the general interest of humanity' (Marx, The Holy Family, 1845, cited in ibid., p. 249)

[17] In so doing, they can learn from the philosophical school of 'egalitarian liberalism', associated with the work of John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Amartya Sen, T. M. Scanlon, G. A. Cohen, Brian Barry, Thomas Nagel, Richard Arneson and John Roemer (Callinicos, 2000, p. 16), a current which offers rich and sophisticated

intellectual resources to the ambivalence about equality conceived as an ethical ideal in Marx and his successors. Provided there is cognisance of its reformist implications, egalitarian liberalism can help to remedy these gaps in the Marxist tradition (*ibid.*, p. 16 and pp. 18-19).

[18] Here, we have a further ironic twist: the capitalist class and their representatives who used to deride what they saw as the metaphysic of 'Marxist economic determinism' are the ones who now champion the 'world-wide market revolution' and the accompanying *inevitability* of 'economic restructuring' (McMurtry 2000; see also Cole, 1998, 2003a, b, c).

[19] At the same time, globalisation, in reality in existence since the beginnings of capitalism, is hailed as a new and unchallengeable phenomenon, and its omnipresence used ideologically to further fuel arguments about capitalism's inevitability (Cole, 1998, 2003, a, b).

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