

“Mummy, where do postmodernists come from?”

Martin Fitzgerald*

How often have you been reading something quite pleasant and then the author drops in the middle of it the fateful word – **postmodernism**? All of a sudden, the argument that you had been following quite well up until that stage begins to get fuzzy. You don't really know what the word means but, with the thought that this precious short space of time that you have to do a bit of reading is so fleeting you'd better not waste your time looking it up, you sort of muddle through and hope that the rest of the article becomes clear. Besides you haven't got a dictionary with you. You also have a sneaking suspicion that the dictionary will probably not give you a definition which will mean much. On top of that, you're an intelligent person and you shouldn't have to look up something that everyone else seems to be so conversant with. All these considerations may pass through your mind. There is at least one other possible avenue of thought though, when you're confronted with the term. “How am I supposed to know what postmodernism is if I'm not even sure exactly what modernism is?”

It seems only right then that we should start by asking what is modernism. **Modernism** in philosophy is the term used for nearly all of the philosophical offshoots of the **Enlightenment**. In other words, it is the complex of ideas that have shaped the modern world, from the eighteenth century until the first half at least of this century. One could even say these ideas were unchallenged, at least in a big way, until the 1970s.

They form a complex of assumptions which are shaped by the Enlightenment. So let's have a look at them. The world for almost two centuries was dominated by these presuppositions, above all, the **suspicion of authority and tradition** as the sources of knowledge of how the world works or how it should work, the **belief in human reason** as the cause of **progress**, the reliance on **reason as opposed to faith** in order to understand the world, the march of **science and technology** as a good thing. All of these translated into an **optimism** that knowledge based on reason would produce an ideal world which goes forward forever.

These dominating ideas of the Enlightenment were the result of philosophical positions which sprang from **Rene Descartes'** (1596-1650) Copernican shift in philosophy. Philosophy moved,

* Mr Fitzgerald is Head of Philosophy, Redfield College, Dural, NSW

with Descartes, from being based on the question “How can I explain the world and understand it at its deepest level?” to “How can I be certain about things?” This led him to postulate the famous “cogito ergo sum” as the starting point of philosophy which began a long tradition of **subjectivism** of which, I would dare to postulate, postmodernism is the end result.

Descartes’ “cogito” as the starting point leads to two strands of philosophical tradition which formed modernism. One was **empiricism**; the view that only sense knowledge is worthy of being trusted. Any intrusion of **ideas** upon this sense data, such use of concepts or reasoning processes which were unverifiable with the senses themselves, it was thought, is liable to distort the truth.

The second strand was in a certain sense the opposite of this. It said that sense data was suspect and that the truth was reached by using one’s reason. This strand came to be known as **rationalism**. The senses were illusory, one had to look behind them to see the truth. This developed by various pathways into attempts to explain the universe in terms of some sort of absolute guiding principle which was knowable by man. This sort of rationalism was called **idealism**.

Empiricism gave a great push to science and technology, which, unhindered by ideas, just kept on creating more and more goods and a better material lifestyle – all of which added up to **progress**. The spectacular results of technology and the certainty which was given by science led to philosophical **positivism**. Any knowledge which was genuine was confined within the bounds of science and observation. The human sciences of sociology, psychology and history, the positivists claimed, should be based on the same method as experimental science as much as possible.

This philosophical positivism led to regarding all knowledge as true only if it conformed to the rigours of scientific method. This meant that certain types of terms were always going to be excluded from what was then regarded as true knowledge. Perhaps I can give some examples to illustrate. **David Hume** (1711-1776) was so radical in his desire to have everything based on pure experimental knowledge that he denied one of the fundamental concepts that is essential for any science to proceed on its way, causality. David Hume would contend for example that just because a billiard ball when it hits another produces the phenomenon that the second billiard ball moves does not justify us in saying that the one caused the other to move. This is simply a phenomenon that we observe and have observed many times, it will not necessarily happen the next time that a billiard ball strikes another one.

This radical scientific method was adopted also in this century by **Karl Popper** (1902-1994) who claimed that a scientific theory was not valid except if it could be falsified. This of course leads to very little fitting into the definition of true science.

This is basically scepticism. It is not even the way that science actually works in the laboratory but is necessary, David Hume and Karl Popper would seem to say, if one is to be positive about ones conclusions.

This positivistic scientific method began as I mentioned before to be applied to the human sciences. But the human sciences are made up of words and explanations and if one wanted to put these sciences on a par with experimental sciences, one had to really discover what was meant by the words on the page when they were arranged in a particular way. This led to **logical positivism** – to the investigation of language and its uses in building up our store of knowledge but from the point of view of the language itself and how it was structured. One of the pioneers in this area was **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951) but only in his initial writings. He becomes less positivistic in his later writings, spurred on I would suggest by the poverty of logical positivism and its inability to get in touch with any type of reality. And this is precisely what happened to science, at least philosophically. It stopped being about an explanation of the world around us which could be understood also in terms of common sense and became more concerned with conforming to a preconceived and reductionist view of what a science should be.

Logical positivism led in turn to a concentration on the text or texts which purported to be scientific, particularly in the field of the human sciences. This led to more and more analysis of the text or texts. Finally, the logical positivism with respect to words and texts which involved linguistic analysis slipped into an analysis of the text on its own, without reference to the author and without reference to any truth that the author might be aiming at. We landed in **structuralism**. Structuralism had a particular penchant for one particular human science, anthropology, because it hoped to find in primitive peoples the key to understanding the world of symbols and signs of which writing was but one part.

A major contributor to this area of learning was **Claude Lévi-Strauss** (1908-) who began to analyse how primitive communities used their symbols and signs and what happened if you introduced them to writing. Levi Strauss, who was an old lefty from Paris, saw that over and above any intellectual content contained in writing, intellectual discourse particularly when it was written down, was simply a power play. Those who wrote used the writing to subject and oppress those who did not write, either because they were not able or because they had no access to the publishing apparatus. To understand a discourse then, was really to analyse it for its assumptions, its

preconceived ideas and its prejudices along with the writer's access to the channels which launched the discourse into the public arena. The discourse, taken on its own without any reference to the truth or to the author's intention had to be deconstructed, and thus we arrive at the movement which bears the name of **deconstructionism** and is most closely associated with the name of **Jacques Derrida** (1930-2004).

This is one of the movements or intellectual traditions which has gone into making postmodernism. In practice deconstructionism means that, given that there is no objective reality to which discourses refer, these discourses have to be considered in themselves, how they are structured, what prejudices they have and for what power purposes the writers have written them. At an even more basic practical level, they have no exposition of truth function at all. They are all about power, the power elites make the discourses and oppress and subject by means of their discourses. The corollary of this of course is that if you want to change the power structures, change the discourse, particularly the public discourse. If all this purports to be only a way of understanding works of fiction, it certainly has a function and an essential one. The problem is when this is applied to areas of knowledge which are not fiction, to history for example, or to anthropology, to sociology or even psychology. The structuralists and deconstructionists, do not admit any reality at the bottom of intellectual works. All is fiction because we construct the reality around us by means of the words we use to describe it. Therefore the line between truth and fiction is blurred and all discourses are equally valid. The section of society that can make its discourse prevail determines reality. I am not saying by any means that this does not happen, but without any truth reference there is no defence against those who wield power and when one particular oppressed group then rise to take charge of the discourse, do not they themselves rule somehow arbitrarily in that they have no truth to back them up? What is the justification of their wielding power and not me and my friends?

All falls into a maelstrom of power plays, with no rights, no justice, no truth, no value, no worth, no consensus. This is the postmodern endpoint of empiricism.

Two films embody the postmodern dilemma very well. One is an older film, *Bladerunner* and the other is a fairly recent one, *The Truman Show*. *The Truman Show* explores the world of fiction versus reality and how, in a world in which all discourses are the same, the edges between entertainment and reality are blurred. People live vicariously through TV characters and at the same time we are all TV characters in the sense that we are manipulated to various extents by the producers of TV shows. I will talk about *Bladerunner* later. In order to do so effectively, we first have to follow the other Enlightenment strand of knowledge, **rationalism**, to its end point in Freidrich Nietzsche and the end of history.

Rationalism is the attempt to come to a comprehensive knowledge of the world by means of reason. Rationalism aims to arrive at an understanding of the world which is free from the vagaries of fleeting sense perception and uses thinking on an abstract level to come to the knowledge of the truth of the universe. Here there is an implicit recognition that the immaterial, the spirit exists, even if it is only in the form of the level of abstraction which is required in mathematics.

This rationalism leads to explanations of the world which tried often to explain how the world of spirit and matter were joined in a rational unity. **Baruch Spinoza's** (1632-1677) pantheism is one such attempt, **Gottfried Leibniz's** (1646-1716) monism another. This lead very easily to idealism. But somehow all of these positions posited an explanation of the world which depended on the thinking subject. They never really escaped the radical subjectivist approach of Descartes. He started inside his head with the "cogito" and the rationalists and idealists never really escaped.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) did try a fusion of Hume's insights and empiricism with the obvious insights gained from rationalism, and some hail him as having triumphed. I suggest that he never really escaped the subjectivist twist.

Rationalist and idealist schemes of how to understand the universe did come to a head with the idealism of **Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel** (1770-1831). Hegel's philosophy has sometimes been described less as a philosophical system and more a way of understanding the march of history. It appealed to the idea, inherent in the enlightenment, of a continuous progress. His idea is very crudely that there is a world spirit which is the result of the accumulation of rational knowledge by humanity and specifically by the intellectuals in society. This world spirit goes trundling through time getting bigger and bigger and more and more refined through a dialectic, through the clash of progressive and liberating ideas with the ideas that have gone before them. The omega point will be everything absorbed into the absolute – no difference, no distinction, all will be part of the absolute.

Meanwhile, the state is the embodiment of this absolute because it somehow crystallizes the best things of society in itself (there are real shades of romanticism here). This will lead in practical terms to **statism** of the right and the left. The statism of the right will lead to Nazism in the twentieth century. The statism of the left, once **Karl Marx** (1818-1883) has turned Hegel "on his head", (converting his historically generated world spirit into a historical determinism of matter) into the Communist states of the twentieth century, those of Soviet Russia and the regime of Pol Pot. Hegel's analysis of how history went forward seemed to be bankrupt after the fall of communism in the 80s and 90s and that is why some began to write articles about the death of history, be-

cause the great ideologies of the world were no longer clashing. One meta-narrative had come to an end. Indeed postmodernism is defined in one way as the end of the metanarratives, the grandiose schemes arising from the Enlightenment, which purported to explain the universe.

In the midst of all these grand schemes of idealism, onto the intellectual stage steps **Soren Kierkegaard** (1813-1855). Reacting against the lack of attention paid to the individual in these cosmic, impersonal, juggernaut type schemes and the crushing of the individual on the altar of statism and the collectivity, he swings intellectual thought in the direction of the individual - the dilemma of the individual in a world which regards him as dispensable.

Kierkegaard is convinced that the essence of existence so to speak is the individual constructing himself or herself by his or her decisions. Freedom and our choices become all important. The most important choices for Kierkegaard were those associated with religious faith and religious commitment.

Kierkegaard's insights into the dilemma of the individual were taken up by other philosophers, notably in this century by **Jean Paul Sartre** (1905-1980), who while stressing the importance of the individual, explored this individual in a world without God, borrowing notions from **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900) about the famous death of God and the loss of meaning in the world. Existentialism turned atheistic. The life of men and women was an absurdity, a tragi-comedy with no meaning other than the one they decided to give it themselves. Franz Kafka captured the existentialist dilemma in "The Trial" and "Metamorphosis". Alan Alda captured it on a more popular level in *M*A*S*H*. This existentialist dilemma was the dilemma of the human person faced with their own limitations and meaninglessness in a world without purpose.

Nietzsche was prior to Sartre but in a certain sense, Nietzsche took the existential dilemma a step further than Sartre. In this confusing world without God, what, Nietzsche seems to say, can you hang onto? Is there any meaning? His answer is no. He claims that all humans act only for power. Thereby his emphasis on the will to power. There are some members of the human race who are more gifted than others and who will exercise this power over others because they are not bounded by the ordinary rules which bind everyone else. They are the supermen or these days I imagine he would say some of them could be superwomen (although he usually doesn't see women in all that favourable a light). This loss of meaning identified and maybe even exalted in by Nietzsche and the later existentialists is a powerful influence on postmodernism in its questioning of freedom and the identity of the person in the midst of circumstances over which that person has no control.

I think we have here all the elements of what we call postmodernism. On the one hand the empirical tradition which led through logical positivism to the loss of meaning at the level of intellectual discourse, and the grasping onto science as the only certitude, the end of history as the failure of the meta-narratives of Hegel's idealism and Marx's communism, Nietzsche's iconoclasm with respect to everything that is not a power play in the world and Sartre's meaninglessness of existence. These are the elements which make up the postmodern world and the elements which make up the philosophical movement of postmodernism.

Earlier I mentioned two movies which explore many of the themes we have identified as being characteristic of Postmodernism, *Bladerunner* and *The Truman Show*. I have already mentioned the main "postmodern" themes running through latter. *Bladerunner* explores many of the same themes and others in a different way – the position of discourse and the blurring of the edges of reality and advertising for example, faith in science, the loss of the identity of the human person in the form of the construction of the identity of the replicants, the clear delineation between those who have power and those who don't and how propaganda allows the powerful to dominate over the masses. It also explores other themes which have more to do with what sociologists identify as "the postmodern world" such as the constant activity of consumption.

I mention these films here because I think the existence of films that do explore postmodern themes is important. The existence of these films means that what we have been exploring in this seminar and in this paper is not divorced from the lives of ordinary people, and philosophy is at its best when it is at the coalface of human experience.

What is the difference between *King Lear* and *Ginger Meggs*?

Barry Spurr *

In the best postmodern way, I should let you know at the outset that I am not going to talk about either *King Lear* or *Ginger Meggs*. I have juxtaposed Shakespeare's tragic monarch and the hero of the once-popular cartoon strip – as indeed I have juxtaposed Andrew Marvell, the late Metaphysical poet and Mickey Mouse – in various public ruminations about the problems associated with the reading, teaching and appreciation of literature in English in the contemporary classroom, specifically, in the current New South Wales Higher School Certificate English syllabus (but, of course, not only there). Such juxtapositions are meant to highlight the jettisoning of value in education, in general, reflected earlier this week, for example, when the Australian Catholic University saw fit to confer honorary doctoral degrees on the Wiggles. The thinking (if it might be so called) behind such events as this reveals a degraded idea of the university – if I may use Cardinal's Newman's term of high conception in reference to such a debased context. It goes well beyond a modern re-consideration of (and, at times, a healthy re-valuation of received ideas about the university and educational ideals in general) to expose, in postmodernism, an utter disconnection from and ignorance of what those ideals might be. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, to its credit, derided the 'doctoring' of the Wiggles for the stunt it was. But that it was possible at all is indeed stunting, diminishing, demoralising – and this, in a Catholic University during Holy Week.

Yet 'postmodernism' is a clumsy and unilluminating term, for various reasons. The first has to do with 'modernism' itself. In art – literary, musical and visual – Modernism, with a capital 'M', was a movement, largely taking place between the two world wars and, in literature at least, having its *annus mirabilis* as early as 1922, with the publication of arguably the greatest poem and novel of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The next generation of writers - someone, for example, like W.H. Auden, whose artistry was maturing through the 1930s - were, strictly-speaking, post-Modernist: drawing upon what Modernists like Eliot had achieved, but subverting aspects of that achievement, making their own distinctive contributions. A generation later, in the 1950s, Philip Larkin and other members of the so-called 'Movement' school of poetry, were also (and more obviously) reacting against Modernism, so were post-post-Modernists, in the sense of their relationship with the original (and, by now, distant) Modernist

* Dr Barry Spurr is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Sydney.

movement. So, it is both hard to pin down the Modernism which postmodernism is related to, and also to date its inception, and, most challengingly, to find what common set of beliefs and attitudes it is supposed to embody and to which domains it can be restricted. I think we may have some idea about what postmodernism in architecture might entail. But is there a postmodernist approach to mathematics, for example? And what might that involve?

What does seem to be agreed is that the essence of postmodernism, in relation to the reading, teaching and appreciation of written texts, is that, first, there is no limit to be set on what might qualify as a 'text' (a bus ticket will do) and no absolute value to be placed on any particular quality of a text: with regard to its aesthetic value, or its significance with reference to its meaningfulness or meaninglessness – let alone any qualities of a moral or spiritual kind, its celebration of eternal verities (which are a chimera in any case). Therefore, there are no 'canonical' texts, for example, in the study of literatures in English – no necessary, required reading for graduates with an English Literature degree: a qualification it is perfectly possible to obtain, today, without having read a word of Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Yeats or T.S. Eliot – the greatest poets of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, postmodernism is a synonym for intellectual chaos and ignorance.

What is needed is a term for this approach to art and literature that is not parasitical upon a previous classification like 'Modernism', but which simply presents itself as itself, as much as this elusive quantity can be identified. I would suggest 'Anarchism' had it not been used before, in a variety of contexts. In Greek, of course, 'anarchy' means 'without authority', the absence of an 'archon', a chief magistrate in ancient Athens. But this is inadequate, too, because the promoters of the brave new world of so-called postmodernism are authoritative and prescriptive to a fault. Their 'Thou shalt nots' are at least as strident as those of the defenders of canonical texts. Having achieved their kudos from berating and destroying the Establishment, in the silly sixties, they are now the Establishment themselves and will brook no contradiction – are, in fact (and I have been around long enough to have experienced this) far less liberal than the hierarchies they demolished, while, of course, endlessly proclaiming their tolerance of diversity, 'difference' (so much better if you can say it in French, giving it the patina of theoretical respectability) and all the other claptrap of a pseudo-intellectual system which has no centre other than the individual's conviction about his or her ownership of The Truth. Yeats saw it clearly in 'The Second Coming' in 1919: 'the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned'.

The reasons for this sustained assault upon the study of English literature are many and varied and have some particular Australian components which makes the resistance to them even more difficult here than it might be in, for example, Britain or North America.

Essentially, postmodernism is a political phenomenon, deriving from the culture of resentment and victimhood which is one of the least edifying outcomes of the increasingly democratic and demotic twentieth century in Western societies. It is a peculiarly self-defeating, self-destructive and paradoxical phenomenon because, in its opposition to what – in a shorthand term – we might call ‘high art’, the very people who it is depriving of access to the classics (through demonising them, their creators and their purveyors, as a conspiracy of oppressive elitism or proposing the Marxist dismissal of them as conspicuous waste) are left with a mess of pottage of works which are condescendingly and patronisingly deemed to be the only suitable and ‘relevant’ study for the *demos*.

That deprived constituency, recognising its deprivation, will, in time, turn upon its self-righteous persecutors and inhibitors. In a mild way, we are encountering this already, at the university, where students come to us after the miseries of the NSW HSC English syllabus (not to mention what has gone before it, over those twelve years of school so-called education) and say that, now, they want ‘to read the classics’. Once, in the disreputable dead days beyond recall pupils were exposed to a good diet of this material even by the time of the Intermediate Certificate, let alone the Leaving Certificate (taken in the equivalent of today’s Year 11).

Nowadays, you have one of the febrile supporters of the New South Wales Board of Studies arguing that we could not possibly expect the senior school students of western Sydney to read Milton. That great mind has nothing to do with their lives; they could not relate to *Paradise Lost*; therefore, it must not be read. Large-scale works of English provenance are revolting expressions of the dated grandiose imperialist patriarchy of Britannia and old Christendom irrelevant to our enlightened and advanced age. And, at this point, insular Australianism usually kicks in, with the theme of repudiating anything and everything that might be Eurocentric to affirm our liberation from our disreputable European past. So, prescribe some contemporary Australian trash and then claim to be affirming the young and their class struggle against the oppressive and supposedly monolithic past, still defended in some reactionary quarters by dinosaurs, as I have been called (and revel in the description).

One of the great defenders of the current syllabus goes about telling students that, instead of studying Wordsworth, they should be concentrating on his sister, Dorothy, who, oppressed by his phallogocentric, patriarchal, masculinist presence was thwarted in her own poetic ambition which,

had it been allowed to flourish, instead of being silenced by her brother and his work, would have written works of genius comparable to those Wordsworth himself composed. And then we wonder that students are skeptical about the whole process of reading and appreciation served up to them in this context of resentment and political correctness.

What are the qualities that distinguish a great work of literary art? All but one of these are offensive to what we might generally gather under the umbrella term of a postmodernist approach to the reading, teaching and appreciation of literary texts. The exception is the close attention to structures of language (or 'discourse', as they like to call it), animated by and expressive of that complexity and subtlety which we expect to find in great literary texts. This, in postmodernist textual study, at its best, is salutary. Unfortunately, it has two major drawbacks. First, the weaker brethren find it the least congenial process of reading, so are inclined to resort to other boiled-down aspects of postmodernist theorising, such as the non-idea of reading and evaluating a text purely in terms of what it says to you, the reader, and how it speaks to your life (and your 'journey', to use one of the terms beloved of syllabus composers), without regard to the contexts biographical, intellectual, historical and social which produced it and to which any intelligent reading of a text must submit in order for a cogent comprehension and assessment of it even to be initiated. And secondly, it misses the essential point of literary study, by focusing attention on structure rather than meaning which, in combination with the reader-centred evaluation, counteracts the power of a great text to lift us out of our own inevitably limited selfhood and contemporary situation to focus on a larger interpretation of life and human existence which may utterly contradict everything that we, to date, have believed or accepted as valuable, but which encourages our attention because of the combination of intellectual substance and aesthetic accomplishment which are the hallmarks of great artistic expression in literature and which, in time, may come to sustain us in life itself. This, for the postmodernist, is a bourgeois fantasy. The self is the only self-sustaining entity, alone and palely loitering in the wasted land of postmodernist subjectivism, in the final death-throes of Romanticism which is contemporary culture.

Part of the problem with the present-day teaching of literature – apart from the initially disabling conviction that it would be better if 'literature', as a concept, didn't exist - is that we know too much. Burdened by the daunting mass of knowledge about the past, for example – now available at your fingertips on the Internet – readers and teachers and syllabus-composers are not unsurprisingly drawn to the watered-down versions of postmodernist theory (which, the philosophers tell me, are so watered down as to be a contradiction of its genuine theoretical bases in the thought of such as Derrida and Foucault). These can, by a theoretical sleight of hand, dispose of the requirements of layers of knowledge which were once required to be brought to the reading of any text worth reading. When this is linked to a politically-driven program to discredit the past in

general – which was wrong about everything (only the present, and *your* present, precisely, having any value or validity) – and an aggressive rejection of any requirement to be humble (or humbled) before the works of genius (derided as a social construction imposed upon the powerless to ensure their submission to elites), that anything of value from the past survives is astonishing. When I suggested, in a *Herald* article, that the idea that anybody could graduate in English Literature without having undertaken the serious study of Milton, a furious correspondent (an English teacher) decried my defence of Milton, asking why on earth would anybody require his presence, as a *sine qua non*, on an English syllabus. That Wordsworth himself wrote one of the most celebrated sonnets in the language about Milton would only have confirmed her view of the conspiracy of men of genius from which we are now being liberated by a congeries of feminist-Marxist-ersatzPoMo-theoretical enlightenment:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
 Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
 Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
 And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
 Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
 In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

This irrelevant effusion, from the boys' club of the dead poets' society, in praise of a man of genius, by a man of genius, is in fact literature occupied about its proper and ancient business, of the immortal expression of profound truths, challenging the decay of present *mores* – Wordsworth has the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath in mind – but ranging over the centuries, recalling the challenges Milton himself faced to his evolving principles at the time of the English Civil War and celebrating the qualities of his poetic voice and the profundity of his life, not least in his courageous bearing of the tragic blight of blindness for a man of letters. Wordsworth's specific references to such as the 'altar', symbolic of the Church, and 'the heroic wealth of hall and bower', to 'manners' and 'virtue', not to mention 'godliness' and the great poet's humility, his 'lowliest duties' construct a multi-layered poetic petition (within the tight constraint of the sonnet-form) of moral

and spiritual dignity and urgent social concern which, certainly, has no immediate relevance to the superficial realities of 21st-century Australian life as experienced by an 18-year-old boy or girl. Instead, it presents a vision of and response to life that is perennial in its scope and expression. The challenge – and no-one is denying that the task is difficult (that is part of what makes it worthwhile) is to submit to what it has to say, connect with it through a considerable amount of research (into the circumstances of the poem's composition and its various references), and then see how and why it has spoken to readers, strikingly and memorably, for 200 years. But that pedagogical and intellectual exercise, into which a gifted and dedicated teacher will draw his or her pupils, requires a profound belief in the worthwhile character of the exercise itself, founded, in turn, on a love of literature. And that's where the problems lie. The poison of postmodernism – at least, in its boiled-down version, peddled by the politically-driven syllabus-composers from the School of Resentment – has effectively jettisoned such works and their appreciation (and, indeed, love) from the curriculum. It is a betrayal of the young which is nothing less than a disgraceful scandal.

The intelligent young have seen through it. Several have told me, in recent years, how they went through the motions of conforming to the syllabus formulae for the 'correct' discussion of texts, using the jargon, saying the 'right' things, knowing that, in the future, they could return to the study of literature and nurture their love for it untrammelled by this straitjacket of the mind. But this is no consolation for the less gifted students who should have as much right to be exposed to the best that has been known and thought in the world, to the great books, but who are being denied this access by *soi-disant* educators who preach social liberation through intellectual and cultural deprivation.

Australia's Wackiest postmodernists, and What to do about Them

James Franklin*

Postmodernism is not so much a theory as an attitude. It is an attitude of suspicion – suspicion about claims of truth. So if postmodernists are asked “Aren't the claims of science just true, and some things objectively right and wrong?” the reaction is not so much “No, because...” but “They're always doubtful, or relative to our paradigms, or just true for dominant groups in our society; and anyway, in whose interest is it to think science is true?”

Postmodernism is not only an attitude of suspicion, but one of *unteachable* suspicion. If one tries to give good arguments for some truth claim, the postmodernist will be ready to “deconstruct” the concept of good argument, as itself a historically-conditioned paradigm of patriarchal Enlightenment rationality.

Finally, the postmodernist congratulates her/himself morally on having unteachable suspicion. Being “transgressive” of established standards is taken to be good in itself and to position the transgressor as a fighter against “oppression”, prior to giving any reasons why established standards are wrong. In asking how to respond to postmodernism, it is especially important to understand that its motivation does not lie in argument but in the more primitive moral responses, resentment and indignation.

To illustrate, let us take a few examples from my webpage of “Australia's Wackiest Academic Websites”.¹ Worst results only are shown. We will need to consider later how widespread and dangerous such examples are and hence how seriously the problem should be taken and what should be done about it.

The University of Western Sydney used to be a leader in the field but a couple of years ago their central marketers cleaned up their website and it is now harder to find what is going on. Through the miracle of web archiving, however, one can browse such past gems as the project of Dr Arnd Hofmeister on ‘Queer embodiment’:

* **Dr Franklin is an Associate Professor in the School of Mathematics, The University of New South Wales**

¹ <http://www.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim/wackiest.html>

Based on a project with/of the Japanese Artist Erika Matsunamie about masculinities and femininities with German male "Cross-Dressers" this research project seeks to investigate the phantasmatic dimension of embodiment. Embodiment is understood as a highly overdetermined and contradictory inscription of practices in the body with continuously shifting investments. Using in-depth interviews and free association over significant self-portrait photographs modes of articulations over embodied experiences are analyzed to get insights in the heterogeneous processes of gendering and sexing the body.²

(Let me make it clear that I have nothing against German transvestites. It is just the way they are being used as an excuse for bullshit that is a problem.)

Still very much with us is the *oeuvre* of Dr Alison Moore, who joined the University of Queensland's Centre for the History of European Discourses as a postdoctoral fellow in 2005.

Her ongoing project is about the history of excretory taboos in Europe of the mid-to-late nineteenth-century and their relationship to visions of progress, bourgeois class conformity and colonial identification. In this vein she had published 'Kakao and kaka: Chocolate and the Excretory Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe', in Carden-Coyne and Forth (eds), Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion and Fat in the Modern World, New York: Palgrave, 2004, 51-69. She is now working on a book manuscript entitled, The Anal Imagination: Psychoanalysis, Capitalism and Excretion.³

The two "Body modifications" conferences that have been held at Macquarie University included some choice items. The first conference,⁴ in 2003, had a keynote paper 'A spectacular specimen: hermaphroditic strategies for survival':

Del LaGrace Volcano (formerly known as Della Grace) is a gender variant visual artist and intersex activist who is the author/photographer of three books, Lovebites (Gay Men's Press, 1991), The Drag King Book (Serpent's Tail, 1999) and Sublime Mutations (Konkursbuchverlag, 2000). sHE has been documenting and creating heroic re/presentations from the queer communities sHE belongs to for over 25 years. Film credits include: Pansexual Public Porn (1997), A Prodigal Son? (1998), Journey Intersex (2000) and most recently The Passionate Spectator (2003).

Another paper in the same conference was 'What an arse can do: affect, time and intercorporeal transformation': "Transformations in anal capacity, in what an arse can do, are sought-after ... let's stop there...

² <http://archive.bibalex.org/web/20010821081505/rene.nepean.uws.edu.au/criticalpsychology/arndres.htm>

³ <http://www.ched.uq.edu.au/?page=38994&pid=39002>

⁴ <http://www.ccs.mq.edu.au/oldbodmod/abstracts.html>

Good taxpayers' money, it must be remembered, is going into this research. Last year's ARC Discovery grants, the major large grants competed for across all areas, included one to UTS for a project on "*Local noise: Indigenising hip-hop in Australasia*".⁵

Although "the body" is a favourite topic, owing to its multiple transgressive possibilities, it must be said that most postmodernist writing is much less colourful than the examples just quoted. More typical is this paragraph, the first one on the website of the University of Wollongong's Hegemony Research Group, which introduces to the interested public what the Group is doing:

*The originality of Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony has long been recognized, and is evidenced by the extremely wide-ranging intellectual applications of, and the amazing corpus of published writings organised around, the Gramscian conceptualisation. In cultural writing, historical interpretation and studies of states, nations and global power it has proved remarkably versatile. Gramscian understandings of hegemony have shaped – overtly or implicitly – such crucial but diverse studies as Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism; Louis Althusser's theory of ideology; Michel Foucault's concept of the episteme; the writings of social historians such as ... etc etc*⁶

The idea that a dense thicket of unexplained references to continental theorists is the way to introduce an idea is absolutely typical of the postmodernist mindset.

A 1998 press release from the University of Adelaide shows where this is heading as regards respect for scientific truth. It concerns a course on 'Indigenous Australian Perspectives in Science and Technology'. There is nothing wrong with studying aboriginal perspectives on the natural world, but the claims made for it include these:

*At Wilto Yerlo we believe it's important that indigenous students realise Western science is only one way of understanding the natural world. Of equal value is their own indigenous way of knowing the world.*⁷

That is not correct. Western science is a way of knowing the natural world, but it is the only way of knowing it that is likely to make an impact on the severe health problems of remote indigenous communities, because it has found the unique right way to study causes and effects.

How serious is the problem? Have humanities departments been taken over by this sort of rubbish?

Not exactly. The kind of people just quoted regard themselves as an embattled minority, and not without reason. There are plenty of humanities academics doing serious work, probably a major-

⁵ <http://apps.arc.gov.au/arcresearch/research/Detail.aspx?id=DP0559371>

⁶ <http://www.uow.edu.au/~kyliesm/whatonabout.htm>

⁷ <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/news/news46.html>

ity in the older universities. Still, the trickle-down effects of the postmodernist industry are quite serious in a number of areas. Humanities academics of a more respectable persuasion have to spend time fighting for positions and grants against an enemy that never gives up; it is a tiring business. Equally exhausting is trying to persuade students to take serious subjects that will force them to think and to learn something instead of grabbing easy marks from trendy courses that give out high marks for the illiterate pooling of politically-correct prejudices. Since universities allocate teaching monies on the basis of enrolments, lecturers in logic or classics are always at a disadvantage in an Arts faculty that offers Critical Feminist Research Methodologies.⁸

Other effects are felt in school syllabuses, as other contributors to this symposium have described. Schoolteachers themselves generally retain a fund of common sense, but curriculum designers and educationists are not kept down to earth by the discipline of dealing with school students and parents. I do have some positive news to report on this front: I recently marked Sydney Grammar School's Headmaster's Exhibition, an essay competition for the school's top students. I am pleased to say that the standard of argument in the essays was uniformly excellent and there was not a trace of postmodernism in any of them. Undoubtedly, a student with the good fortune to have well-educated parents or to go to a top school will be able to avoid infection by the postmodernist virus. The youth more exposed to corruption is one who moves from a not so good school to a second-rate humanities faculty and takes his teachers' attitudes seriously for want of access to anything better. An intelligent student in that position suffers a grave injustice. It is especially because of the trashing of the talent of such students that I maintain my anger about postmodernism.

The last serious consequence of postmodernism, one that extends well beyond the small clique of card-carrying jargon-laden theorists, is the moralising of public debate on questions that should be factual, such as the "History Wars" and debates on economic rationalism. The relentless assault of postmodernism on truth and its replacement of rational debate with resentful "deconstruction" has, so to speak, given permission for public intellectuals to lead with denunciations and rancour prior to getting their facts straight. The "History Wars" began when Keith Windschuttle wrote a book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, claiming on the basis of his archival research that the Tasmanian aboriginals were not massacred but mostly died of diseases.⁹ It is astounding how few of the replies to him bothered to examine his factual claims and the evidence he provided. Almost all of the ferocious attacks on him consisted of denunciations of his alleged racism, abuse about his supposed lack of imagination, comparisons with the Holocaust denier David Ir-

⁸

http://archive.bibalex.org/web/20010717114554/http://arts.deakin.edu.au/guymer/asw311sg/sg311_12.htm

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_wars ; K. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Macleay Press, Paddington, 2002).

ving, and snide remarks about his not having a PhD. Though only one of his major opponents descended to any explicit postmodernist claims about the relativism of truth, the standard of the debate was extremely low, in a way that I believe would not have been tolerated forty years ago before the advent of postmodernism. Something of the same shallow moralism infects the debate on economic rationalism. According to its supporters, a free market is the best method of delivering prosperity to both rich and poor. That may or may not be so, but the way to debate it is to look at economic evidence. It is not to the point to try to short-circuit that difficult economic debate by abusing economic rationalists for “reducing humans to mere consumers” or for approving of “obscene” inequalities of income. Arguments on matters of fact need to be sorted out before moral judgments are made, not, as postmodernism would have it, the reverse.

If it is agreed that postmodernism is a problem, what should be done about it?

There are four possible plans:

Plan A: Do nothing and hope it goes away

Plan B: Take political action in an effort to have postmodernists sacked and deprived of grants

Plan C: Refute postmodernism with arguments

Plan D: Provide a more exciting positive alternative

Defeatist though it sounds, there is something to be said for plan A: sit and wait for it to go away. We all have other things to do, and given that postmodernism is not exactly forging ahead, we might well decide to take a relaxed approach and not grant it the oxygen of publicity. And after all, flared jeans and big hair did not disappear because anyone refuted them – they just came to their use-by date and no-one bothered with them any more. Still, to take the same approach with postmodernism would neglect the claims of the young whose minds will be corrupted by falling in with postmodernists. And since academia still in most cases provides jobs for life (especially for those unemployable elsewhere), timescales in academic fashions are very long – a present PhD student could still be teaching in forty years’ time.

There have been some interesting recent attempts along the line of Plan B: political action. Brendan Nelson, until recently the minister in charge of higher education, refused to fund about half a dozen of the worst grants recommended by the Australian Research Council’s grant evaluation process, and appointed the conservative editor of *Quadrant*, Paddy McGuinness, to the panel that evaluated the grants.¹⁰ That is fiddling with the margins, and there seems no prospect of anything more forceful. Since academic freedom is a principle of some value, that may be reasonable. There is an inevitable and largely unresolvable conflict between the principles of academic

¹⁰ http://www.quadrant.org.au/php/article_view.php?article_id=1955

freedom and quality control. I do not call for anyone to be sacked. (Though I do call for certain persons to resign in shame.)

Refutation, Plan C, would be a good plan in an ideal world where there was a level playing field in the conflict of ideas, where theories fought man to man on the basis of fair arguments. That is not our world. You might as well expect damsels in distress to be rescued by knights in armour. Because postmodernism is not accepted by its followers on the basis of argument, deploying arguments against it is like boxing with shadows. It is just met with a smokescreen of “deconstructions” of the appeal to argument as itself implicated in the modernist rationalist problematic, and so on.

Still, perhaps there is an uncommitted audience out there somewhere, so I have two excellent thinkers to recommend who identified and exposed what arguments there are at the bottom of postmodernism. The first is Raymond Tallis, whose brilliantly-titled book *Not Saussure* shows how the ideas of such later stars as Derrida repeat the fundamental mistake in the philosophy of language made by Saussure a hundred years ago.¹¹ Saussure believed that the structured nature of language meant, for example, that the meanings of “black” and “white” were defined merely by their opposition to each other, rather than being tied to our perception of those colours; the disconnection of language from reality that his theory implies has been relied on by all postmodernists since to emphasise the “constructed” (hence political, hence probably wrong, hence open to remaking at our pleasure) nature of whatever we say.

The second thinker to expose the confusions at the heart of postmodernism was the Sydney philosopher David Stove, who in 1985 ran a “Competition to find the worst argument in the world”.¹² The argument had to be both very bad and very widespread. He awarded the prize to himself with the following argument:

We can know things only

- as they are related to us
- under our forms of perception and understanding
- insofar as they fall under our conceptual schemes,

etc

So

we cannot know things as they are in themselves

¹¹ R. Tallis, *Not Saussure: a critique of post-Saussurean literary theory* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988).

¹² J. Franklin, ‘Stove’s discovery of the worst argument in the world’, *Philosophy* 77 (2002), 615-24, <http://web.maths.unsw.edu.au/~jim/stoveworstargt.pdf>

Stated as baldly as that, the argument is probably not recognizable. Here is an example that most will recognise. Speaking of the typical products of a modern high school, he writes:

Their intellectual temper is (as everyone remarks) the reverse of dogmatic, in fact pleasingly modest. They are quick to acknowledge that their own opinion, on any matter whatsoever, is only their opinion; and they will candidly tell you, too, the reason why it *is* only their opinion. This reason is, that it is *their* opinion.

That is a version of the “worst argument” because it says, in effect, “my opinion is just my opinion – created by my genes, education etc – so it cannot be an opinion that there is any reason to believe”. The version that lies at the heart of postmodernism is similar, but more culturally focused:

The cultural-relativist, for example, inveighs bitterly against our science-based, white-male cultural perspective. She says that it is not only injurious but cognitively limiting. Injurious it may be; or again it may not. But why does she believe that it is cognitively limiting? Why, for no other reason in the world, except this one: that it is ours. Everyone really understands, too, that this is the only reason. But since this reason is also generally accepted as a sufficient one, no other is felt to be needed.

I hope it is clear why the “worst argument” is so bad. As another Sydney philosopher, Alan Olding, pointed out, it is of the same form as “We have eyes, therefore we can’t see.”

It is hard to believe that a real live postmodernist will concentrate long enough to take on serious arguments like those of Tallis and Stove. The postmodernist mindset does not bother to reply to objections. So here is my recommendation on what to say if you find yourself arguing with one at a party. You will find that whatever you say is met with an attempted “deconstruction” as just another symptom of your indoctrination by the capitalist rationalist oppressors. So ask this:

What would count as evidence against your position?

If something is suggested, you have something to work on. Most likely, it will become clear that nothing would count as evidence against that position. But a position that nothing would count as evidence against is vacuous. (If your position is “snow is white”, it is clear what counts against it, such as seeing black snow; if your position is “snow is white or snow is not white”, nothing counts against it because you haven’t said anything with content.)

I have a recommendation also on what to say to the friends of the postmodernist at the party who are shocked by your lack of tolerance and urge you to read all of Derrida and Foucault before you rudely dismiss their important contributions to thought. Ask them

What is one good idea that postmodernists have come up with?

Ten to one they will be unable to state one idea postmodernists have come up with, good, bad or indifferent.

In the longer term, the answer to postmodernism, especially to its ethical appeal, must rely on Plan D: presenting a better alternative. If the youth are being corrupted by postmodernism through its appeal to their indignation and to their sense that there must be more to life than the pursuit of material gain, then they can only be rescued by presenting a more credible alternative moral vision.

So what vision? Unfortunately, there are a number of fundamentalisms available – Islamic, Sydney Anglican, Hillsong, Environmentalist and so on – which play well in the market. (I use “fundamentalism” here somewhat loosely, for any position that hands down a complete scripture and simply urges “have faith, take it or leave it”.) Fundamentalist leaders are always encouraged by the number of fourteen-year-olds joining up. What do you expect? It is fortunate that an Australian teenager who signs up is not as badly off as one in the Gaza strip who will soon find himself strapping on a bomb, but blind commitment is no way to find the meaning of life. The Catholic tradition does not lend itself so well to fundamentalism, since it has always approved of philosophy, but a kind of Catholic fundamentalism is certainly possible – for centuries, many Catholics said “If the Pope says Galileo is wrong, then Galileo is wrong as far as I’m concerned.” That kind of “loyalty” is not helpful.

Another alternative vision might be called “imitatory” – it is based on presenting models that will inspire the young in the right course: the life of Jesus in the religious realm, literary works with solid values such as Jane Austen’s novels and *Harry Potter*, stories of real heroes such as medical researchers and peace negotiators. That is a good plan as far as it goes. It is very appropriate for the earlier years at school. The fight against postmodernism, however, is really on the level of theory. There needs to be a positive theoretical vision that will support one’s initial positive reaction to heroes, instead of, like postmodernist suspicion, undermining it.

I have a plan. It is based on presenting the absolute basics of ethics in a way that shows their objectivity, but free from any religious commitment. I have come to that view from a perspective of Catholic natural law ethics, but there are other ways of seeing it – my closest collaborator in this area is Jean Curthoys, author of an excellent book attacking postmodernist feminist theory, *Feminist Amnesia*.¹³ She has a Marxist background and sees what we are doing as a continuation of the “liberation theory of the Sixties”.

¹³ J. Curthoys, *Feminist Amnesia: the wake of women’s liberation* (Routledge, London, 1997)

The idea is that ethics is not fundamentally about what actions ought to be done, or about rights, or virtues, or divine commands. Ethics does indeed have something to say about those matters, but they are not basic. Where ethics should start is well explained in a page of Rai Gaita's *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*.¹⁴ He asks us to consider a tutorial in which one of its members had suffered serious torture and that was known to all the others in the group. If the tutor then asked the group to consider whether our sense of good and evil might be an illusion, "everyone would be outraged if their tutor was not serious and struck by unbelieving horror if he was". Scepticism about the objectivity of good and evil, Gaita says, is not only false but a moral offence against those who have suffered real evil.

Ethics should start, then, with a direct sense of what is good and what is evil. To what things can good and evil happen? The death of a human is a tragedy but the explosion of a lifeless galaxy is just a firework. Why the difference? There is something about humans, an irreducible worth or equal moral value, that means that what happens to them matters a great deal. That equal worth of persons, brought home directly to us when someone we care about suffers loss or when we ourselves suffer an injustice, is what ethics is fundamentally about. Other aspects of ethics follow from that. Why is murder wrong? Because it destroys a human life, something of immense intrinsic value. (And why is it arguable that capital punishment might nevertheless be possible in some extreme circumstances, although it takes a human life? – because there is a possibility that it might deter someone from taking many valuable lives.) Other rules of right and wrong should follow from the worth of persons similarly (together with necessary information about the psychological makeup of humans, which gives insight into what is really good for them). Rights? They follow in the same way as rules: the right to life is just the prohibition on murder, but seen from the point of view of the potential victim; it too follows directly from the intrinsic moral worth of the person under threat. Virtues? The virtue of restraint or temperance, for example, is a disposition to act so as not to harm oneself and others, so it too is directly explicable in terms of the harm done (by drugs, for example) to humans. Divine commands? They must be in accordance with what is inherently right. In the Christian vision, God does support the value of all humans. "Look at the birds of the air", says Jesus. "They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"¹⁵ Any god or purported god who issues commands contrary to human worth, such as edicts to make war on unbelievers, must be resisted in the interests of humanity.

¹⁴ R. Gaita, *Good and Evil: an absolute conception* (2nd ed, Routledge, London, 1994).

¹⁵ Matthew 6:26.

Much more is needed to explain how that moral vision works itself out in practice. It does not follow from the fact that the principles of ethics are simple that it is easy to decide on ethical questions. On the contrary, the fundamental equal worth of persons itself creates conflicts when there is tension between what different people need. Some of the issues are discussed further in my new book, *Catholic Values and Australian Realities*.¹⁶ But I hope enough has been said to indicate where to find an alternative, and more optimistic, vision of human life than the simplistic travesties foisted on the long-suffering youth of the world these past forty years by postmodernism.

¹⁶ J. Franklin, *Catholic Values and Australian Realities* (Connor Court Publishing, Bacchus Marsh, 2006).

Postmodernism and the Fractured Curriculum

Alan Barcan*

In a recent issue of *Sydney's Child*, a monthly paper directed at parents, a senior lecturer in Popular Culture at the University of the Sunshine Coast wrote that "responding to the death throes of the old curriculum", educationists were injecting "fresh fodder" into the traditional curriculum, "exciting many students about learning for the first time in a long time." Postmodern education, she said, is still in its early stages, but once the "rough edges are planed and the complex vocabulary relegated back to tertiary institutions" it would teach students to reflect on their work and that of others and will empower future generations to make informed choices.¹

Just what is this panacea for the ills of contemporary education? Is it the same postmodernism whose arrival caused a stir in intellectual circles in the early 1970s? And what of the old curriculum it is to rejuvenate? What benefits will the new remedy bring?

In this survey I concentrate on the secondary schools of New South Wales. In my opinion, despite its many problems NSW education is in better shape than that of most other parts of Australia. What is true of NSW schooling might not apply elsewhere!

I start with a few initial generalisations about postmodernism and education, then look at the pre-postmodern curriculum, which for some sixty years provided what was in essence a humanist-realist version of liberal education.

I then consider the cultural revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the new ideologies associated with it. This was when postmodernism emerged as a new ideology, though it was not yet in schools and little known in universities. After glancing at the reaction of the independent schools to the new ideologies, I discuss the fracturing of the curriculum in the 1970s and 1980s. Next we examine the impact on education of the 1989-93 reforms associated with so-called economic rationalism or neo-classical political economy. It was in the late 1990s that postmodernism came to public notice as an element in the school curriculum, initially in English and in Years 11 and 12. At this level it also established a small bridgehead in history. As for the sciences, postmodernism's contribution was to spread antipathy. We consider once more the confrontation of non-state schools with the new intellectual environment. Since all future teachers now receive

* **Dr Barcan is an Emeritus Professor of Education, The University of Newcastle, NSW**

their education in universities, we need to assess ideological currents likely to influence their academic and professional preparation. We close with some reflections on the present state and future possibilities of postmodernism in education.

Let me start with some generalisations:

* Postmodernism is an ideological theory, one of a number currently affecting the pluralist secondary school curriculum;

* Postmodernism is also sometimes used as an umbrella term for the vast range of ideological, curricular and pedagogical changes since the cultural revolution of 1967-74. "Post-modernity" might be another term for this phenomenon. In this paper I concentrate on the narrower, theoretical concept of postmodernism, but it is difficult at times to separate this from the broader picture.

* The impact of postmodernism is strongest in Years 11 and 12, and in English and to a limited extent in History; it has little application to earlier stages of education.

* Relativism is a dominant feature of postmodernism, but the pluralist, "inclusive", curriculum also encourages relativism;

* In recent years postmodernism has gained strength because some of its former opponents, notably the demoralised adherents of pseudo-Marxism, have abandoned their beliefs and become silent or have accepted much of postmodern theory. This perhaps justifies applying the term postmodernism to cover most of the variegated ideologies in the pluralist curriculum.

* However, people of strong or traditional religious beliefs, supporters of vocationalism in education, and adherents of liberal humanism remain opposed to the intellectual blight of postmodernism.

Discussing primary education in England, Melanie Phillips makes a point with considerable validity for Australia. In *All Must Have Prizes* she remarks that post-1967 neo-progressive ideas were not really absorbed by classroom teachers. "Very few teachers are ideologues. The truth was, if anything rather worse: that a whole way of thinking had been assimilated without it being realised or understood, let alone challenged, and that it had been used to lend a superficial veneer of credibility to second-rate classroom practice." And she quotes a 1992 report on primary education in England: "The real problem was not so much radical transformation as mediocrity."ⁱⁱ

It is notoriously difficult to define postmodernism. Dictionaries, of course, are supposed to offer a dependable treasury of succinct definitions. So let's consult the *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, whose wording I have further slimmed down:

a style and concept in the arts, architecture, and criticism, dating from the late 20th century which . . . has at its heart a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies . . . Typical features include a deliberate mixing of artistic styles and media, the self-conscious use of earlier styles and conventions, and often the incorporation of images relating to the consumerism and mass communication of modern post-industrial society.

But how does this relate to education, particularly school education? In 2004 a lecturer in history at Macquarie University told a meeting of history teachers: "It is against the point of postmodernism to define it. Loosely, though, it refers to a series of movements that adopt a stance of radical scepticism towards the modernist search for authority, progress, universals, reason, systems and consistent criteria for the evaluation of knowledge claims."ⁱⁱⁱ On the face of it, postmodernism seems thoroughly antagonistic to the work of schools.

The NSW Board of Studies provided a definition for students of English in Years 11 and 12 taking Elective 2, "Postmodernism": "Postmodernism has arisen within the context of questioning certainties about time and space. It involves the playful challenge of fundamental principles and assumptions about the nature of texts. By highlighting the conventions and clichés of the forms and functions of texts, accepted notions of originality, authorship and the nature of representation are challenged."^{iv}

Curricula have always served a variety of purposes and therefore have varied in content. Varying curricula were often provided in a variety of schools, or in a variety of streams or courses within the one school. Other institutions also provided education alongside, or even alternative to, schools -- the home, the church, and in recent times the media, notably television.

Today the curriculum is fractured. Yet until the late 1960s it possessed a fundamental coherence, despite variations between types of state schools and between state and non-state schools. I use the term "fractured" rather than "fragmented", which would suggest a disintegration into discrete segments. "Fractured" implies an attempt to sustain one common curriculum, though one which possesses fissures. Strangely, the advocates of what they call an inclusive education contributed to the fracturing of the curriculum. In the early 1970s a number of special interest groups, otherwise referred to as "disadvantaged minorities" or identity groups, began to exert a strong influ-

ence on schooling, including the curriculum. Educational theorists rallied round, identifying groups of children they believed had specific needs. New ideologies emerged seeking to promote some of these interests: feminist, neo-Marxist, neo-progressive were the most prominent.

Some six competing theories or movements with distinctive educational aims, operate on contemporary schooling. They often overlap. (1) Critical theory, a degenerated form of Marxism, emphasises the social context of knowledge. It has recently become demoralised, but survives as a simplistic sociology used to interpret subjects or studies in class terms. (2) The social justice "inclusive" approach focuses attention on groups considered to be disadvantaged, such as women, ethnic minorities, Aboriginals and homosexuals. (3) Strong vocational and instrumental purpose, emphasising the acquisition of skills. (4) The relics of the liberal academic curriculum, which tends to emphasise humanist values, such as character building or moral issues. (5) Strongly religious schools, often with small enrolments, sometimes accepting large segments of traditional academic knowledge but sometimes not exposing their older students to the curriculum required for the public examinations. (6) Postmodernism, at the other extreme, is critical of rational thinking and the search for truth. It sees different truths for different groups; truth is relative. Its impact is strongest on literature and history. Because of its heavy theory, it is found mostly in the senior years of secondary school. In some ways neo-Marxist or critical theory, possessing its own firmly held truths, was a very strong opponent.

Before considering the impact of postmodernism in the schools, we must recall the sort of curriculum it sought to supplant.

The Modernist Curriculum: a Humanist-Realist Compromise

From the early twentieth century till the late 1960s the curriculum in Australian schools possessed a confident optimism. The main elements of this curriculum, also prevalent in most other English-speaking democracies, was a humanist-realist version of liberal education. The tradition of general or non-vocational education, called liberal because it was the education of a free man ("liber" in Latin), not the vocational training of a slave, originated in Greece during the fifth century BC, was the education of a free man. Its humanist version was concerned with "Man", with the building of character and ideas (usually including religious ideas). Its realist stream ("rea", Latin for things) was concerned with the acquisition of knowledge about Nature, the material world.

The underlying philosophy of this curriculum was elaborated in the nineteenth century by people like Matthew Arnold, Cardinal John Newman and Thomas Huxley in Britain, while the German educational philosopher J. F. Herbart and his disciples helped devise a range of appropriate subjects and teaching methods.

The aims of education were asserted clearly and confidently by Peter Board, Director of Education in New South Wales, in the Preface to the 1905 primary school syllabus:

The school aims at giving to its pupils the moral and physical training and the mental equipment . . . to meet the demands of adult life with respect to themselves, the family, society, and the State. By its influence upon character it should cultivate habits of thought and action that will contribute both to successful work and to upright conduct, and, by the kind of instruction it imparts, it should . . . prepare the pupils for taking up the practical duties of life and give them tastes and interests that will lead to activities beneficial both to themselves and the community.

In the primary school the humanist-realist curriculum focused on seven or eight subjects: English, history, geography, arithmetic, nature study, music, crafts, and physical education. Scripture was usually included. The majority of pupils did not proceed beyond primary school, though the number doing so steadily grew. Echoing Arnold's definition of liberal education, the "Prefatory Note" to the NSW primary school syllabus for 1925 stated that literature brought the child "into contact with the best that has been thought and said, and so increasing his knowledge of human nature and adding to the stock of ideas about life gained from his personal social experience." ^v

Most youngsters left at about age 14. But some proceeded to post-primary schooling. This was specialised. Pupils in "secondary" schools continued studying a broad, liberal, humanist-realist curriculum, with strong literary, historical and scientific components. This centred on Latin, English, history (or perhaps geography), French (or perhaps German), mathematics (arithmetic, trigonometry, geometry, algebra), science (physics and chemistry) and physical education, reinforced by sport. In state schools visiting clergymen often provided weekly instruction in religious doctrine.

Other boys and girls followed a more directly vocational curriculum lasting two or three years and leading to apprenticeship and the technical college. Junior technical schools offered subjects like technical drawing, woodwork, and metalwork. Girls in home science schools might study cookery, home management (home economics), needlework, and household hygiene. Boys and girls could also take a commercial course incorporating such subjects as book-keeping, shorthand and typing. In some states, notably Victoria, the distinction between "academic" and "vocational" secondary education was very firm. But in New South Wales by the 1930s many technical or home science schools also provided academic courses.

This curriculum survived, in its essentials, until the late 1960s. In harness with the elements of the mental training curriculum popular in the nineteenth century, it represented the transmission of a cultural heritage. As the English "Report of the Consultative Committee on Secondary Education" (the Spens Report, 1938) put it: "There is, undoubtedly, a common Western European tradition, derived mainly from the Graeco-Roman civilisation as it was transformed by Christianity, and one of the chief functions of secondary teaching is to make boys and girls conscious of it and regard it as something to be revered and preserved."^{vi}

As late as January 1964 the Australian Teachers' Federation reaffirmed this tradition when it identified "The Aims of Australian Education" as: (1) Fundamental skills and knowledge; (2) Vocational preparation, (3) Citizenship; (4) Intellectual development; (5) Ethical character; (6) Aesthetic appreciation; (7) Health; (8) The worthwhile use of leisure.

But a new era was dawning.

The Cultural Revolution and the New Ideologies

In Australia, as in western society generally, the late 1960s and early 1970s brought a new climate of opinion and of values. Social and cultural upheavals heralded the advent of a permissive society, followed soon after by a multicultural, pluralist one.

Moral change involved greater sexual freedom and greater uncertainty about values. Many people began to conceive truth as relative and began to doubt verities long-accepted as absolutes. Religious certitude weakened. Television, after some ten years of respectable orthodoxy, promoted new values, making it a powerful rival of the school curriculum. Like popular music, it tended to propagate a low-grade common culture, diluting both the new sectional cultures and the old liberal education.

In Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory radical and neo-progressive education spread rapidly. Two factors facilitating change were the raising of the minimum school leaving age to 15 and the abolition of the external exams usually taken at about that age. New South Wales was more cautious of change. It had raised the minimum school leaving age many years before and had restored an external exam at the end of the junior secondary stage in 1965. The Commonwealth Labor government elected in December 1972 provided a generous flow of funds to promote neo-progressive education, into education. Special attention was given to the "disadvantaged" groups. The Commonwealth over-vaulted state and church authorities by giving aid for innovations directly to schools. The Schools Commission, appointed in January 1974, became the engine for expanding these policies.

Departments of Education across Australia ceased to issue syllabuses specifying the material to be learned; instead they offered "guidelines". In New South Wales, for instance, the 1975 *Curriculum for Primary Schools -- Social Studies* contained not lists of topics but a rationale, a set of objectives, and areas of enquiry. Some years later Garth Boomer, then Associate Director-General of Education (Curriculum) in South Australia, described arrangements after 1960 as a case of "systemic schizophrenia in which official curriculum statements and actual curriculum practice in schools have become progressively more incongruent."^{vii}

At least four major ideological theories contested the curriculum -- the deteriorated liberal, the neo-progressive, the radical, including the neo-Marxist, and the feminist. Postmodernism, born in France in early 1970s, had no real impact on secondary schooling until the late 1990s.

Deteriorated liberal education -- In the early 1960s a new emphasis on process at the expense of content helped undermine humanist liberal education. In America the Cold War had encouraged a strong reaction against progressive education, in an attempt to restore academic standards, particularly in science and mathematics. Jerome Bruner was a leading figure in this endeavour. His "structure of disciplines" theory, emphasising the importance of mastery of concepts, had some influence in Australia. Unfortunately, many educationists interpreted this theory to mean that mastery of concepts was more important than "mere knowledge". Moreover, when it came to methods of teaching, Bruner could come up with nothing better than the inductive method, which had affinities with progressive education. In mathematics, for instance, the student should "discover for himself the generalization that lies behind a particular mathematical problem." The inductive method was a slower method of acquiring knowledge than the older narrative or demonstration lessons.^{viii}

One innovation in the primary and junior secondary years in the late 1960s and early 1970s was school-based curricula. Where educational administrators still exercised some control, as in New South Wales and Tasmania, they encouraged curriculum planners to foster the cultivating of mental skills and the formation of concepts. In 1971 Inspector B. J. Burns commended the natural science curriculum for New South Wales primary schools: "The content of the course is not the essential consideration. It is the method of learning which counts. The process is more important than the product." A year later another inspector even stated, referring mainly to primary schooling, that "the cancerous growth of content in the past has been a contributor to the lack of literacy."^{ix} The view that "mere knowledge" was not enough had become an assertion that knowledge was not important. The theory of "learning to learn" assumed that pupils could learn the techniques of investigation without mastering knowledge.

Radical and neo-Marxist ideology -- Radicals energetically denounced traditional education. Tom Roper, a national student leader from New South Wales, attacked the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture in his 1970 book, *The Myth of Equality*: "Our schools are places designed by middle class English-Australians for middle class English-Australians and controlled by middle class English-Australians."^x He identified ten handicapped groups whose interests were ignored in the schools. In May 1971 the *Sydney Morning Herald* printed extracts from a Communist Party document urging revolutionary-minded teachers to present to students the need for socialist revolution and stating that "the role of education under capitalism is in essence that of a transmitter of bourgeois ideology."^{xi}

Classical Marxism had paid little attention to education, which it regarded as part of the superstructure of society; educational reform would follow the revolution. In the meantime, radicals should seek greater access for working-class children to the basic elements of western culture and to technical education. But neo-Marxists attacked liberal, vocational and progressive education equally.

The major theorist of neo-Marxism, the French communist philosopher Louis Althusser, came to prominence in the late 1960s. He denounced humanism and widened the Marxian theory of the state by identifying a variety of repressive "ideological state apparatuses", such as religion, education, the family, law, politics, trade unions, the media and culture. These ideas owed something to Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Gramsci, the imprisoned Italian communist who died in 1937, argued in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, first published in English in 1971, that the bourgeoisie held power not only because of its control of production but also through the hegemony of its ideas. The new radicals ignored Gramsci's stress on the importance of formal education and of working-class children studying traditional subjects. They preferred to denigrate knowledge as socially conditioned.^{xii}

A new sociology of education purveying a deteriorated, reductionist version of Marxism was spreading in teacher training courses. It originated with the publication in London in 1971 of a book of readings edited by M. F. Young, *Knowledge and Control: New Directions for the Sociology of Education*, which informed educationists that the curriculum, and concepts such as academic and non-academic, bright and dull, were "socially constructed". A year later Doug White, lecturer in education at La Trobe University, announced the arrival of neo-Marxism in his chapter on education in *Australian Capitalism*

Neo-progressive ideology was an up-dated version of progressive education. In Australia progressive, child-centred, education had attracted some minor interest from the 1920s to the 1950s. It favoured activity methods in the classroom and preferred social studies to separate history and geography courses. Yet the progressives continued to accept liberal democratic values. Their pedagogy found favour mainly in small private schools and girls schools; it had limited impact on state schools and none in Catholic ones. Neo-progressives differed from the progressives in their advocacy of

"open education", a concept which could encompass at least five meanings: physically open, i.e. open area teaching instead of separate classrooms; this implied team teaching; open-ended class discussions (no conclusions, no "closure"); open relationships between teachers and pupils and between pupils (i.e. lack of privacy, revelation of personal feelings or beliefs); open or free choice of learning experiences; openness by taking the school into the community and vice versa. Neo-progressives also disdained citizenship education. Strangely, in New South Wales the open area classroom and team teaching first appeared in the Catholic Diocese of Maitland in 1972, first in some infants schools, and then in primary ones. Some state schools imitated this. But both state and Catholic schools were cautious about this fad.

The Australian Schools Commission established by the Whitlam Labor government encouraged neo-progressive pedagogy financially and ideologically. Its first report, in June 1975, advocated "more equal outcomes from schooling." It opposed selective high schools and streamed classes. The Report challenged the simplistic Marxian view that knowledge was class-based, or relativist. "It is . . . romantic nonsense to maintain that the development of effective English usage, intellectual competency or opportunities to discover enthusiasms not available through the child's home are simply attempts by one group to impose its culture on others." And yet "the forms of knowledge" valued in schools "largely represent the accumulated culture of ascendant social groups." Knowledge should also be looked at "from other social perspectives and the achievements of other groups appreciated". And yet, again, "despite their historical associations, there is nothing necessarily middle class about logic, mathematics, science, art or any of the other ways" of ordering knowledge. In all, an uneasy analysis.^{xiii}

Feminist ideology was unable to develop a strong theory, though where necessary it used Marxist concepts. The celebration of 1975 as International Women's Year stimulated government funding and gave political respectability to the feminist groups. A self-appointed study group submitted a report, *Girls, School & Society*, to the Schools Commission in 1975; the states followed suit with reports advocating improved education for girls and opposing "sexism" in education. In its extreme form this involved purging school books of inappropriate words and pictures, the introduction of "non-sexist language", and the examination of narratives to ensure adequate attention to females.^{xiv}

Partly because the various pressure groups had conflicting aims, the NSW Department of Education followed a cautious policy. In the Preamble of "Towards Non-Sexist Education", issued by the Department in June 1980, the Director-General, D. Swan warned that the policy of eliminating sexism in education should not denigrate "the traditional family, traditional roles, occupations, activities or behaviours or the traditional choices of particular students."

Seeking to reduce this problem the Government appointed in October 1980 an Education Commission on which these groups had representation. Later, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, wrote that it

seemed like a good idea at the time. Instead of having all the different interest groups fighting amongst themselves over education policy, why not form a commission where they could meet and iron out their differences . . . The reality is that the commission has offered limited advice to the Minister . . . And what advice has been offered appears to have been disregarded . . .^{xv}

In an address to primary principals early in 1982 Swan described the “forces of diversity” as “a truly motley horde . . . disorganised as a whole but becoming skilled in pursuit of separate objectives.”^{xvi}

The Independent Schools Confront the New Ideology

In 1967 686 independent, non-state, secondary schools existed in Australia. The Catholic system of primary and secondary schools was by far the strongest. Its fees were lower than in most other non-state schools. The Church of England maintained some primary schools and secondary colleges. The Presbyterians and Methodists had some secondary colleges. Finally a number of non-denominational collegiate schools existed. Two categories of non-state schools occupied a special place, the prestigious corporate colleges and the much larger Roman Catholic system.

The corporate colleges numbered 168. They were strongest in Victoria, though quite numerous in New South Wales. Most of them were Anglican, but some Presbyterian, and a few Methodist and Catholic collegiate schools also existed. They were mostly single-sex, and often boarding, schools. Hence they might be expected to have a strong impact on character formation. They claimed to possess a special philosophy of education, which included major elements of the liberal curriculum. But the emphasis was on religion and sport: “muscular Christianity”.^{xvii}

A survey of 71 corporate schools conducted by *The Australian* in 1969 and 1970 found that over half of them stressed religious and academic aims, but less than half mentioned social service and only 30 per cent referred to character training. Towards the end of the 1980 an analysis by three academics argued that knowledge and wit had become more important than moral virtues, and intelligence more than character. A new spirit had overtaken religious education, which they described as “kind hearts”.

With the publication of Robinson's *Honest to God* in 1963 and Cox's *Secular City* in 1965, and with the various Declarations of Vatican II in 1965, it was clear that the movement of the modern world was bearing the Christian religion downstream. Ecumenism developed so many dimen-

sions that all Christians left were clinging together and reaching out their hands to anyone at all who would admit a spiritual dimension in the universe, a holy alliance of all non-materialists.^{xviii}

For the Catholic community the cultural revolution was compounded by its own intellectual trauma. The qualities of a Catholic school, as described in a document issuing from the Second Vatican Council of 1965 to 1965, "Christian Education", were quite compatible with liberal humanist-realist ideals. "It cultivates the intellect with unremitting attention, ripens the capacity for right judgement, provides an introduction into the cultural heritage won by past generations, promotes a sense of values, readies for professional life . . ." Elsewhere the document specified directly religious purposes -- to learn to worship God by intelligent participation in the Liturgy of the Church, and to live in righteousness.^{xix}

Catholic hostility to progressive education derived partly from possession of its own philosophical traditions. A practical reason for Catholic suspicion of educational experimentation was the large size of classes; progressive methods required smaller classes and a relaxed environment. But the long-established system was breaking down. In the 1950s the high level of immigration, coupled with a rising persistence rate, brought increased enrolments. After the states and Commonwealth reintroduced state aid to non-state schools about 1963-64 smaller classes became feasible in Catholic schools. Another change was an increase in the number of lay teachers, as fewer boys and girls entered the teaching orders. Between 1965 and 1970 the proportion of religious in NSW Catholic primary schools fell from 69 per cent to 51 per cent and in secondary schools from 77 per cent to 54 per cent.^{xx}

However, Catholic schools were more conservative than state ones. Teachers were still required to prepare lesson plans in advance and the Catholic system retained inspectors (known as superintendents). Of course, superintendents could be child-centred or subject-centred. Child-centred education (which sometimes meant teacher-centred) led to certain disturbing phenomena. A member of the Catholic Education Office at Armidale noted in 1987 that in one primary school three different methods of long division were used, in Years 4, 5 and 6. In fact, the degree of child-centred or teacher-determined curricula might vary from subject to subject.^{xxi}

But Catholic secondary schools, most of them under teaching orders, retained their allegiance to an academic, examination-oriented curriculum. The Catholic Education Office in Armidale commented: "There appears to be little reason for concern over way-out experimentation in secondary schools." The schools were selective and maintained entrance exams. The Christian Brothers, in particular, emphasised the importance of habits of study, streaming, examinations and hard work.^{xxii}

Nonetheless, the first history of boys' and girls' corporate secondary schools in Australia, *Learning to Lead*, published in 1987 (and the only such history since C. E. W. Bean's history of boys' corpo-

rate schools, *Here, My Son*, in 1950), found that in the preceding 30 years there had not been any significant innovation in the curriculum of such schools.^{xxiii}

A Fractured Curriculum

In 1975 the long boom, which had started about 1941, ended. Full employment was no longer the norm. Parents, students, and employers became more concerned about vocational education. Complaints about the quality of the curriculum swelled. A series of investigations started.

In the 1970s a new concept, multiculturalism, began to impinge on the curriculum. Australia was a land of immigration, drawing mainly on Britain, and assimilation into the Anglo-Celtic tradition was the accepted process, in which schools played a vital role. The New Left's onslaught on the cultural tradition facilitated the progress of the multicultural ideology. So did an injection of Commonwealth funds.

Departments of Education could do little about either the curriculum or standards. In the early 1970s school-based curricula in state schools gave teachers considerable control over the primary and junior curriculum. It emboldened radical teachers to replace traditional content with various innovations, under the rubric of "democratizing" the curriculum.

In the senior secondary schools the external examinations at the end of Year 12 survived, but were diluted. Most states had introduced a school-assessed component, usually 50 per cent. In addition, the results were adjusted to ensure a predetermined spread, by a process known as "norm-referencing" or standardised scoring. After the markers submitted their results these were adjusted to give whatever distribution was required. In New South Wales in the late 1970s, 10 per cent of the candidates in each HSC course were awarded the top grade (Grade 1), the next 20 per cent received Grade 2, the middle 40 per cent received Grade 3, the next 20 per cent Grade 4, and the remaining 10 per cent Grade 5. Standards were relative, not absolute.^{xxiv} This was an attempt to conceal falling standards, a consequence partly of a deterioration in the quality of primary school education which accompanied school-based curriculum. Other contributing factors were the disruption caused by the rapid turnover of teachers in secondary schools in the period up to 1974 and a fall in the quality of teacher training after teachers' colleges were replaced by colleges of advanced education and university departments of education. The wider range of vocations now available produced a decline in the quality of those entering teacher training. In the 1980s the problem was exacerbated as the rapid rise in retention rates brought more lower ability pupils in Years 11 and 12.

Although neo-progressive ideas appealed to Commonwealth education bureaucrats and some university education lecturers, the radicals or neo-Marxists had a more vigorous theory. Neo-Marxism separated itself decisively from the neo-progressives at a conference on "What to do about schools", held in

Sydney in June 1976 and attended by 700 people. The conference resulted in a new journal, *Radical Education Dossier*.^{xxv}

But the neo-Marxists soon suffered a crisis. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1974) had exposed repression in the USSR. Michel Foucault, another anti-humanist French philosopher, whose theories helped found postmodernism, challenged neo-Marxism. Louis Althusser delivered a paper on "The Crisis in Marxism" in November 1977, and fell silent. A manic-depressive, he spent his final years in an asylum after murdering his wife. The denunciation of the "gang of four" in communist China in 1976 confounded the Maoists. *Radical Education Dossier* sadly noted: "We seem in 1983 to have lost the coherence and purity of our earlier conceptions". The journal called a conference on "Future Directions in Education" and changed its name to *Education Links*. "Critical theory" became a more fashionable designation than Marxism. Other varieties of radicalism survived amongst feminists and advocates of social justice.^{xxvi}

The 1970s and 1980s produced a melange of integrated studies (favoured by progressives) and radical interpretations of old subjects (favoured by neo-Marxists), alongside remnants of the liberal disciplines, often focussing on process rather than content, formulation of concepts rather than acquisition of facts. The popularity of activity methods reduced the intensity of learning. "Pupil research" and problem-solving often deteriorated into answering a string of questions and copying paragraphs from books. The advance of multiculturalism brought a rapid growth of "community languages" in the curriculum from 1978 onwards. Many of these languages enrolled only a small group of students.

The multiple incursions into the curriculum were spreading alarm. In late 1983 Anne Junor, a research officer for the NSW Teachers' Federation, warned that the curriculum would become overcrowded by efforts to introduce peace studies, women's studies, computer education, media studies, career education, living skills, politics, environmental studies, legal studies and so on. The basic subjects would suffer.^{xxvii}

Later educationists criticised these two decades in scathing terms. Dr Ian Patterson, principal of Knox Grammar School and a member of the 1988-9 Committee of Review of New South Wales Schools did not mince matters:

The teachers of the 1970s had their chances. It was their "golden age". Teacher numbers doubled; salaries jumped; massive funds from governments flowed to schools; school-based curriculum became the vogue; the authority of principals was sapped; and teachers made the running.

By the end of the 1970s, it was apparent that children were not performing well . . . business and industry complained persistently about the end-products of schooling. The public began to ask questions.

The result was a plethora of reports and investigations into education across Australia in the 1980s. The gist of most was to restore authority to principals, to tighten curriculum offerings, to set accountability beacons and to re-emphasise teaching about Australia.^{xxviii}

Economic Rationalism and the Ideologies

Twenty years after the New Left launched its challenge to education a New Right initiated another phase of intensive change. This was linked with the supremacy of neo-classical liberal economics, "economic rationalism", in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both the Labor and Liberal parties embraced neo-classical political economy. Its principles favoured a reduction of state intervention and increased engagement in the global economy: the lowering of tariffs, the diminution of the welfare state, privatisation of state-owned instrumentalities, and minimal control over currency markets. The educational corollary was a re-emphasis on vocational education and training, improvement in standards and, in the case of the Liberal Party, on encouraging private schools.

The politicians entered what had once been the secret garden of the curriculum. While the reform movement of 1987-93 favoured administrative devolution, it sought central control of the curriculum. Across Australia ministries of education, staffed by the Minister's political and educational advisers, began to supersede departments of education. State governments established new boards of education to regain some control over the primary and junior secondary curriculum, challenging the strong influence teachers had exercised at these levels. The governments identified Key Learning Areas for both primary and secondary schools.

Concurrently, the world-wide collapse of communism about 1989 weakened the already demoralised Left. The curriculum was an arena of contention between the remnants of the radicals or semi-Marxists, or critical theorists; neo-progressives arguing for a child-centred activity curriculum; the relatively few defenders of "traditional" liberal humanism, often imbued with Judaeo-Christian religious morality; and the new enthusiasts for vocational training. Both radicals and progressives invoked the doctrine of "social justice" in search of a curriculum oriented to the interests and perspectives of allegedly disadvantaged minorities.

John Dawkins, appointed Minister for Employment, Education and Training (a title which itself constituted a policy statement) in July 1987 by the Commonwealth Labor government and Dr Terry Metherell, from March 1988 Minister for Education in the NSW Liberal government, were the two

leading engineers of change, though administering different remedies. The other states mostly followed the Commonwealth's lead.

The Commonwealth's influence stemmed from its funding powers and its membership of the Australian Education Council (the nine ministers for education). In 1991 the AEC authorised the preparation of a "National Curriculum", to be defined by National Statements and Profiles for eight Areas of Learning: English, mathematics, science, languages other than English, technology, studies of society and environment, the arts, and health and physical education. In 1989 New South Wales identified similar Key Learning Areas, six for the primary school and eight for the secondary. Once again syllabuses would be issued specifying content and employing external, objective, assessment.

Both the National Curriculum "Statements and Profiles" and the New South Wales syllabuses generated ideological contention. The politicians had to delegate responsibility for curriculum construction to boards and committees whose members included teachers, academics, principals, union officials, ministry or departmental bureaucrats and community representatives, resulting in struggles between contesting groups.^{xxix} Radicals and progressives captured many of the committees and issued draft Statements and Profiles. They provoked a great outcry. In Melbourne Bill Hannan, a veteran educational radical turned administrator, commented that at times the English documents paid only lip-service to the study of literature and over-emphasised "pop sociology and deconstruction -- the sort of stuff that is taught at university." The Study of Society and Environment document lacked any real study of history; it was "a case of political correctness gone wild." In July 1993 the AEC deferred the adoption of the National Curriculum. However, in the next few years most states adopted many features of the Profiles.^{xxx}

Although New South Wales rejected the National Curriculum, some of its own syllabuses took an inordinate time to appear. This was because of protracted struggles between the Board of Studies, some of its syllabus committees, and the Ministry. In 1992 the Minister referred the draft infants-primary school English syllabus back to the Board of Studies for further consideration, mainly because of its theoretical approach to grammar. In 1989 Work on a *Human Society and its Environment* syllabus started in 1989; it did not appear till 1998. The 1994 draft used the word "invasion" to describe the arrival of British settlers. The Teachers' Federation decided to ban any section of a syllabus from which the word "invasion" had been removed.^{xxxi} The impasse was resolved by requiring that in Stage 2 (Years 3 and 4) the "Significant Events and People" strand should explain "why terms such as 'invasion', 'occupation', 'settlement', 'exploration' and 'discovery' reflect different perspectives on the same event." The syllabus remained inclusive. "It incorporates gender, Aboriginal, citizenship, multicultural, environmental, work and global perspectives and encourages the inclusion of studies of Asia where appropriate".^{xxxii}

The draft Geography syllabus for junior secondary years also aroused controversy. In July 1992 the principals of two private schools, one Presbyterian, one Anglican, protested that the syllabus committee's demand for an "inclusive perspective" threatened "our Judaeo-Christian mind-set and way of looking at the world".^{xxxiii}

The final syllabus documents reveal some half-dozen differing ideological imprints, such as vocational, social justice, radical, humanist-realist, postmodern, feminist, and environmental naturalism.

(a) *The New Vocationalism*

In late 1987 John Dawkins, Minister for Employment, Education and Training and A. C. Holding, Minister for Employment Services and Youth Affairs, issued a booklet *Skills for Australia*, stating that "Skills and skill formation policies are of central importance to the task of structural adjustment facing Australia". The education and training systems had to play an active role in this process. It was necessary to boost the retention rate to Year 12 to 65 per cent by the early 1990s. This meant making the final years of secondary education more attractive. "Curriculum reform will be an essential element in this process".^{xxxiv} But attempts to promote commercially-relevant languages, particularly Asian languages, had limited success. The theorists diverted this new vocationalism into a pursuit of "key competencies".

(b) *The Environmental Movement*

In the late 1980s the environmental or ecological movement took off. Departments of Education across Australia issued policy statements on environmental education. In 1990 Stephen Kemmis, professor of education at Deakin University, hailed the "dramatic changes" achieved by the green movement: "there is barely a school or classroom in Australia where concerns about pollution and the degradation of the environment are not discussed, there is hardly a student who has not at some stage debated issues of exploitation versus sustainable use of resources." The semi-Marxist radicals were rather critical, *Education Links* remarking that "contrary to the hopes of progressive and many green teachers, schools are not primary agents of social change." Greens were "essentially members of the new middle class", whose utopian views "represents the guilt of the already privileged."^{xxxv}

(c) *Social Justice and the Curriculum*

In accepting economic rationalism Labor abandoned its traditional policy of socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Instead, the Labor governments of Victoria and South Australia adopted social justice frameworks in 1987 and 1988 respectively while in the latter year the federal ALP issued *Towards a Fairer Australia: Social Justice Under Labor*. Labor

governments in Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland also sponsored social justice in education policies. The Queensland Department of Education Social Justice Strategy of 1992 targeted eight student groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, those in geographical isolation, those with gifts and talents, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds.^{xxxvi}

In fact, by the late 1980s several of the special interest groups had helped reshape the educational scene, as evidenced by the increased proportion of females and members of ethnic groups staying till Year 12 and attending universities, and the higher number of Aboriginals continuing their education.

After the collapse of the New Left, some radicals embraced social justice. In his 1993 book *Schools and Social Justice* the semi-Marxist professor of sociology at Macquarie University, Bob Connell, identified the usual disadvantaged groups, such as the poor, women, Aborigines, homosexuals, whose circumstances were perpetuated and exacerbated by the mainstream curriculum.

Speaking to NSW educational administrators in 1991 Garth Boomer, a former advocate of progressive education who had found a career in the Commonwealth and South Australian bureaucracy, wondered whether the terms "empowerment" and "social justice" were "debased coinage, abused by too many loose minds." Forums on social justice paraded the usual list of disadvantaged groups and recommended "inclusive" and "fair" teaching methods. But to offer the disadvantaged an "alternative curriculum", said Boomer, would heighten their disadvantage. Social justice required getting the disadvantaged up to the educational mark, where they could hold their own in life's stakes.^{xxxvii}

(d) *Unreconstructed Radicalism*

A radical perspective still flourished amongst academic educationists, educational administrators, and teacher unionists. In 1990 the Australian Curriculum Studies Association co-sponsored a conference to examine "the interface between a social-justice perspective on education and the economic rationalist viewpoint." The "Principles for Australian Curriculum Reform" adopted at the 1991 ACSA conference on "Liberating the Curriculum" were infused with reductionist sociology. According to item 2,

Curriculum is a social, historical and material construction which typically services the interests of particular social groups at the expense of others. Curriculum work involves identifying these interests and their relation to the curriculum and collective action to redress any disadvantage experienced by individuals and groups.

Item 3 asserted that curriculum research should promote the role of curriculum in social change and item 4 that "curriculum work involves the identification and critique of the ideology embedded in all curriculum practice, discourse and organisation." (Was the ideology of the ACSA included in this "critique"?) The conference endorsed a curriculum which was relevant, which prepared for productive work, which prepared "people" to exercise "their political rights in a socially critical democratic society", which was "inclusive" by recognising the contributions of all groups, which was based on "cooperation and success rather than competition and failure", and which engaged "people" in authentic tasks, such as acting to improve the environment, the production of art works and performances for public exhibition, and commentary and action on social issues.^{xxxviii}

This was a programme for social and political change, not academic education. It assumed that all social wrongs could be remedied, that schools could undertake this task, and that teachers, educational theorists and educational administrators could identify those wrongs and the appropriate remedies. The "Principles for Australian Curriculum Reform" ignored the possibility that education had a validity in itself, and that at least some knowledge was objective, whatever the social circumstances which produced it.

(e) *Reviving the Humanist-realist Curriculum*

Advocates of liberal humanist education congregated around such journals as *Education Monitor*, started by the Institute of Public Affairs in 1989, and *Quadrant*, founded by the Australian Committee for Cultural Freedom many years before. Though uneasy at the new emphasis on vocational subjects, they welcomed attempts to restore rigour and control radical and progressive pedagogy. *News Weekly*, published by the National Civic Council, also began to champion liberal education.

Some radicals, dismayed by the extremes of both neo-progressives and economic rationalists, rediscovered the previously-scorned virtues of liberal education. At its 1987 conference the Australian Teachers' Federation argued that schools should not have the discretion to remove major areas of knowledge from the common curriculum. "While needing renovation, the conventional disciplines are also a source of knowledge that is itself empowering and useful." In the Spring 1987 issue of *Education Links* Rob White, a South Australian, asserted: "It is absolutely essential that the Left mount a vigorous defence of 'liberal education'." Denis Fitzgerald, a NSW Teachers' Federation activist, wrote early in 1987: "If we are serious about attracting students back to our public system we need to discard some of our thinking into the hippie dustbin of history."^{xxxix}

One of the most energetic defenders of liberal humanist knowledge was Bob Carr, premier of New South Wales from March 1995 when the Labor Party ousted a Liberal-National coalition government. The new regime reiterated the need for an academic core of basic subjects for the compulsory

school years, notably English, mathematics, science, history and geography.^{xi} It favoured criterion-referenced assessment (i.e. fixed standards) rather than norm-referenced, relativist, standards. This was to be implemented by an “outcomes-based” curriculum. The government asked Professor Ken Eltis to review “the quality of the curriculum documents that utilise outcomes and profiles”. In his report, *Focusing on Learning*, August 1995, Eltis recommended an outcomes-based curriculum, firmly defining outcomes as “explicit statements of the knowledge, skills and understandings expected to be learned”. Eltis commented that the new English syllabus for K-6, which had reintroduced formal grammar into the primary school, had been captured by a group of academics dedicated to what they called “functional grammar”, which employed complicated language and esoteric terminology. He advocated the adoption of the conventional terminology, of nouns, verbs, etc., something the premier was known to support.^{xii}

Bob Carr was also a strong supporter of history. In December 1995 the premier delivered the “Thirroul Statement on History”. Carr asserted that students should develop “a sense of sequence, cause and chronology”. The Government promised to increase the time devoted to history at school. The Board of Studies responded to the drive for citizenship education by increased attention to civics in the Year 7 to 10 history syllabus. The School Certificate exam tested twentieth century history. It also covered reconciliation and Australia as an egalitarian society. In 1998 external tests in English literacy and mathematics were introduced for the School Certificate. A year later science was added, followed in 2002 by a test in Australian history, geography, civics and citizenship. A concurrent Commonwealth government drive for citizenship education assisted these efforts.^{xiii}

Immediately after the Eltis review, the government asked Professor Barry McGaw, Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research, to assess the Higher School Certificate. Since its establishment in 1967 the retention rate to Year 12 had increased fourfold, from 16 per cent to more than 70 per cent; the number of subjects had increased from 29 to 79; and subject syllabuses had “evolved almost beyond recognition”.^{xiii}

Following McGaw’s final report in 1997, the number of courses in Years 11 and 12 was reduced. Most subjects now offered only two-unit courses, though English, the only compulsory subject, offered five courses and mathematics, the second-highest in popularity, three. To widen access to vocational education and training seven new subjects were developed: information technology, tourism and hospitality, primary industries, retail, construction, metal and engineering, and business services. Seven key competencies were named.^{xiv}

The first HSC exam on the revised curriculum was held at the end of 2001. It was then that post-modern theory appeared in some syllabuses.

In 2003 the co-authors of a biography of Bob Carr remarked that although he had denounced the relativism long fashionable in educational philosophy, "popular culture still crowds out the classics in much of the curriculum. He has not banished the post-modernist fashions from schools."^{xlv} It was one thing to insist that traditional liberal subjects had a place in the curriculum; but the content of these subjects was defined by teachers, academics and administrators many of whom had no concept of liberal education.

(f) *Postmodernism-- Reality or Illusion?*

The term "postmodern" can mean the intellectual changes which marked the world after the great cultural upheaval of the late 1960s and after, by contrast with the "modern" world born in the mid-eighteenth century Enlightenment. It can also mean the variegated theory which appeared from about 1970 onwards in the obscurely-expressed, diverse ideas of a batch of mainly French philosophers -- Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and others.

Postmodernism is mainly concerned with literature and with criticism, with cultivating doubt, supporting relativism, opposing rationality, opposing the idea of progress. It rejects broad overarching explanations of the world. Its ideology arouses the ire of liberal humanists, vocational trainers, and residual Marxists. An unkind English Marxian even attributed the rise of postmodernism to the malaise of once-privileged intellectuals on finding that the state no longer required their services as interpreters of culture.^{xlvi}

Postmodernists proclaim that the curriculum is socially selected and that textbooks can be deconstructed, i.e. their words can mean almost anything the reader wants them to mean. An article by two academics from James Cook University of North Queensland, "School Knowledge as Simulation: Curriculum in Postmodern Conditions", published in *Discourse*, April 1990, provides a typical example of postmodern jargon:

School knowledge is the ensemble of competences and knowledges putatively achieved through school texts and classroom discourse . . . a postmodern sign system operant across synchronic and diachronic axes.^{xlvii}

Postmodernists embrace relativism. A Scottish academic offers a short definition: "Relativism . . . is the moderately uncontentious position that the beliefs, values and practices of any given society are a product of that society and should be seen in relation to the structure and needs of that society. It is also the much more contentious one that all beliefs are thus equally true, rational and valuable."^{xlviii}

Postmodern relativism undermines English literature and history. Its rejection of rationalism undermines the scientific subjects. It is hostile to both the humanist and the realist elements in the curriculum.

Postmodernism Targets English

English, the core of the humanities, is the only compulsory subject for the HSC. It faces distinctive problems because it must cater for the widest range of abilities. For these reasons English offers five courses, whereas most other subjects offer only two. Being an arena of ideas it is assailed by a plurality of contradictory cultural currents, including critical semi-Marxist sociology, the ideologies of special interest groups, and a sophisticated postmodernism.

The study of English has two major overlapping elements: language and literature. Language study seeks to develop the ability to clearly express ideas, orally and in writing. Traditionally the study of grammar helped this. So did the writing of compositions. The study of literature also helped literary expression. Attempts have been made in primary schools to restore training in language technical skills. The phonic method in teaching reading and spelling has reappeared after some 30 years when word recognition (“look-and-say”) was favoured. Both techniques are useful, but phonics is basic. However, some resistance to phonics still exists. Another improvement has been the reintroduction of grammar.

In the past the study of literature, through novels, poetry, drama, helped illuminate individual and social life. Nowadays English also includes film and other areas of popular culture such as television, song lyrics, and cartoons. In the senior school, English encounters two problems: an anxiety to impose postmodern theory on higher ability students and, at the other extreme, the tendency to present a simplistic form of social or cultural studies, particularly for those pupils who find literary or critical theories too demanding. Today the emphasis is on the theoretical or social context of “the text” rather than on the study of “text” as literature in its own right. The term “text”, of course, accommodates the new areas of popular culture now incorporated in English.

In 2000 Naomi Smith drew attention in *Sydney’s Child* to the changed examination papers.

Until recently, most HSC English questions directed students towards exploring the meaning, ideas and/or style of the works in question, allowing them the freedom to come to their own conclusions about the topic as long as it was supported by reference to the texts. Students might be asked to ‘discuss the nature and effect of tragedy as it

unfolds in *King Lear*' (1995); or to explore how the best poetry can show us a new view of the world (1996).

By contrast, many questions from the 2001 specimen papers actively direct students away from any deep consideration of the text itself, and towards more peripheral issues. Students are asked in one question to rewrite a portion of text from the standpoint of a character who has not been given a voice; in another to discuss the statement 'there are as many different ways of interpreting and valuing texts as there are readers'. In some modules, texts can only be explored within the context of a topic heading such as 'Consumerism' or 'Powerplay', limiting discussion to superficial aspects of the text and ignoring deeper layers of meaning.^{xlix}

Students in these final years concentrate on approaches favoured in the examination paper. It is short-sighted, Naomi Smith continued, to base a secondary syllabus on the work of Derrida, Foucault and the rest—upon a body of theory which denies the existence of objective truth and the possibility of ethics and principles which are intrinsically worthwhile and which do not merely serve the interests of a dominant group.

A few weeks before the 2002 examination an English teacher, James King, satirised over-ambitious theory in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article, "This is not a headline, it's an HSC English exam text". He complained that "wide reading—a euphemism, for exam-hall name dropping—has replaced close reading. Students and teachers drown in shallow water". Just provide a brief history of the last 400 years of productions of *King Lear*. "Examine Marxist, feminist, structuralist, post-structuralist, modernist, post-modernist, Freudian, post-Freudian, colonialist, post-colonialist, orientalist and anarchist approaches—but mention others if you wish." Don't quote the play in detail or discuss events and characters: "you may run out of time." Do not mention Shakespeare — he is dead. "Remember that seventy per cent of your assessment mark must be from non-exam tasks." He closed with a warning. "There are heretics lurking in our schools who continue to delude themselves that some books are better than others, and that a medieval French chamber pot is not an English text."¹

In October 2002 all 64,000 HSC candidates sat for the first English paper (Standard and Advanced). The second, less gruelling Standard English paper was taken by some 37,700 students. The Advanced English course was taken by 21,000 candidates, of whom 8000 were boys. A further 6000 students took the far harder Extension courses. English as a Second Language was taken by 2000 students. All papers lasted two hours.

The Standard and Advanced paper and contributed 45 marks to the total. It had three questions, all centred on a common theme, Change. Question 1 was based on four “texts”: Joni Mitchell’s 1970 anti-development song *Big Yellow Taxi*, whose popularity had recently revived on radio (“They paved paradise and put up a parking lot/With a pink hotel, a boutique and a swinging hot spot”); an anti-development cartoon by Phil Somerville (a sign “A Modern Tropical Rainforest Soon to be Erected on this Site” in front of a cluster of houses and telegraph lines); a poem “Cicadas” by Catherine Mack (depicting the emergence of that insect); and an Earthwatch website, disclosing how Canada’s Inuit Eskimos were using cyberspace to build economic independence. Candidates were asked to identify the changes depicted and how they were conveyed. Presumably children of Green parents enjoyed the exam; those from Liberal families or forestry workers might have encountered difficulties!

Question 2 required a letter to the author of one of the sources. Question 3 required candidates to write three feature articles for magazines called *New Worlds*, *Different Perspectives* and *Developing Self*, referring to the ideas in the texts they had studied, which might be prose fiction, drama, poetry, film or non-fiction. The films were *Star Wars -- a New Hope*, *Radiance*, and *Much Ado about Nothing*, the non-fiction was Melvyn Bragg’s *On Giants’ Shoulders*, Carmel Bird’s *The Stolen Children -- Their Stories*, and Sally Morgan’s *My Place*.ⁱⁱ

The exam had a strong contemporary orientation. The boundary between English literature and social studies/cultural studies was blurred. A student at Chester Hill High School told the *Herald* reporter that once he recognised the paper’s “sub-text” (i.e. its message) it was not hard. But he remarked that he could live without further English studies.ⁱⁱⁱ

Shakespeare, Chaucer, Jane Austen and other representatives of high culture make their appearance in the Advanced English, Paper 2. Candidates chose three questions out of 11, with further internal choice. Question 1 invited them to compare the values of Jane Austen’s early nineteenth century *Emma* with those of the 1995 film *Clueless*, or those of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. Question 2 asked them to compose a conversation between two people on such texts as Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Paul Keating’s funeral address for the Unknown Australian Soldier, human rights activist Aung San Suu Kyi’s words to the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, or Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech. No single point of view could emerge in an answer – except a belief in plurality.

English Extension 1 was the stronghold of theory. The student was to answer two questions, chosen from the module he/she had studied. The three modules, Genre, Texts and Ways of Thinking, and Language and Values, each contained four questions. Genre included a “Revenge Trag-

edy” elective whose prescribed texts ranged from Euripides’ *Medea* to the film *High Noon*. In the Crime Fiction elective, texts came from film, prose fiction, and drama. The Essay elective asked “Has the essay had its day?” Its texts were Montaigne, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and Betty Churcher (her TV programme). The electives in the Texts and Ways of Thinking module were the Individual and Society, Postmodernism, and Retreat from the Global. In Module C, Language and Values, electives covered Acts of Reading and Writing, The Language of Sport, and Gendered Language.

Interviewed after the exam a Sydney Boys’ High student was sceptical about the benefits to students of the Marxist and Freudian interpretation of poetry. The syllabus was based on fashionable university analyses of literature. “There’s a lot of jargon”, he said.^{liii}

A journalist/mother made the same complaint in the *Newcastle Herald* (“New English is a study in jargon”). Her son had expressed his happiness after the second English exam that he had finished with English for ever. She reported that at school information meetings teachers confessed they had some difficulty working out what they were supposed to be teaching.

“We used to appreciate books, poems and plays for the beauty of the writing, the plot, the characters, etc. etc.” Students today react to texts to achieve certain “outcomes”. The second English paper “raised conversation to an art form by directing that answers were to be in the form of written speech.” The questions on plays, poets, films or speeches required a conversation between two people presenting different views about the structure, staging, language and ideas of the text. The conversations would have been stilted, she said, because the point of the exercise was to consider a text. Good conversation features colloquialisms, colour and the natural rhythm of speech.^{liv}

Dr Wayne Sawyer, president of the NSW English Teachers’ Association, charged the critics of the English syllabus with being unable to make up their minds. Sawyer, lecturer in English Education at the University of Western Sydney, was one of the editors of *Re-Viewing English*, a collection of articles published in 1998 and widely-used in teacher training. The critics, he said, alleged that postmodernism encouraged the use of unnecessary and trendy jargon such as “texts” instead of “literature” and “composers” instead of “writers”. Secondly, they claimed that all texts had been reduced to a kind of bland equality, with Shakespeare no more valuable than *Star Wars*. And while some saw the course as a dumbing down, others saw it as too difficult. For Sawyer the syllabus reflected “a generous and intelligent eclecticism.” The addition of film, speeches, television and multimedia texts, he said, moves textual study from its esoteric position and puts it into the centre of the students’ world. Education had to move with the times.^{lv}

Both Sawyer and the critics have validity. English has developed a multiple personality, appropriate to a pluralist society. A rising retention rate makes it necessary to cater for a large group of lower ability students. In 1986, 44 per cent of young people stayed to Year 12. By 1993 the figure was more than 70 per cent. This revolution had troubling consequences. The introduction of Contemporary English in 1989 had provided lower ability students with a course emphasising skills rather than the study of texts. Soon more able students discovered that this course was an easy way of gaining high marks. Not long after he became premier Bob Carr expressed alarm at the number of students taking Contemporary English in which they could study as few as two texts and no pre-twentieth century literature. The subject was dropped from the new HSC. The number of candidates taking the more demanding courses rose. Yet English still had to accommodate lower ability pupils.^{lvi}

In the 2003 HSC exam Standard English, the easiest course, was taken by 33,600 students. Next in difficulty was Advanced English, followed by Extension 1 and Extension 2, the latter being taken by only 2300 candidates. The first question in the English (Standard, Paper 1) required the candidate to write an essay demonstrating "understanding of the way perceptions of change are shaped in and through texts" and to "describe, explain and analyse the relationship between language, text and context." In the English (Advanced, Paper 2) candidates had to answer one of three questions. The first required writing an article for a newspaper's education supplement using the headline "Truth is Not Simple"; the second was to write using the headline "Real Power is not Obvious"; or the candidate might choose the headline "History is not a Single Story". In all cases reference had to be made to texts, which might include a film, a novel or poetry.

In questions like these, the student is guided not only towards the view that there is no one truth, that truth is relative, but also that a statement and its "real" meaning differ. The "deconstructing" of accepted beliefs cultivates a pervasive spirit of gloom and scepticism. Foucault's postmodern concern with power and the introduction of multimedia and a wider variety of texts converts some strands in English into cultural studies. Relativism and sociological interpretations had become ingrained in the curriculum.

In his inaugural lecture at Melbourne University in 1994 Professor Simon During recognised that academic English had lost its vigour. Interest in English was losing ground to a wider spread of contemporary cultural forms, from advertising and the internet to cartoons and art movies --"what we call cultural studies." He attributed this partly to student preferences, partly to globalisation, which was helping sever the roots of national heritages. The growth of jobs in the cultural sector was another factor.^{lvii}

Postmodernism's Bridgehead in History

It could be argued that postmodernism develops critical thinking. But "critical" in what sense? Not in the sense of critical or disinterested enquiry, for the type of conclusion the enquirer is likely to reach is predictable. And other approaches, such as neo-Marxism, critical theory, or the discovery method, could make similar claims. I believe that critical investigation is assisted if one has a philosophy, a "position", though one must be prepared to look critically at one's own position. Such a position requires some experience of the world, some intellectual maturity, a good historical (or other) background.

At a history teachers' conference in 2004 Marnie Hughes-Warrington of Macquarie University described the attitude to history taken by some extremist supporters of postmodernism and post structuralism. These doctrines:

unmask histories as constructions – not descriptions – of the world by and for different social groups. They are 'grand', 'master' or 'meta' narratives that legitimate some ideals and gloss over conflicting views and discontinuities. Traditionally that has meant the adoption of a masculinist, Eurocentric position . . . that Europe is the epitome of a modern civilisation other cultures and genders should and will aspire to emulate . . .

This is a failure of nerve in a generation of intellectuals hostile to their own culture! We have to go back to the philosophers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment in France to find a comparable situation.

In historiography postmodernism presents a few very well-known ideas in very complex, often pretentious language. As far back as the 1920s the English educationist Fred Clarke, acknowledged that real history cannot be taught in school. It can be learned only by those who have had some experience of life. But something very valuable can be taught in school under the name of history: the first beginnings of a philosophy of life.^{lviii}

Postmodernism denies the possibility of teaching a philosophy, of historical objectivity and historical truth, offering only doubt. It tells students that a figure who seems a hero to some may seem a tyrant to others. The History Extension paper, for more ambitious students, had questions on historical objectivity and areas of historical debate. Yet the truth is that few students have sufficient historical background to grapple with historical theory. Not unnaturally, history has developed some resistance to postmodernism.

Like English, the Modern History course is heavily oriented to recent times. In 1911 Leaving Certificate history covered Europe from the fall of the Roman Empire onwards, though the exam was confined to 1450-1914. Thus this course traversed three major phases in the evolution of western civilisation: the Dark Ages, Feudalism and Modern (bourgeois-capitalist) times. The inclusion of three renaissances, those of the twelfth, fourteenth-fifteenth, and nineteenth centuries, injected a measure of optimism. Over the years the focus of modern history contracted towards the present but expanded beyond Europe. After World War II the course became Modern European History and started at 1450, while the exam was now limited to post-1789.

Today the broad sweep, anathema to postmodernism, has gone, replaced by a two-year course focusing on the last hundred years. The Preliminary course, taken in Year 11, “provides students with opportunities to investigate key social, political, economic and technological features, concepts, individuals and groups, events and historiographical issues”—no mean ambition! In pursuance of this wide-ranging aim, Year 11 students must take at least three in-depth studies, at least one of which must be pre-twentieth century. More than 32 topics are on offer, half of them related to European, North American or Australian history, the other half to Asian, African, or Central and South American. Choice must be made from both lists. In list A, topics start with the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the reign of terror in France 1792-95 and reach the struggle for indigenous rights in Canada in the late twentieth century, and post-communist Russia. List B starts with the Indian Mutiny 1857, and proceeds via Allende and the Pinochet coup in Chile and Sung San Suu Kyi in Burma to Tibet's fight for survival and Tiananmen Square in China.

This is truly globalised history. But unlike earlier courses, this smorgasbord inhibits any overarching vision of an evolving political-intellectual-social-economic tradition. It is hostile to the transmission of a cultural heritage.

The exam, based on Year 12, traverses only 65 years, from 1914 to 1979. Thus it centres on the “time of troubles” which followed the nineteenth century renaissance. The 2002 exam in Modern History, taken by more than 9000 students, lasted three hours. Candidates were to answer all three questions in Section 1, “World War I and Its Aftermath, 1914-1921”; two questions from one of eight Options in Section II, “National Studies”; and one question from one of the seven Options in Section III, “International Studies in Peace and Conflict”.

Because Section 1 was taken by all candidates the paper was extremely easy. It centred on three quotations: about joining the British army in 1914; leaving it in 1919; and “killing off the best of the male population”. A fourth source was a picture of “British travelling salespeople” (actually two women) in 1917. One senses the incursion of political and feminist ideologies. The first question

consisted of three short-answer comprehension tests, the sort of thing once easily handled in lower primary school. The second required an essay on changing attitudes to the war, based on the two sources “and your own knowledge.” Question 3 required students to assess the usefulness and reliability of the sources.

This section of the paper is imbued with insecurity and scepticism. Earlier generations would have faced straightforward questions testing their knowledge of facts and ability to generalise about such old favourites as the causes or results of the war.

In Sections II and III the answers were to be in essay form. In Section II (National Studies) each Option started with a broad general question followed by one on a historical figure relevant to that question, where possible including a woman. Thus in Option D (Russia and the Soviet Union 1917-1945) the first question was either on war communism and the New Economic Policy or communist economic policy after 1928. The identities were Alexandra Kollontai or Leon Trotsky.

Lower ability students are likely to find personalities easier to discuss than broad political, social or economic concepts. However, assessment of individuals can raise moral or value issues. In its favour, it must be said that this approach nicely balances the over-emphasis on individuals of many nineteenth century humanists and the neglect of them by many semi-Marxist or radical authors.

The two-hour History Extension paper, intended for more ambitious students, had a heavily postmodern character. It had two questions only, with no internal choices. The first question required discussion of “That Noble Dream: The Problem of Historical Objectivity”, and was based on a lengthy quotation which referred to the American historian Charles Beard, the Greek Herodotus, the English Gibbon and Macaulay, and the Swiss Burckhardt. The second required an analysis of two areas of historical debate in relation to historiographical issues.^{lix}

In my time, historiography was studied only in the fourth year honours course. Prior to this I had studied history for four years in the primary school, five years at high school, and three years at University. Are Year 12 students qualified to undertake historiographical work? The absence of history in the primary school and its reduced presence in the junior secondary reduces the necessary background for historiographical judgement. Perhaps it is the ability of teachers to coach their students which is being examined. But how many teachers are qualified to teach historiography?

In the junior secondary school testing of Australian history, geography, civics and citizenship was reintroduced, the first compulsory exam being taken by more than 82,000 Year 10 School Certificate students in November 2002. The course has a strong sociological character. Australian history covered the Vietnam moratorium, Federation, the White Australia Policy, Sydney in 1901, immigration, women's suffrage and communism. Students started with the 1965 Freedom Ride in NSW, discussed several referenda, and pondered the "most likely reason for banning fishing" in waterways.^{lx}

The students answered multiple-choice questions, such as: "What were the Vietnam Moratoriums in Australia? (a) Large anti-war protests that attracted support; (b) Small gatherings of radical anti-war protesters; (c) Meetings of the mothers of the Save Our Sons (SOS) organisation; (d) Meetings of the Returned Services League of Australia (RSL) after the Vietnam War." Here again, a political agenda is obvious.

One teacher commented that the exam was a shock for many students. "Over the past two decades previous state examinations have really only measured skills." For the first time "my students were asked to 'really' study, recall and analyse content." The culture of perseverance, study and application (she said) needed to be reinstated in our schools.^{lxi}

Postmodernism and the Sciences

Since the sciences are based on rationalism and logic, both of which postmodernism distrusts, the philosophy has little to offer the sciences -- except to develop an aversion. After all, the traditional scientific methodology -- collection of data, generalisation, testing of the generalisation by more data, conformation or modification of the generalisation -- is repugnant to postmodernists. Even at a popular level some people distrust science; they prefer "Nature". Many were adherents of the environmental movement. But some might claim to be postmodernists.

A prime way of subverting content of school science is by diverting attention to the social context of science. Another is by trying to make it child-centred. In 1985, for instance, a Victorian high school teacher, using the title "Getting science back from the Scientists", advocated a science based on "what we want kids to be able to do as a result of it." The preferred method of work was the project (a garden project, work with animals, a kitchen project . . .) Teaching scientific practices "in a prescriptive fashion", as truth, was "thoughtless and uncritical."^{lxii}

Enrolments in science subjects have fallen, as have levels of attainment. The sciences are weakened by several factors: the high proportion of lower ability students now in Years 11 and 12; the

limited training of many teachers in the sciences and mathematics; the failure of many primary schools to instil in pupils a sound foundation in these disciplines.

Neville Fletcher, adjunct professor at the University of New South Wales found that Year 11-12 syllabuses in physics in New South Wales, Victoria and, to a lesser extent, Queensland, did not concentrate on description or social issues, though hints of “deconstructive” or postmodern philosophy could be discerned in the NSW syllabus, such as the expectation that “Students develop knowledge of how our understanding of energy, matter and their interrelationships is influenced by society.” He suggests that this view is itself “socially constructed”. But they were isolated elements in the syllabus. The main problem was that some of the learning tasks were well beyond the abilities of most students, and most teachers, at this level.^{lxiii}

A professor of physics at the University of New South Wales, Joe Wolfe, points out that the syllabuses tried to satisfy two different needs, those of a large fraction of students who need to know the history, achievements and limitations of science and a small elite group, seeking careers in science, technology, engineering and other science-based professions, who need to master science. High school syllabuses have concentrated on the human side, on science history and the social context. “Many students have success in these new subjects because they find it easy to remember facts and write short essays about social and historical aspects. What they don’t find easy is quantitative analysis. The shortage of teachers is in physics and chemistry. There is a good supply of biology teachers (note contemporary interest in the person, in the body). According to John Storey, head of physics at the University of New South Wales, HSC physics is an interesting subject, but it is not physics; according to Brian James, head of physics at Sydney University, the syllabus gives students less depth of understanding. Professor Wolfe suggested that two separate courses be provided, one for the large majority needing to know about physics, another for the smaller number seeking to enter the science-based professions.^{lxiv}

At the 2002 HSC exam the number of candidates had increased to 64,000 candidates and the number of subjects to 80, but the number taking physics had declined to 9350. Yet the subject still attracted students interested in a career in science or medicine. A teacher at the Brigidine College remarked that 80 per cent of the exam required a written response and the remainder was calculations. The examination favoured candidates who could express themselves cogently and not simply handle calculations.^{lxv}

Responding to complaints that science students were struggling to finish their courses before the HSC exam, the Board of Studies cut down the new syllabuses in physics, chemistry, biology, senior science and earth and environmental science by about 15 per cent.

How Non-State Schools Handle Postmodernism

The word “grammar”, often incorporated their names, is a reminder of the traditional link of the major corporate colleges with the liberal humanist curriculum. On the other hand, their acceptance of the HSC exam tied them to had current senior school curriculum. At the other extreme, since the late 1970s an increasing number of small Christian fundamental schools were opening, often not using the HSC and certainly rejecting the newer fashions in the curriculum.

By the year 2000, 31 per cent of students in New South Wales were attending non-state schools. The drift to private schools was an Australia-wide phenomenon. In the twelve months from 2001 to 2002, 86 new schools opened in Australia, of which 62 were non-governmental: 22 small Christian schools, 14 Catholic, 11 non-denominational, six Montessori, five Steiner and four Anglican.^{lxvi} According to the NSW Department of Education school promotion manager, parents mistakenly believed private schools had higher academic results, better discipline and uniforms, more homework and better-dressed teachers. "Public education is often viewed as value neutral whereas private education is value positive".^{lxvii}

The drift from public to private schools had been mainly at the secondary level. In New South Wales a drift at the primary level became evident in 2000. One reason was the increasing number of smaller Anglican and Christian schools. In inner-western Sydney new Islamic schools have appeared. The Chief Executive Officer of Christian Schools Australia argued that the shift was not because of extra Commonwealth funds going to private schools, nor because of better facilities, but "because parents are increasingly seeing the link between the spiritual and educational growth of their children."^{lxviii}

Of course, the Catholic system remained the strongest component of non-governmental education. Many Catholic schools incorporated current ideologies. For instance, Catholics were habituated to the idea of social justice; their bishops had issued annual statements on that theme since 1940. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, formed in 1968, was a strong supporter of peace studies in the 1980s (the Uniting Church was another bulwark of this subject in non-state schools).^{lxix}

At the 1994 conference of the Australian Association for the Teachers of English Maria Pallotta-Chiaroli, gender and equity officer for South Australian Catholic schools, argued that teachers had not gone far enough in challenging orthodoxy. While they regularly dealt with “disability, race, ethnicity, class and gender” in the English classroom, homosexuality and AIDS were largely ignored.

Using the English classroom as a site for resistance and interventionist strategies. . . homophobia and AIDS-phobia can be addressed alongside and integrated within the overall thematic landscapes and narrative treatments of prejudice and social injustices.^{lxx}

In 1995 the Catholic Education Office in Victoria issued new guidelines for religious education, which some Catholic systems in other states also adopted. The guidelines encouraged students “to discuss and debate topical issues such as euthanasia and abortion in a balanced way”. The teacher would present the Church’s view, but both sides of the debate could be discussed. According to a Catholic Education Office spokesman, the revised guidelines reflected the changing nature of society and the cultural diversity of the student population. Many students attending Catholic schools were not brought up as Catholics and often came from single-parent families.^{lxxi}

In New South Wales, particularly in Muslim and Catholic schools, Studies of Religion has grown notably since 2676 students sat for the first HSC examination in that subject in 1993. In 2003 it attracted 11,072 candidates, making it the fifth most popular subject. The paper included questions on Aboriginal belief systems and media perceptions of religion. A teacher who was also a committee-member of the Association of Studies of Religion attributed the surge of interest to the prominence of religion in current affairs. A teacher at Marist College North Shore, Sydney, pointed to the course’s philosophical associations: “the big questions in life, like why do we suffer?” One of his students said: “The everyday life stuff is what I find most interesting. Looking at the ordinary lives of, say, a Jewish person or a Hindu or a Muslim, it’s more relevant to us young people than history and stuff.”^{lxxii}

At St Patrick’s College, Campbelltown, a Catholic girls’ school, it was compulsory, in the form of “Studies of Religion”. However, the principal adopted the radical principle of a totally negotiated program for about 60 students in Years 8 and 9. “The diverse curriculum and emphasis on pastoral care are aimed at developing self-esteem, confidence and independence” according to the entry in the *Sydney Morning Herald’s Guide to Schools*. As might be expected in a working class industrial region, the curriculum was heavily weighted to vocational studies: Joint Secondary School/TAFE courses were offered.

Catholic schools shared in the shift towards vocational preparation. In 1987-88 over 50 Year 11-12 students in the Sydney Southern Region participated in a pilot programme of combined school/TAFE courses. Students could later transfer to TAFE. Similar arrangements operated with Liverpool and Miller TAFE colleges. These developments were welcomed by the Catholic Regional Office as “of particular benefit to students who wished to stay on for Years 11 and 12 but for whom the present academic curriculum is not suitable”.^{lxxiii}

In fact, private schools offered a variety of curricula. Some corporate collegiate schools coupled the traditional with contemporary. In such schools the views of the principal was an important factor. In 1992 a commentator in *Education Australia* summed up the educational views of the principals of three contrasting schools. Peter Cornish of SCEGGS Redlands seemed to be a liberal fundamentalist, charging ahead with ideas of excellence; Bill McKeith of the Presbyterian Ladies College was a businessman, working through the options, coming up with what the market wanted. And John Winchester of “St Pats” was the intellectual iconoclast, firmly believing in the need for reform, organising the timetable and the way it controlled the curriculum.^{lxxiv}

Financial considerations, particularly the need to increase enrolments, could widen the curriculum. This problem afflicted the Sydney Church of England Girls’ Grammar School, SCEGGS Redlands which, like all other SCEGGS schools, was forced to sever its formal link with the Sydney diocese in 1976 following the misappropriation of school funds by the diocesan comptroller. In an attempt to recover from this disaster, the school became co-educational in 1978, changing its name to SCEGGS Redlands. A new headmaster, Peter Cornish, brought financial security and academic respectability. In the 1990s he advertised that the school provided “a liberal education in the Grammar school tradition”. This included the International Baccalaureate and seven languages. It also provided “careful innovation for contemporary education”. Ironically, Cornish made an unwise attempt to profit from the Sydney Olympics, produced a severe capital loss, and was abruptly dismissed. Thereafter the school occupied “a lower rung of academic excellence “ compared with such long-established single-sex Sydney private schools as Knox and Sydney Grammar. Its reputation rested more on its “interesting non-core programs than its academic ones.” The use of the initials SCEGGS and its preferred name of the Redlands obscured the once-proud claim to be a grammar school.^{lxxv}

In April 2006 SCEGGS Darlinghurst, “considered one of the nation’s leading schools”, aroused considerable controversy by its acceptance of postmodern theories. An assessment task in March for advanced students in Year 11 asked them to write an essay explaining how *Othello* supports different readings. “You must consider two of the following readings: Marxist, feminist, race.” One wonders why a school whose name hints at it being a grammar school did not include the liberal humanist interpretation, with its interest in the analysis of character, moral issues, and cause and effect. Commenting on this essay Harold Bloom, the American authority on Shakespeare, and Les Murray, the distinguished Australian poet, declared literary study in Australia to be dead. The prime minister, John Howard, complained that the English curriculum had fallen victim to postmodernism and political correctness.^{lxxvi}

The Presbyterian Ladies College, Sydney, in 1996 emphasised “innovation, the ability to cope with change and an appreciation of the multifaceted nature of each person.” The College, it claimed, was recognised for “its adherence to traditional Christian values, its beautiful heritage setting and high academic standards” Religious education was “available”. Four years later it advertised in the *Good Schools Guide* that 95 per cent of school leavers went to university, 5 per cent to vocational study. It services included an academic extension support teacher, a chaplain/religious adviser, pastoral care dean, English as a second language support teacher, a remedial support teacher, and a school-based police officer. It emphasised that it was a “very expensive” school.^{lxxvii}

An increasing number of private schools offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, whose curriculum resembles somewhat the old humanist-realist one. In 2003 ten NSW private schools taught the IB as well as the HSC. Australian students had to study English; a second language; one maths, science and humanities subject; and do 50 hours of physical activity, community service and a creative project. In New South Wales, unlike other states, government schools do not teach IB courses.^{lxxviii}

On the other hand, the growing number of small Christian schools cling to a strongly Bible-based education. Often controlled by parents, they are expanding at an average of almost seven per cent a year. By 2001 more than 300 fundamentalist Protestant schools across Australia were educating 70,000 students. If such schools did not wish to provide a curriculum leading to state-approved examinations they could escape surveillance by not seeking registration or certification. Many of them taught creationism alongside the theory of evolution, not just as part of religious instruction but as a science subject. “You will find that most Christian schools like ours present creation as a truth and evolution as a theory”, stated Carl Palmer, the principal of the 720-student Trinity Christian School in Canberra, a co-educational Kindergarten to Year 10 school.^{lxxix}

New Currents in the Higher Education of Teachers

Two groups of university lecturers influence the secondary school curriculum and the outlook of those who will teach it: the lecturers who present academic general courses and those giving professional training in education. The former often adopt radical or postmodern views, the latter usually endorse current fashions in the school curriculum. Apart from their lecture courses, both the academics and the professionals exert an influence by their participation in subject associations, such as the English Teachers’ Association and in Board of Studies curriculum sub-committees.

In his website *Ozleft* Bob Gould, long-time Trotskyist and Sydney bookseller, denounced in May 1999 the deleterious effect of the new theories on the humanities and on the left intelligentsia.

“Over the last 15 years”, he wrote, “the rise of postmodernism and cultural theory has had a devastating impact on the intellectual life of the left in Australia. It has drastically affected the humanities, it has contributed substantially, along with some other factors, to the elimination of narrative Australian history as an academic discipline in some universities.” He compared the effects of this sweeping intellectual fashion in the humanities to the impact of the cane toad on Australian fauna and the rabbit and prickly pear on the flora. “The high theory of postmodernism tends to wipe out everything else in the cultural territory through which it sweeps.”^{lxviii}

The deterioration in Marxian theory was not, in fact, the result of postmodernism alone. In the 1980s the rise of neo-liberal “economic rationalism” and the collapse of communism helped discredit Marxism. A hint of the deterioration of Marxism in the academic world comes from the policy statement of the Marxist Club at Sydney University (membership 40 in 2001) which sought to remedy two problems: the view that in the post-Soviet era Marxism was “a dead dog” and that “despite the fact that students in a number of academic disciplines are expected to be familiar with Marxist theory, Marxism is inadequately taught by lecturers, if taught at all.”^{lxviii}

The deteriorated Marxism or postmodern relativism of many lecturers received passing mention in 1991 from Ann Curthoys, a feminist historian in the Humanities (Communications course) at the NSW Institute of Technology (now the University of Technology, Sydney) and subsequently Professor of History at the Australian National University. According to Curthoys, “most academics in the humanities and social sciences, and as far as I know in the physical and natural sciences as well, now reject positivist concepts of knowledge, the notion that one can objectively know the facts . . . Many take this even further, and argue that knowledge is entirely an effect of power, that we can no longer have any concept of truth at all.”^{lxviii}

Some academics renounced their hostility to subject-disciplines. In 1995 Ann Curthoys acknowledged that “some important planks in the New Left educational agenda—ungrading, [anti-]disciplinarity, vocationality, and political relevance—now look less admirable than they did.”^{lxviii} A year later she was dubious of postmodernism. “Even among those sympathetic to the influence of postmodern and literary theory on the discipline of history, we can see in very recent years a feeling that the postmodern mode has gone too far. It has led us to be unable to see the difference between history and fiction . . .”^{lxviii}

Yet in 2006, in *Is History Fiction?*, written with her husband, John Docker, she seems to have had a change of heart. “We see ourselves as deeply sympathetic to postmodernism in its hospitality to popular genres, and its interest in experimentation . . . also to poststructuralism . . . in its stress on heterogeneity, difference, contradictoriness, and indeterminacy . . .”^{lxviii}

Symbolically, what was once a neo-Marxist journal, *Education Links: the radical education dossier*, ceased publication early in 2006. Founded in 1976 as *Radical Education Dossier*, it offered an alternative to neo-progressive education and more discreetly, to postmodernism.

In an effort to emphasise the practical aspects of teacher training Commonwealth educationists in the early 1990s encouraged university departments of education to transfer more responsibility for the preparation of teachers to the schools. The reduction in their role caused a fall in the number of lecturers in education and the disappearance of courses in the history, philosophy or sociology of education. This reduced neo-Marxist and neo-progressive influence and promised a revival in the schools of formal organised subjects. Yet some educationists still denounced organised subjects or disciplines. Under the appropriate banner “Rage against the dying of the light”, Professor Bob Connell of Sydney University complained in 2002 that “under neo-liberalism, the old style subject curriculum has enjoyed a strange revival.”^{xxxvi}

The survival of subjects is encouraged by the growth of vocational courses as well as by the vested interests of secondary teachers and subject method lecturers in universities. But the expanding appeal of postmodern ideas to some lecturers in the humanities and the survival of a deteriorated Marxism, coupled with the contradictory ideologies of various “minority” groups, is likely to confuse rather than sharpen the minds of future teachers.

And So?

The fashioning the school curriculum by social, philosophical or ideological theories is not abnormal. What is new is that the powerful influences on pedagogy are no longer being defined and mediated by educational theorists; they are formulated and to some degree implemented by non-educational administrators, experts and theorists. Their provenance is short on educational principles. The gap between educational theories and teaching realities has become too great.

Identity politics, concern for the special interest groups, provision for “disadvantaged minorities” have helped fracture the contemporary curriculum. Effective schooling needs an overarching philosophical, moral and intellectual coherence. The current curriculum accommodates a variety of aims and ideologies, including:

*a concern with groups, generating an “inclusive curriculum”

* a concern with individuals not through character development and moral education but through “personal development” through sex education, drug education, self-esteem, etc.

* a prime and widely-accepted vocational aim;

* a heavy diet of theory, directed mainly to higher ability students;

* an obsession with the social context of knowledge, a potentially sophisticated but subsidiary aspect of education, often imposed on lower ability students.

A specific contribution of postmodern theory is to inject a spirit of pessimism and scepticism into the curriculum, in striking contrast with the optimism of the 1880s to 1960s.

Postmodernism endorses pluralism, a fragmented curriculum, a variety of alternative interpretations, none of which can claim decisive authority. But young children seek a simple and positive message. To paraphrase a dictum of the Australian historian, W. K. Hancock in his autobiography, "First comes commitment, then detachment."^{lxxxvii}

It is fairly easy to identify major features of the malaise, to diagnose the sources, and even to prescribe remedies. The difficulty lies in implementing reform. Politicians and their advisers can be frustrated by ideologues in teachers' unions and universities, assisted by some educational administrators and some parents' associations. The countervailing culture of the media, especially television, contributes heavily to the malaise of the intellect in schools. Family support is often lacking, across many levels of society.

In fact, contemporary society circumscribes the extent to which postmodernism can spread. The needs of economic activities, the influence of the family over the first five years, indeed the first twelve years, of life, surviving religious beliefs, the commonsense demands of everyday life, the limited number of highly sophisticated minds in our society, work limit the opportunities for postmodernism. Education is not the province of schools alone. A variety of social forces help shape the knowledge and beliefs of each new generation. Fortunately, after entering the workforce many youngsters continue to learn and will correct the miseducation they suffered as adolescents. Others, however, will embrace ephemeral educational fashions as the received wisdom.

A common culture requires a common broad academic curriculum in primary and to some extent junior secondary schools. Given this base, students can proceed to a variety of specialised Year 11-12 schools, with differentiated curricula leading to differentiated examinations. Yet some difficulties inhere in the schools themselves. The wide ability-range of students staying on to the HSC is one source of curriculum malaise. The benefits of extended schooling have, perhaps, been

oversold. The main argument for protracted schooling is not, alas, the value of knowledge in itself but the value of the HSC Certificate as a credential for employment.^{lxxxviii} There is a case for letting students so inclined leave school early. Australian society affords second chances. Maybe, after a break, reluctant learners will return to their studies more appreciative of their value and more ready for the task.

Some students will give lip-service to postmodern or sociological ideologies to meet examination requirements, shedding these views thereafter. This is an old phenomenon. For some decades Catholic schools taught their pupils to regurgitate the Protestant liberal view of history for the Leaving Certificate exam. But in religious lessons, and elsewhere, they were taught the Catholic view of medieval history and the Reformation.^{lxxxix}

A major need is to strengthen an ideology which fosters coherence within a pluralist society while accommodating the cultures of the special interest groups. The tremendous range of subjects in secondary schools impedes a common culture. One way of fostering common values, at least among some groups, and of encouraging academic achievement is to create more small specialised senior high schools. A second is to establish specialist examinations. Already the International Baccalaureate offers, for students in private schools, an alternative exam.

The curriculum should be organised in subjects based on syllabuses rather than in "areas of knowledge" devised to accommodate various special interests and ideologies. History and literature can provide constituents of a liberal education. In both subjects broad general overviews will provide an antidote to postmodernism and relativism. If we seek standards they have been provided in three thousand years of western civilisation.

This need not detract from the provision of a realistic vocational training.

The restoration of knowledge, the maintenance of an "academic" curriculum in particular schools, can be assisted by the commitment of individual principals or groups of teachers. Sometimes politicians can help sustain quality in education. Yet attempts to restore a basic humanist-realist curriculum must confront the problem that many teachers lack knowledge of the disciplines and that many teachers and interest groups oppose this curriculum.

The family remains a vital ingredient. Learning begins in the home. In the first five years of life, and to some extent the next ten years, the family can assist appreciation of humanist values and can sustain some elements of rational liberal education.

We should beware of the intrusion of the culture of the streets into the school curriculum. Moral education, the inculcation of values, cannot be left solely to the study of popular songs or even the wider popular culture of films and television.^{xc}

How feasible is a revival of a cultural heritage? Two phenomena provide some hope. On the one hand, we may be moving beyond the disruptive identity politics of multiculturalism into a more tranquil phase of social bonding. At the other extreme, an age of globalisation may generate a countervailing interest in the historical/cultural heritage as a requisite for a cohesive society.

Without some knowledge of a cultural heritage extending over at least the last century and a half many students remain “absolute beginners”. They are likely to develop a mindless resentment of society, their prejudices sustained by intellectually feeble views. Students leaving school imbued with the relativism of differing groups with differing truths and lacking strong common cultural bonds will constitute a generation unable to make up its mind, an easy prey for new, self-confident ideologies which do offer clear beliefs.

It is worth remembering that the ideological trauma afflicting Australian schooling is not unique. Similar problems trouble other countries in the western tradition. It is also salutary to recall that over the centuries education has experienced periods of deterioration similar to our own, punctuated by epochs of tremendous advance. In the Hellenistic age, which started in the fourth century BC, the sophists and cosmopolitanism engendered relativism, and a frivolous curriculum. The late Roman Empire experienced similar problems. In the late feudal age, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, scholasticism lost its liberating features and became obsessed with abstruse theorising, while at a lower level schools were overwhelmingly commercial in character.

But counter-balancing this, a series of renaissances provided a source of standards, a vision of what mankind is capable of at its best. The classical renaissance of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries helped restore humanism and rationality to education. It reclaimed many of the achievements of the renaissances of classical Athens and the late Roman Republic. Similarly, the medieval renaissance of the twelfth century recovered Aristotelian logic, rediscovered Roman law, and encouraged the study of Latin. The most recent of these successive flowerings was the nineteenth century renaissance.

Here and there islands of excellence will sustain quality in the curriculum. We can be certain that, in the long run, rational, humanist and practical education will revive. The interlude of postmodernism will, in its turn, give way to other and better ideologies.

Notes

- ⁱ Karen Brooks, "Teaching With the Times", *Sydney's Child*, March 2006, p. 19.
- ⁱⁱ Melanie Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes*, London, 1966, p. 58
- ⁱⁱⁱ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, Macquarie University, "Postmodernism and Poststructuralism", *Teaching History*, Journal of the History Teachers' Association of NSW, December 2004, p. 15.
- ^{iv} Board of Studies New South Wales, *English Stage 6. Prescriptions: Area of Study, Electives, Texts, Higher School Certificate 2001 and 2002*, p. 31
- ^v Prefatory Note, p. 2.
- ^{vi} Board of Education, *Report of the Consultative Committee on Secondary Education*, p. 153.
- ^{vii} "Curriculum and Teaching in Australian Schools, 1960-1990: A Tale of Two Epistemologies", in Bill Green (ed.), *Designs on Learning: Essays on Curriculum and Teaching by Garth Boomer*, Australian Curriculum Studies Association, Canberra, 1999, p. 127
- ^{viii} A. Barcan, *Two Centuries of Education in New South Wales*, pp. 267-8, 269-70.
- ^{ix} "Exciting Curriculum", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 1971; *The Leader*, Department of Education, Sydney, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1972, p. 57.
- ^x T. Roper, *The Myth of Equality*, published by the National Union of Australian University Students, 1970, p. 26; cf Barcan, *Sociological Theory and Educational Reality*, p. 119.
- ^{xi} *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 May 1971; cf *Sociological Theory and Educational Reality*, pp.184-9.
- ^{xii} *Sociological Theory*, pp. 151-5
- ^{xiii} *Report*, paras. 1.5, 2.1, 2.10; James McAuley, "A Blueprint for Ockers", *Aces Review*, Vol. 2, No. 7, July/August 1975, p. 3. para. 2.10.
- ^{xiv} *Sociological Theory and Educational Reality*, pp. 257-264.
- ^{xv} *leader*, "Sins of omission and commission", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 December 1983.
- ^{xvi} Doug Swan, Speech at Primary Principal Conference, 2 January 1982, *Priorities in Education*.
- ^{xvii} John McLaren, *A Dictionary of Australian Education*, 1974, p. 100.
- ^{xviii} Geoffrey Sherington, R. C. Petersen and Ian Brice, *Learning to Lead: A history of girls' and boys' corporate secondary schools in Australia*, Sydney, 1987, pp. 159, 161, 143.
- ^{xix} Donald Cave, "Christian Education and the Second Vatican Council", in Peter Gill (ed.), *Catholic Education: Where is it Going?*, 1972, pp. 72, 78.
- ^{xx} James Bourke, "Catholic Schools: The Present Position", in Peter Gill (ed.), *Catholic Education*, p. 14
- ^{xxi} T. W. Maxwell, "Curriculum Design in Primary Schools: Issues from Experience", *New Education*, Vol. 9, Nos 1 & 2, 1987, p. 105.
- ^{xxii} Helen Praetz, *Building a School System: A sociological study of Catholic education*, Melbourne University Press, 1980, pp. 80-1, 96-7, 112, 114.
- ^{xxiii} Sherington, Petersen and Brice, *Learning to Lead*, p. 126.
- ^{xxiv} Board of Senior School Studies, *A Guide to the Higher School Certificate*, 1977, p. 13.
- ^{xxv} *Radical Education Dossier*, No. 1, October 1976, pp. 26-7.
- ^{xxvi} *Sociological Theory and Educational Reality*, pp. 164, 205-6.
- ^{xxvii} *Education*, 7 November 1983.
- ^{xxviii} "The Carrick Review: A Member's View", *Education Australia* Issue 7, 1989.
- ^{xxix} cf John Lidstone, "Bring teachers into play", *The Weekend Australian*, 24-25 January 2004.
- ^{xxx} cf A. Barcan, "Ideology and the Curriculum", in Naomi Smith (ed.), *Education and the Ideal*, Sydney, 2004. p. 12
- ^{xxxi} annual conference, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 June 1994.
- ^{xxxii} Board of Studies, New South Wales, *Human Society and its Environment K-6: Syllabus*, pp. 23, 5.
- ^{xxxiii} "Think like an Aborigine? Not them", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 July 1992. cf. S. Codrington, "What is an Inclusive Perspective?", *Independence*, Vol. 18, No. 2, September 1993.

- xxxiv *Skills for Australia*, J. S. Dawkins and A. C. Holding, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1987, pp. 3, 6, 8, 9.
- xxxv Stephen Kemmis, "Curriculum, in Australia: Contemporary Issues", in J. V. D'Cruz and Peter Langford (eds), *Issues in Australian Education*, Melbourne, 1990, p. 108; "The Greening of our Schools", *IPA Review*, Summer 1991; *Education Links*, Summer 1989/90.
- xxxvi Mark Sinclair, "Social Justice in Education in Australia circa 1983-1996: The Becoming of a Market", *History of Education Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2002, pp. 78-76.
- xxxvii Garth Boomer, "Pragmatic-Radical Teaching and the Disadvantaged Schools Program", August 1991, in Bill Green (ed.), *Designs on Learning: Essays on Curriculum and Teaching by Garth Boomer*, pp. 51-3.
- xxxviii "Principles for Australian Curriculum Reform: Policy Statement of the Australian Curriculum Studies Association", Biennial General Meeting, July 13 1991, Appendix, *Liberating the Curriculum*, pp. 35-6.
- xxxix Denis Fitzgerald, "Hippie Dustbin", *Education*, NSW Teachers' Federation, 16 February 1987.
- xl Norman McCulla, "The State Election and School Education", *Newsletter*, Australian College of Education, NSW Chapter, June 1995, pp. 4-5.
- xli *Focusing on Learning: Report of the Review of Outcomes and Profiles in New South Wales Schooling* (K. J. Eltis), p. 47; Fenton Sharpe, "Schooling in New South Wales: The first year under a Carr Labor Government", *ACE News*, Newsletter of the Australian College of Education, March 1996, p. 6.
- xliv Richard White, University of Sydney, "The Formation of the History Council of NSW", *AHA Bulletin* 83, 1996, p. 47.; Julia Baird, Education Reporter, "Exploring the notion of nation", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 November 2000; "World for kids: don't nag, forget the odd socks and tell us about sex", *SMH*, 7 November 2000.
- lv "HSC blown by wind of change", *Newcastle Herald*, 28 October 2000.
- lvi *Newcastle Herald*, 28 October 2000
- lvii Andrew West and Rachel Morris, *Bob Carr: A Self-Made Man*, Harper/Collins, Sydney, 2003, pp. 183, 368.
- lviii cf A. Barcan, "Whatever happened to the sociology of education?", *Australian Quarterly*, Spring 1993, Vol. 65, No. 3, p. 77.
- lix Allan Luke and Carmen Luke, James Cook University of North Queensland, "School Knowledge as Simulation: Curriculum in Postmodern Conditions", *Discourse*, Vol. 10, No. 2, April 1990, p. 75.
- lvi Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, 1984, p. 154, cited R. W. Fevre, *The Demoralization of Western Culture*, Continuum, New York, 2000 p. 133.
- lvii Naomi Smith, freelance writer on education, "The 'New' HSC English", *Sydney's Child*, February 2002.
- lviii *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 September 2002.
- lix Board of Studies, New South Wales, 2002 Higher School Certificate Examination, English (Standard) and English (Advanced). Paper 1 – Area of Study.
- lvi The student was Ravi Prasad, 16, of Chester Hill High, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 October 2002
- lviii Jordan Rastrick, Sydney Boys' High, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 October 2002.
- lvii Joanne McCarthy, "New English is a study in jargon", *Newcastle Herald*, 31 October 2002.
- lviii "Moving English into the real world", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 2002.
- lix Mark Scott, "The Education Premier: no return to the 'good old days' ", *Sydney Morning Herald*. 15 September 1995.
- lvi "Say goodbye to English", *The Australian*, Higher Education, 7 September 1994.
- lviii F. Clarke, *The Foundations of History Teaching*, London, 1929, p.12.
- lix Board of Studies New South Wales, 2002 Higher School Certificate Examination, History Extension.
- lx "History no passing phase for teenagers", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 December 2002.
- lxi Janice Creenaune, letter, "History in the making", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December 2002.
- lxii Fergus McGinley, Robinvale High School, "Getting science back from the Scientists", *The Australian Teacher*, No. 13. August 1985, pp. 10-11. The magazine was published jointly by eight teachers' unions.

- lxiii Fletcher, "Science Education for the Twenty-First Century", in Smith (ed.), *Education and the Ideal*, pp. 158-9.
- lxiv Joe Wolfe, "Soft science teaching bodes ill for the clever country", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 April 2005.
- lxv "The pros and cons of being a physicist", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 2002.
- lxvi "Schools boom has new leader", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17-18 January 2004.
- lxvii "Talk up your values, public schools urged", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 2004.
- lxviii Linda Doherty, education editor, "Primary pupils join march to private schools", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 December 2003; Stephen O'Doherty, CEO, Christian Schools Australia, "Why supporters of public education can applaud the growth of faith", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 2004.
- lxix Pat Jacobs, *Operation Peace Studies*, Melbourne, 1985, Ch. 10, "Peace Studies and the Churches".
- lxx cited by Kevin Donnelly, "Revolution in the English classroom", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 1994.
- lxxi Carolyn Jones, "Religion classes take controversial turn", *The Australian* 6-7 May 1995.
- lxxii *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 2003.
- lxxiii "NSW Catholic schools link with TAFE", *Curriculum Australia*, October 1988, reprinted from *About Catholic Schools*, June 1988.
- lxxiv Entries in *SMH Guide to Schools*, 1996, pp. 155, 101, 240; Bruce MacLachlan, "Breaking the Boundaries", *Education Australia*, Issue 18, 1992, pp. 12-13.
- lxxv Mark Scott (ed.), *Guide to Schools*, The Sydney Morning Herald, 4th edition, 1996, p. 155; "SCECGS Redlands", Wikipedia, the user-contributed encyclopedia, 2006, internet.
- lxxvi "Elite girls' school kills the Bard"; "Despair over Bard question", *The Weekend Australian* 15-16 April 2006; Adele Horin, "The expectations are far to great", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29-30 April 2006.
- lxxvii *Guide to Schools*, 1996 pp. 155, 102; *SMH Good Schools Guide 2000*, p. 172.
- lxxviii "International bright young things opt for another school of thought", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 2004; "Students pursue a different course", *SMH*, 2 March 2004.
- lxxix Garry Linnell, "God's classroom", *The Sydney Morning Herald Magazine Good Weekend*, 24 February 2001, p. 18.
- lxxx Bob Gould, "Postmodernism, cultural theory, the decline of the humanities and the demobilisation of the left", *Ozleft: An independent forum of strategy, tactics and history in the Australian left, green and labour movements*, internet, May 1999.
- lxxxi University of Sydney Union, *Clubs and Societies: The Beige Pages*, 2000, p. 59; semester 2, 2001, p. 22; 2002, p. 32.
- lxxxii "Unlocking the Academies: Responses and Strategies", *Meanjin*, Vol. 50, No. 2/3, 1991, p. 391.
- lxxxiii "Ivory tower as transmitter", *Arena Magazine*, August/September 1995.
- lxxxiv Ann Curthoys, "Thinking About History", *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* No. 83. December 1996, p. 26.
- lxxxv Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, Sydney, 2006, p. 181.
- lxxxvi "Rage against the dying of the light", summary of the Ashworth Lecture in sociology, University of Melbourne, *The Australian's* Higher Education pages, 23 October 2002.
- lxxxvii W. K. Hancock, *Country and Calling*, London, 1954, p. 220.
- lxxxviii "Year 12 is still the best way to get a foot on the career ladder", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19-20 October 2002.
- lxxxix Bob Gould, "Postmodernism, cultural theory . . .", *Ozleft*, May 1999, p. 11
- xc Andrew Masterson discusses the invasion of street culture into American schools in "Hip-hop high", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 2003.

