# Postmodern Education and the Concept of Power

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### Abstract

*This article presents a discussion of how postmodernist, poststructuralist and critical educational thinking relate to different theories of power. I argue that both Critical Theory and some poststructuralist ideas base themselves on a concept of power borrowed from a modernist tradition. I argue as well that we are better off combining a postmodern idea of education with a postmodern idea of power. To this end the concept of power presented by the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is introduced. This concept controverts a number of major educational concepts, i.e. concepts such as causality, autonomy, subjectivity and originality. In other words, it allows us to take a fresh look at old concepts. Finally, I relate the discussion to a number of recent theories of learning.*

Keywords: power, post modernity, Critical Theory, post structuralism, discourse analysis, learning

In the 1990s, Edwards and Usher wrote an influential monograph on postmodernity and education. In the introduction they make the following statement:

> Education does not fit easily into the postmodern moment because educational theory and practice is founded in the modernist tradition. (Edwards & Usher, 1994, p. 24)

This claim, I think, could be understood as a conceptual radicalisation of the common view that postmodern education doesn't fit well into the overall modernist structures of learning and didactics. It is, in other words, not just a question of a critique of modernist education from a postmodern educational perspective. The element of radicality is comprised in the hypothesis that it is the 'postmodern' and 'education *per se*' that are out of fit. Education simply belongs to the moderns. It is perhaps even a logical rather than an empirical statement. Postmodernity must come up with something other than education. This, of course, is one reason that postmodernists are critical of all kinds of curricula and didactics. However, such a critical attitude doesn't help to answer the basic conceptual question: how can postmodern education be carried out when this is not possible? How can we connect the words 'postmodern' and 'education' to form one unproblematic sentence? If such questions are not

addressed properly there can be no legitimate critique of any modern education from a postmodern perspective. Postmodern philosophy is conceptually excluded from educational debates.

This question is particularly felt within the area of education and power. On the one hand, most traditional critical educational approaches which function within the concept of the modern, are easily combined with the concept of power, because here education is considered as progress towards freedom or autonomy. In most postmodern perspectives, on the other hand, such an approach would be impossible because there would be no such thing as autonomy in the Kantian sense. Following Edwards and Usher, therefore, education and power, can only be coupled within the paradigm of the 'modern'. For conceptual reasons, this coupling does not work in postmodern settings. The overall aim of this article is to rescue this relationship between postmodernity and education and power so that it again becomes possible, in the same utterance, to speak of power, autonomy, education and postmodernity.

The first move in addressing this problem is to explore the problematic elements further: to discuss the concepts of modern and postmodern so as to elaborate and explicate the unease of the situation. The next step is to illuminate a purely modern concept of education and power, taking as a point of departure Steven Lukes's theory of power and applying it to educational issues. Steven Lukes belongs to a critical theoretical tradition, and applying his insights in this context make the problems within critical and modern approaches to power and education particularly clear. In contrast to this, I consider the so-called discourse analysis of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau as an example of a postmodern concept of power. I argue that this makes it possible to understand important concepts such as education and autonomy in new and interesting ways. Finally, I discuss how this approach relates to a number of popular theories of learning.

## Problems of Modern and Postmodern Theories of Education

Within much Critical Theory (see below for further elaboration), power is often considered as structural processes that produce false consciousness. The educational task, therefore, is to analyse and understand these processes so that consciousness can become fully itself. Such a view of the relationship between power and emancipation is found in the work of Wolfgang Klafki:

> Education in the sense of critical theory must therefore necessarily become a permanent critique of society, and the aim of such effort is to help the individual to self-determination and emancipation ... . (Klafki, 1983, p. 105; my translation)

Here it is assumed that structures of power can be described and revealed, causing the 'hidden' subject, in this case an individual but in other cases a social class, to become what s/he basically and fundamentally already is; autonomous, free and in possession of reason.

This view is problematic from a postmodern point of view because it assumes a dual essentialism: firstly, a sociological essentialism, which has to do with a possibility of a

scientific description of society claiming to be independent of the paradigmatic context of the researcher, the teacher or the student. Here, the structures of society correspond to these descriptions, and if one studies hard enough, critical science will succeed in producing exact conceptual mirrors of the societal structures. Secondly there is a psychological essentialism. Critical theory tends to assume a subject that exists *a priori*, that is, prior to the workings of the structures of power. It is very hard, from a postmodern point of view, to accept a subjectivity which is independent of any discourse, vocabulary or language game.

The second approach considered in this article is postmodern theory. I use the word 'postmodern' to include any theory that, first, tries to operate without an epistemological foundation, and secondly, views reality and subjects as distributed positions in local networks of language games, discourses or vocabularies. Finally, the postmodern moment is characterized by a fragile and provisional relation between what is present and what is not.[1] This broad definition includes both structurally oriented positions, such as Foucault's and subjectivist ideas such as Kenneth Gergen's.[2] Jean-François Lyotard himself lies somewhere in the middle. So, specifically in the context of this article, postmodernism is a much broader term than poststructuralism. In fact, one could say that the stake here is a critique of certain poststructuralist versions in favour of, as I understand it, a more strictly postmodern approach.[3]

A widespread idea in postmodernism, particularly its poststructuralist version, is that power encapsulates even the tiniest sentences that are produced in educational settings. In the world of the Foucauldian, there are no places outside power. Every sentence and its possible connection to other sentences is the result of the workings of power. Foucault, therefore, describes the basic question of a theory of science as:

> ... a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other. In short, there is a problem of the regime, the politics of the scientific statement. (Foucault, 1980, p. 112)[4]

Such formulation, however, must leave many educators uneasy. First, educational activity seems to lose legitimacy. Within Critical Theory, education is valuable in itself to the extent that it contributes to the emancipation of individual or collective subjects. This aspect is missing in the poststructuralist position, because even the emancipated subject is not an ethical or a scientific absolute, and should instead be considered as just another instance of power. A second source of discontent is the question of the status of the poststructuralist thesis itself. Does the statement 'everything is power' have a privileged rational status or is it itself constructed as part of the workings of power?[5] This is a classical objection to any kind of scepticism. Further, it seems that the turn from 'this is reasonable' (Critical Theory) to 'this is powerful' (Poststructuralism) marks a change in the discipline underlying educational theory, that is, from the humanities, in particular philosophy, to the empirical disciplines, which in this case means sociology. This dislocation to a sociological discourse was almost implemented by Critical Theory, which ended up being interested almost only in the relation between education and society, with, however, the usual addition of the idea of emancipation. This addition gives Critical Theory the potential of being an educational theory, that is, a theory about what makes learning valuable (emancipation). Being deprived of this possibility, the poststructuralist

approach tends to end up in a complete socialisation of the field of education. A further reason for disliking the monopolising effects of the poststructuralist concept of power is the same as the postmodern dislike of monopolising effects altogether. Ideas like Foucault's tend to become the single valid description of social processes. This is a problem because the very aim of postmodernity is to provoke an explosion of vocabularies which should not be subordinated to one another, and certainly not under a single sociological category.[6]

The final cause of unease is based on the insight that if power becomes the foundational category, education becomes an impossible practice. This is so because in such cases there would be no place from which to recognise learning as worthwhile[7]. If everything is power, it becomes impossible to distinguish between activities which are educational and activities that are not. Postmodernity and education becomes opposites, exactly as in the Edwards/Usher quotation above. The modern tradition is based on ideas of enlightenment, reason, scientific progress, emancipation and objectivity, and Critical Theory is solidly rooted within this tradition. If the legitimacy of these modern ideas vanishes, we are left in a postmodern situation, characterised by a chaos of local narratives, the survival of which, in the poststructuralist version, is decided by the microprocesses of power. Both alternatives seem equally unsatisfactory because the subject-matter here is *postmodern education* and not just postmodernity *and* education.

In the rest of this article I want to argue, first, that the problem is due to a connection between two different concepts of power in critical and postmodern educational theory respectively. This connection is not, I argue, adequately reflected. In some instances, power is taken to be a struggle between two developed or potentially developable subjects. This is identified as a modern discourse on power. Used in this way, the concept of power might have a critical function, but is at the same time contradicted by the postmodern hypothesis that any subject is socially and linguistically constituted and cannot be of a unitary nature, as is postulated in the modern discourse of power.

If subjectivity is fully itself before power sets in, then these identities must have been constituted independently of power. This 'independent' space is highly modern (versus postmodern), because it depends upon a subject *a priori* or upon another kind of already-existing social order. Therefore, I attempt to define a postmodern concept of power proper, a concept that may encompass the constituting effects of power, where the 'independent' subject is itself constituted by acts of power. If such a postmodern notion of power is accepted, however, it cannot fulfil the critical tasks facing educational theory, because it destroys any perspective from which such a critique, freed from power, could be formulated. The discussion, therefore, takes place within the framework of Figure 1.

First I will explicate cell A by means of an account of Steven Lukes's theory of power as an example of a theory of power that is supposed to work as supplement to a critical and modernist idea of education. Next, I discuss cell C, a postmodern concept of power

|  | Modern concept of power | Postmodern concept of power |
|---|---|---|
| *Modernist education* | A |  |
| *Postmodern education* | B | C |

**Figure 1:** The relationship between power and education

in a postmodern educational context, by drawing on the discourse analysis of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

## The Three Dimensions of Power—A Modernist Account

Steven Lukes developed his theory of the three dimensions of power in the mid-1970s. He re-organised a reading of an important set of texts from American political science and published his ideas in the pamphlet *Power—A Radical View* (Lukes, 1974), which had a great impact on discussions of theory of power.[8] Even though his theory originates in political science, his hypothesis is interesting for any discussion of power, including educational theory.[9] Lukes speaks of three dimensions of power, identifying a first and a second dimension within existing social science, and adding a third dimension himself.

The first dimension of power is ascribed to the American theorist of democracy, Robert Dahl. According to Dahl, power is at work when it is possible to identify two observable subjects, A and B, who both lay claim to the same entity. Due to the social pressure wielded by A, B is affected by power to the extent that he acts in a way that he would not otherwise have done. Dahl assumes this to take place as an observable conflict between two fully developed political subjects. The influence of A on B resembles the paradigm of causality pictured by David Hume. In this case, A and B are comparable to snooker balls colliding and reacting with mathematical precision. So in this first dimension focus is on 'behaviour in the making of decisions over key or important issues as involving actual, observable conflict' (Lukes, 1974, p. 13). In this way Dahl establishes a conceptual framework, allowing for a positivist-based study of political processes.

Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz present the second dimension of power. When in the 1960s they conducted a set of critical studies of the behaviour of some major American industrial corporations they found that, in many situations, power was not at all about an observable conflict between articulated positions in a public space, but about preventing some groups or individuals from articulating anything at all. In other words, even though on the surface a situation might seem to be characterised by consensus, this consensus was the result of conscious decisions from people in power (A) aiming at avoiding the expression of other relevant points of view (B). Bachrach and Baratz made a point in stressing that we could also speak about a proper and rational consensus which is not influenced by power at all. This means that we are still within the area of observable conflicts, although the conflict may be observed outside the official spheres of discussion, e.g. outside the classroom, on the factory floor, in social clubs or in families. These hidden opinions were termed 'counterfactual', i.e. what B would otherwise have done; not necessarily an officially stated point of view but just a grievance of any sort in any social environment. The second dimension of power, therefore, is both visible and invisible. It is invisible at the important levels of decision-making, but visible outside in the places just mentioned. The essential conflict is 'between the interests of those engaged in non-decisionmaking and the interest of those they exclude from a hearing within the political system' (Lukes, 1974, p. 20).

The third dimension of power is Lukes's own. The important point is that we should talk about power even with regard to situations where there are no observable conflicts in any conceivable setting. Some important instances of this include the castes in India and the condition of women in some Muslim societies. What amazes a Western observer

in these cases is that even the casteless person sometimes appreciates the societal system that has deprived her or him of so many rights and opportunities. According to the first two dimensions of power, in such cases there is no exercise of power because there is no observable 'counterfactual' anywhere. Lukes, then, is interested in widening the workings of power to situations where there is a general consensus in all social arenas. Therefore, he needs to operate with a distinction between subjective and objective interests. Subjective interests are those that are in some way expressed in a public or private space, as in the first two dimensions of power. Objective interests are those that would have been articulated if the subject lived in a fully enlightened and democratic society. According to his argument, the limit of power is the fully knowable and transparent subject. If only B knew more about the social circumstances under which he lived, he would be able to express his true interests publicly, as in the first dimension of power. The sphere free from power, therefore, is a rational and public space associated with such concepts as democracy, rationality and autonomy. Power clashes with rationality in a Kantian and Habermasian fashion, as in:

> I suspect that we are here in the presence of a fundamental (Kantian) antinomy between causality on the one hand, and autonomy and reason on the other. I see no way of resolving this antinomy. (Lukes, 1974, p. 33)

There are two important consequences to such a view. First, the categories of power and subjectivity are maintained as completely distinct. Even though subjectivity and autonomy can be overwhelmed by power, thereby rendering subjectivity invisible to any observer, the fundamental distinction is still intact. In the third dimension the subject is still fully constituted, but it is suppressed, and the aim of critical education is to bring about circumstances which will allow subjectivity to become what it already is in a (hidden) sense, that is, autonomous and free. Secondly, causality and power are comparable. Social action is determined by outside forces: to the extent that action is caused by such mechanisms; we say that the action is regulated by power. But how should we conceive of a situation where B *voluntarily* chooses a certain behavior? Here the forces of power do not guide B. Instead, he is guided by free and autonomous self-regulating reflection, as in the practical reason of Imannuel Kant. In such cases, B is beyond the reach of the sociologist because he is not subject to the heterogeneity, motives and dispositions of social and psychological life; in short, to its causality. Both these observations show Lukes to be deeply influenced by the kind of Kantianism that emphasizes,on the one hand epistemology as a study of causality, and on the other an ethical space based in freedom and reflection.[10]

This has a number of consequences. First, the concept of power that Lukes endorses is equivalent to that found in Critical Theory, because he assumes a position outside power from which the educational researcher may implement his critical enterprise. Second, he postulates a notion of the learning subject (the object of research, that is, the student) that is woven into structures of causality. Speaking about something (the subject in its true form) which is distorted or hidden presupposes a place that is open and transparent.[11] A third consequence of this basically modernist perspective is a particular view of the nature and aim of schooling. If the world can be described in categories of causality and autonomy, the task of the school is to educate students to deal with both.

Causality refers to the subject matter of schooling (e.g. this is how the world is, the world consist of two social classes and so forth), and autonomy becomes the development of independent thinking and action within a given sphere or in life as such. But causality and autonomy are two separate spaces. This can be observed in various conceptions of education that completely divide the field into content and reflection. If this is correct, any educational theory or practice that distinguishes between subject matter and reflection should be classified as a modernist theory. This critique is similar to that of Gert Biesta when he states:

> The problem is, however, that if the sociology of knowledge wants to offer an insight into these power relations, it can do so, first, if its own knowledge about power relations stands outside of the realm determined by these relationships, and second, if it can assume that the knowledge that the sociology of knowledge itself provides offers a correct representation of the social and historical situation upon which our knowledge is said to depend. (Biesta, 2002, p. 384)

For Biesta the problematic assumptions of sociology are twofold: firstly, the idea of a researcher standing outside the realm of power, corresponding to the free rational subject of Steven Lukes; and secondly, the idea that sociological theory can be an accurate representation of the world. This corresponds to the assumption of causality and content.

Thus, there are two basic distinctions within this sort of theory. First there is a distinction attached to the learning subject; the difference between causality and autonomy. The question concerning this distinction is: are the sentences of learning produced by a free consciousness or are they grounded in a structure of causality that is biased as a consequence of the student's position in the social structure? This distinction takes its point of departure in the position of the learning subject: its degree of emancipation. Another distinction related to Lukes's ideas concerns the subject matter or objectivity of education: the 'what' of learning. The answer of Critical Theory is that we must learn about the sociological and psychological causality of the societal essence in order to think autonomously. If we accept these distinctions, we get a picture of the modern critical educational theory represented in Figure 2.

The aim of education is to move from A to B, from suppression to autonomy, by the didactics of C and D, knowledge of societal causality and free reflection.

This is a 'friendly' modernism, which allows us a way out of the iron cage of power.[12] It presents a pleasing cohesion between the concepts of power and education. It is, in other words, a description of cell A in Figure 1, with regard both to the subject of learning, who can become what s/he basically is already, free and rational, and to the subject matter of education, the pure positivity of the descriptive sciences of sociology and psychology. Everything fits.

| Objectivity<br>Learning | (C) Societal causality | (D) Reflection |
|---|---|---|
| (A) Suppressed subjectivity | | |
| (B) Autonomy | | |

**Figure 2:** Power and education in Critical Theory

This harmony is disrupted by postmodernity, particularly in its structuralist variants. Here, we hear that the grand narrative of enlightenment and freedom is dead, and that power has completely overtaken the learning subject, making free reflection and autonomy impossible. What, within Critical Theory, was an autonomous space, are within the structural versions of postmodern theory just another position woven into the fabric of power,[13] and we are left with causally determined subjects caught in a kind of neo-structuralist web. When, in the same movement, any narrative of scientific progress as instances of legitimate objectivity is dismantled, we run into major problems because it has become impossible to comprehend the subject matter as objective societal causality. Instead, the educational content becomes a socially constructed entity, and these social constructions are based on struggles of power between different paradigms, vocabularies and communities of research in all sorts of constellations. We are left behind a wall of power even more solid than before. This is the ground for our unease. The replacement of objectivity and subjectivity by the concept of power means that neither 'the world' nor 'freedom' are possible candidates for the projects of education. This is certainly an iron cage: the end of education.[14]

However, this rather frustrating conclusion is only valid as long as we remain within the concept of power as it was defined by Steven Lukes. Power, then, is only a problem if no emancipation is possible. But 'emancipation' is itself a child of the modernist project. If spontaneous subjectivity is dismantled as a valid category, we can no longer say that power is a problem or that emancipation is a value in its own right. The paradox is clear. We want something to be the case, but at the same time that very 'want' is prohibited. The problem is that we are caught in cell B in Figure 1, a modern concept of power which assumes knowledge and autonomy, combined with a postmodern epistemology according to which neither knowledge nor autonomy can be permitted because these very categories are constituted by power itself.

Furthermore, it seems impossible to make the concept of power a sovereign educational category that can replace an objective analysis of society or consciousness. There are two reasons for this. First, if we describe everything as power, this description cannot be valid due to an exclusive relation to nature. That would be a modern argument. It would presuppose that the word 'power' corresponds to something outside language, more or less like the Marxist who proclaimed it possible to reduce the entire social field to two social classes. Within the postmodern tradition, we are not permitted to posit such a correspondence between language and reality. Secondly, such correspondences are only allowed within local and specific communities of knowledge. The concept of power might be considered valid within some such communities, but within others the criterion of validity has no reference to the concept of power. No matter how this topic is twisted and turned, power, in the context of the postmodern proper, is a local vocabulary that cannot legitimately claim universal validity as a category of analysis.

We seem to lack ideas to proceed. We are overwhelmed by the logical misfit between power and education: the contradiction already established by Edward and Usher in the introduction. The problem cannot be solved by appealing to such ideas as increased educational emancipation. Instead I suggest another direction of enquiry. What is a postmodern concept of power? How can a relationship between power and education be restated on a postmodern foundation? And what happens when this postmodern concept

of power is applied to education? In other words: what should be the content of cell C in Figure 1? The remaining part of this article is devoted to clarifying such questions.

### Discourse Analysis—A Postmodern Concept of Power

To illustrate a postmodern view on power, I will present the social theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This theory, also named discourse analysis, has had a tremendous impact on the sociology of power in the past 20 years. Discourse analysis is formulated within the framework of neo-Marxism, but the concept of power that the theory displays is highly postmodern, at least if we look at how postmodernity is conceptualised in this article. Compared to the concept of power presented by Lukes, there are two important innovations in the postmodern approach. The first difference is that power is considered as constitutive, that is, power is a process wherein subjects are mutually created. Secondly, the postmodern idea of power concerns a circular relationship between power and authority instead of drawing on causality as its methodological paradigm.

The constitution of subjects takes place through so-called antagonisms. An antagonism is not a conflict between observable agents fighting over scarce resources: that would be a modern approach, because the subjects would be constituted before any conflict arises. It is neither a confrontation of physical entities, as is assumed in the metaphors of a Humean causality. Instead, it is a space, created by the formula A = non-B where A is defined purely as non-B, as pure negativity. For example, an antagonism might start with the expression: 'I am not a positivist'. In such a case, we would find a non-B (non-positivist), but there is no A (except the formal 'I'). The expression hardly means anything, because the language game has no rules telling us how to continue (the possible ways of continuing are too numerous, e.g. 'I am not a positivist, but a realist/ constructivist/idealist/hermeneutician etc.'). Instead we could narrow the options by saying: 'I am not a positivist, but a constructivist'. In this instance constructivism is nothing but negativity, i.e. purely defined by what it is not. What at the outset was a set of contingent and loosely coupled differences in the social field (floating signifiers) now becomes something concrete, A and B. This is called the logic of equivalence, where a large group of differences is categorised under a concept, in this case 'positivist'. What at the beginning of the process was a broad designation of a range of thinkers and a diverse set of intellectual positions with all sorts of connections and differences is now reduced to non-constructivism (non-B).[15] In this process, thousands of pages are reduced to perhaps ten pages in one book, summarised in, for instance, sentences such as 'Positivism claims three things …'. At the same time as this logic of equivalence is doing its work a new difference is articulated, because constructivism and positivism are formulated as radically opposed. Let me finish off the process. A fully-fledged antagonism is realised when the 'non-B' (the positivist) defines himself as a 'non-A'. This is what happens when the 'positivist' declares himself a non-constructivist and repeats the same process from the other side of the equation. In such a case, we end up with two new-born social identities (positivist and constructivist), both defined by what they are not. A new difference has been created in the language game of scientific theory.

Please note the implications. First, the subjects are not constituted *a priori* but are constructed in ongoing antagonistic processes. Secondly, the build-up of *the other* as an

equivalence means that a range of possible meanings disappears from the horizon of a particular discourse (e.g. the 10,000 pages from the textual reservoir of positivism that did not find a place in the ten-page constructivist construction of positivism). These vanished meanings are left in the fallow field of language which is called 'the field of discursivity', an area of major interest for historians and political strategists of any kind. Postmodern power has, therefore, two productive characteristics. Firstly, it produces a new order of antagonistic identities, A and B. Secondly, it posits a difference between this order of identities and a discursive field surrounding it, consisting of excluded and possible language games which, in principle, can be activated at any time. It is, in other words, a practice, an articulation, and a field of pure contingency.[16]

Now we are set to understand the circular structure of postmodern power.[17] This structure consists of two moments. The first is presented in the following:

> Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*. (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112)

The idea is that any antagonism produces authority. The formula A = non-B is capable of directing social movement away from B, and simultaneously, within A, a new social order is created, organising the vectors of intention via the establishment of a nodal point, i.e. a centre, a knot or a magnet that attracts new descriptions and new social movements (which again may be described as structures of motivation, of incitements, of causality etc.). One example of this is the clash between modern science and a medieval/Aristotelian view of knowledge. This major struggle resulted in the constitution of the basic tenets of modern science, setting up tremendous institutional nodal points structuring the motivation and behaviour of scientists, students, politicians and other important players in the politics of knowledge.

These processes could be highlighted by a reflection based on one of the founders of modern political thinking, Thomas Hobbes. In his view, both the political subject and the sovereign are constituted simultaneously when confused individuals, in a common contract, deliver all their powers to one political authority. With this move they all leave the state of nature, thus enabling a social and political order.[18] As this contract is initiated, all the individuals are subject to the logic of equivalence, becoming persons, that is, subjects to the will of the sovereign. The proper way to express this is that the subjects, the relations between them, and their relations to the sovereign are constituted simultaneously, a transformation from nothing to being in one instantaneous movement. This is the logic of equivalence.

For Hobbes, this line of thought was primarily an argument for a secularised monarchy. Within the context of this article, his argument becomes a political logic which can be applied in all cases where there are political processes and where the nodal points and the subjects are constituted (e.g. I [the subject] is a constructivist [nodal point], to the extent that this concept is communicable to others [which it is]). This is a social order from the point of view of political theory.

However, one problem in the thinking of Hobbes has long troubled me. What, from the point of view of discourse analysis, is pure negativity (that is, non-B, e.g. the positivist),

is not a part of the vocabulary of Hobbes. What Hobbes lacks is an explanation of the sudden incident of the contractual equivalence. Suddenly, the individuals become rational and gather around the monarch. But why? The explanation might perhaps be found in the processes of antagonism just mentioned. If so, the Hobbesian atoms become proper subjects because they define themselves as non-B (any kind of enemy). So the positive space described by Hobbes as a social order of subjects and hierarchy is constituted by an act of antagonism. This could be illustrated as

nodal point --- A = non B      Antagonism      B = non A --- nodal point

These two spaces of social order are divided by antagonism and surrounded by the field of discursivity which is constantly threatening to penetrate the established order. This is the basis for the second part of the circularity of postmodern power. A social space can only be structured by excluding other possible language games. These excluded ways of speaking are a reservoir for new articulations and new practices. For instance, in an absolute monarchy the monarch would normally try to sustain the nodal point (there is only one) by hindering the entrance to the field of discursivity. In a democracy, on the other hand, the situation is reversed, because it allows free admittance to the field of discursivity as long as the grand over-determining principle of free speech is accepted. The circular structure between power and authority which we find in and on the edge of any social order is thereby established. The antagonism produces an equivalence simultaneously constituting subjectivity and authority. This relation is constantly challenged by new articulations which take their point of departure in the field of discursivity, producing new antagonisms and new structures which might again be overruled. This is the circular principle governing the constitution and the penetration of any social order: in our case, the sentences and authority of education. I must emphasise that this is all there is to it. There is no autonomous subject and no objective world. There are only these particles of language games, a kind of social atom, where the nucleus is the structure of authority and the electrons are the field of discursivity. The question is now: how can this concept of power be applied to educational issues? What does a postmodern education look like from the point of view of this vocabulary?

## Educational Implications

This discussion has two parts. Firstly, I want to return to some of the debates concerning the relationship between causality and freedom which I presented together with my account of Steven Lukes's ideas. Secondly, I will show the practical significance of the discussion by classifying some prominent theories of learning as different moments in the circularity of power.

   'Power' in Lukes's theory and in Critical Theory is, as already mentioned, initiated in a general Kantian kind of argument based on the distinction between Man as an object of knowledge and man in himself, obeying only the laws of practical reason. On the one hand, considering Man as an object of knowledge, it becomes possible to do empirical research, thereby laying out the structures or the causal forces that govern human action. Governed by practical reason, on the other hand, Man is free to produce and live by his own laws in spite of causal influences. The educational project for Kant-inspired theory

is therefore to ascertain whether people act freely or under the influence of empirical motives. And if they do not act freely, the educational task is to provide pupils with the proper knowledge of causal forces to enable them to overcome them.

Within discourse analysis, the relationship between autonomy and causality is turned upside down. The classical conception of causality assumes the existence of already constituted entities affecting each other. These 'already constituted entities' further assume the existence of a social order; that is, a system of equivalences, reducing a multitude of possible differences to identity and essence. In discourse analysis, on the contrary, causality is a social construction, maintaining its existence as negotiated ways of putting sentences together within a given social or epistemological order. Causality is, then, not an attribute of the world but rather a form, implemented discursively in language games involving explanation.[19]

With the concept of autonomy we face a much harder task. There are two ways of looking at autonomy from a discursive perspective. On the one hand, we may pursue the sort of analysis outlined just above. Autonomy then, like causality, is a hegemonic construction within a certain discourse. This means that both the identities in a causal relation and the space of autonomy are posited and distributed in the general hegemonic struggle concerning the ability to say sentences such as 'I am free'. In this case, autonomy is like any other name, that is, any string of letters taken from the field of discursivity, transforming itself through processes of antagonism and complicated strategic interactions, and in the end finding itself in a negotiated social order as terms like 'the free woman' or 'the enlightened citizen', to mention a couple of positions that would normally apply the concept 'autonomous' to themselves. On the other hand, a deeper understanding of the concept of autonomy in postmodern sociology would place the concept at 'the edge of the social', as the area of practice that escapes the concept of causality, simply because autonomy is logically prior to causality. This is the point where antagonism was originally articulated; the place where the social order is both penetrated (from the field of discursivity) and produced anew (by the activity of antagonism). The field of autonomy, or freedom, is, in other words, not a concept that can be opposed once and for all to the empirical Man (as we saw it in Lukes's rather stereotypical use of Kant). No, autonomy is instead the *experience of the border of the social order*, because it is the point from which this very order was originally articulated. In this sense, autonomy is the place of interaction between possible social orders; it is a void between social structures, and it is the answer given at the edge of existence. The thinker, standing at the border of the positivity of the social, does not find an objective world of essences or the foundational thinking subjectivity of Descartes, but an abyss, at the bottom of which is the field of discursivity, a disorganised reservoir of quotations. This is the reason why we keep studying the major thinkers of our culture. It is because they produced the original sentences of the Westerners' revolt against the authority of the church. By the term 'original' I mean exactly 'autonomous', the first to think, standing at the edge of the language game, an edge where nobody ever stood before. Autonomy, then, is not an attribute of the subject, but a place where the social order is thrown back on itself and into a new articulation (a new book). This happens because the 'throwing back' corresponds to an experience of the edge of the social, and this experience is an attempt to suggest new language games and new nodal points. In these new vocabularies, though

some of the words might be the same as in the original order, their meaning has changed because they are used in new ways.[20]

So the concept of autonomy has two meanings. On the one hand it is an entity fought for in a hegemonic struggle similar to the positions of causality. On the other hand, autonomy is the point of contingency enabling causality and entities altogether, thereby simultaneously penetrating old and constituting new language games. If we consider autonomy and power to be basic concepts of education, then a postmodern education would lead the student towards this double aim: the aim of considering himself as a free citizen in a particular society, and the aim of leading the student to the edge of this society; it is the combination of free participation and the contemplation of an open horizon in solitude. Finally, postmodern education should force these two levels into contact with each other. This is the intrasection of the edge of the social and the hegemonic structure of society, the transaction between thinking and action. For instance by doing what Foucault calls fearless speech (Parrhesia) (Foucault, 2001).

Furthermore, the discussion points towards the possibility of classifying a number of educational theories in a new way. Taking the point of departure in a postmodern concept of power, we can map out a number of already existing positions. This move is attempted in the matrix below, where I have depicted how a postmodern concept of power and education, cell C in Figure 1, can be used as a device for classification. Education as a social activity must take place in a field of tension between a social order, which I call knowledge/non-knowledge, on the one hand, and the relation between this social order and a field of discursivity on the other.

A definition of education taking its point of departure in the concept of power as this is found in discourse analysis needs to be aware of two aspects. The first aspect is the presence of a difference between something that can be considered as knowledge and something that cannot. Knowledge, in this perspective, has nothing to do with the correspondence of sentences to an external reality, but is rather the correspondence between the student's sentences and the sentences produced in the nodal point (the center of 'modernist' power). The utterances representing non-knowledge (e.g. the pupil's essays) can therefore be evaluated. How this evaluation turns out depends on how the sentences of the nodal point are constructed. This is power as it works within a specific order. Here we find agents who express themselves and agents who do not dare to, we find evaluators and examinations, and we find students and pupils who are suppressed and some who are not. The other aspect concerns the relation between this system of knowledge/non-knowledge on the one hand, and the field of discursivity on the other. Laclau and Mouffe's point is exactly that the social can never be a closed identity, but may only exist as partial closures of the field of discursivity. Knowledge, in other words, is surrounded by excluded meanings. This is a postmodern field, because it emphasizes the excluded, the possible, the contingent and the limits of the social order.

We are left with a twofold challenge to a postmodern theory of education. First, a conservative challenge to the theory of education, because education can only take place in a social order where it is possible to distinguish between sentences that express knowledge and sentences which do not, and because this distinction is a part of a hegemony, a tradition or a paradigm. Secondly, we find a revolutionary moment stating that if we want to follow the ontology of the social, then the established distinction

|  | + *Knowledge/non-knowledge* | - *Knowledge/non-knowledge* |
|---|---|---|
| - *Field of discursivity* | (A)<br>Lev Vygotsky, Lave & Wenger, Theories of curriculum and evaluation | (B)<br>Non-education |
| + *Field of discursivity* | (C)<br>? | (D)<br>Jean Piaget, Ernst von Glasersfeld |

**Figure 3:** Power and education in the postmodern condition

between knowledge and non-knowledge is constantly challenged and overthrown because of the workings of the field of discursivity and the processes of antagonism.[21]

What is the implication for the evaluation of some of the existing theories of learning? Within learning theory it is hard to find perspectives that simultaneously address both the conservative and the revolutionary challenges. Most theories inspired by the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky emphasize a distinction between the experienced and the non-experienced. They tend to emphasize the relation knowledge/non-knowledge, anticipating a particular social order. These theories do not discuss anything looking like a field of discursivity.[22] On the other hand we find a group of theories that emphasize the contingency, that is, the constant challenge and penetration, of any existing knowledge. This is the case for a group of theorists inspired by Jean Piaget. Their common theme is a focus on interruptions of any cognitive order. However, none of these ideas, at least as they are commonly interpreted, is able to conceptualise how a given order is structured as an organisation of hierarchical knowledge. The operations of the constructivist Piagean subject take place in an environment free of suppressive influences. If we evaluate Piaget by postmodern standards, his thinking is interesting as far as the moment of change is concerned. That is, his ideas can be understood as a theory of how the discursive field interacts with the accepted system of knowledge. But his theory cannot organise structures of knowledge with any great specificity.[23]

I have now identified the contents of cell A and D in Figure 3. Cell B is rather a case of non-education. I would not be surprised to find a school where there is no structure of knowledge and no observable interplay with a field of discursivity, but that is an empirical matter. Cell C is, however, more interesting, because it reveals an area which in my knowledge is not adequately discussed within existing educational theories. This area concerns a concept of postmodern power and education where structures of knowledge and a field of discursivity can be conceptualised simultaneously. It is an area that can only be illuminated by digging deep into the masterpieces or classics of educational and philosophical thought, because as far as I am aware there are no contemporary attempts to address the issue directly.[24] If this identification of a theoretical void is valid, it means that we have so far not been able to interrogate the theory, research and practice of education adequately.

Another and related conclusion is that the relation between power and education becomes far more complex and open than before. The reader may recall how, after the discussion of the poststructuralist concept of power, we ended up with a rather reduced notion, leaving education in an iron cage of structure and causality. The reconfiguration of the field of power and education suggested in this paper implies that each moment of

the social has its own field of knowledge and its own field of discursivity. Each educational effort, the poststructuralist included, should involve both aspects. Postmodern education is an open and always unsettled interaction between the local substances of knowledge. Postmodern power, like the first enabling antagonism (autonomy), is what makes this negotiation possible in the first place. I hope that you can now see that *if we combine a postmodern concept of power with a postmodern perspective on education, the need for reflection is re-opened.* Thus, postmodern theory does not necessarily position the concepts of education and power as opposed to each other. The key question for further research is whether this theoretical opening is also an opening for a *new relation between postmodernity and enlightenment*, resulting in even a reformulation of the former quotation from Edwards and Usher, as something like 'education fits easily into the postmodern moment'.

## Notes

1. As in 'postmodernism is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state' (Lyotard, 1979, p. 79).
2. As in 'We could use our language to construct alternative worlds in which there is no gravity or cancer, or in which persons and birds are equivalent, and punishmeng adored' (Gergen, 1999, p. 47).
3. See Peters & Wain, 2003 and Marshall, 2004, pp. xiii–xvii for a thorough discussion of the similarities and differences between postmoderrnism and poststructuralism.
4. See Burbules, 2000 for a similar argument concerning the works of Lyotard. Notice also Lyotard himself, in quotes such as in 'to speak is to fight' (Lyotard 1979, p. 10). Further examples of monopolising theories of education by political metaphors include the perspective of situated learning, where Etienne Wenger (1998) speaks of 'regimes of competence'. Later in his life Foucault partly abandoned the paradigm of power (Foucault, 2001). Instead he spoke of a critical and open attitude based on the attempt to create a unity between thinking, speaking and acting.
5. This also seems to be the view of Rancière: 'So while it is important to show, as Michael Foucault has done magnificently, that the police order extends well beyond its specialized institutions and techniques, it is equally important to say that nothing is political it itself merely because power relationships are at work in it' (Rancière, 1999, p. 32).
6. This is what is meant in: 'any consensus on the rules defining a game and the "moves" playable within it *must* be local' (Lyotard, 1979, p. 66). A universalisation of the concept of power is therefore a denial of the local character of postmodern knowledge.
7. This is based on a general reference to the London school that defines education as 'valuable learning', thereby insisting on a (philosophically) normative foundation of educational theory instead of a sociological foundation (see Pring, 2000, pp. 7–15 and Hirst & Peters, 1970, p. 20). The question is, of course, what counts as valuable, particularly in an educational landscape characterised by plurality.
8. See Clegg, 1989.
9. If 'politics of the scientific statement' (see Foucault, above) and similar formulations are relevant to educational thinking, political theory gains immediate importance for pedagogy.
10. Recent discussions, instead, take their points of departure in Kant's third critique *Critique of Judgment* and in his political essays. These contributions emphasize how the concepts of morality and knowledge must always work in a public space. This reduces the tendency to look at the relationship between ethics and epistemology as a dichotomy, focussing instead on how thinking, morality and politics interact in much more subtle ways (e.g. Arendt, 1992). An example from Kant's political thinking of how morality and epistemology interact is found in: 'All actions affecting the rights of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is not

compatible with their being made public' (Kant, 1991, p. 126). And an instance of the strong presence of a political vocabulary in his epistemological writings is: 'Without the control of criticism reason is, as it were, in a state of nature, and can only establish its claims and assertions by *war*. Criticism, on the contrary, deciding all questions according to the funda-mental laws of its own institution, secures to us the peace of law and order, and enables us to discuss all differences in the more tranquil manner of a legal *process*. In the former case, disputes are ended by *victory*, which both sides may claim, and which is followed by a hollow armistice; in the latter, by a *sentence*, which as it strikes at the root of all speculative differences, ensures to all concerned a lasting peace ... Just as Hobbes maintains that the state of nature is a state of injustice and violence ...' (Kant, 1988, §429). Notice the coming together of epistemological and political vocabulary in a totally different spirit from the simple Lukesian separation of knowledge and morality.

11. See Blake & Masschelein (2003, p. 45) for a description of Habermas's and the postfreudian project: 'Only a dialogue whose participants strive for optimal mutual understanding can hope to release the subject from unconscious tutelage, whether to neurotic fantasy or to ideological illusion'. In another passage inspired by Habermas, we find the same idea: 'Critical theory insists that the more individuals understand about the social determinants of their actions, the more likely they are to escape from the ideological constraints to which they were previously subject' (Carr, 1995, p. 113). For the connection between Critical Theory, reason and enlightenment: 'Both critical social science and education are expressions of an Enlightenment belief in the power of human reason' (Carr, 1995, p. 115).

12. This is an optimistic version of Critical Theory. For a distinction between optimistic and pessimistic versions of Critical Theory, see Blake & Masschelein, 2003. Optimism is displayed in expressions such as 'Critical educational theorists are, however, united in their attempts to empower the powerless and to transform social inequalities and unjustices' (McLaren, 1995, p. 29). The pessimist approach is found in the classical works of Horkheimer and Adorno.

13. An example is Foucault's critique of the concept of ideology, as in: 'The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to make use of ... [because] ... it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth ...' (Foucault, 1980, p. 118).

14. All that is left of Critical Theory in such a case is the cry 'I don't know what, but not this!' (Blake & Masschelein, 2003, p. 55). (Just as when at the close of the era of Logical Positivism, Morris Schlick almost desperately burst out with 'I see what I see' (Schlick, 1959). Concerning poststructuralism, the relationship between power as a destructive and a productive and even an ethical force is indeed debatable. I leave this subject here, for the sake of argument, just presupposing the primarily negative interpretation. In the next part of the article I will present a perspective on 'power' more in line with a productive approach to the concept.

15. Which in fact is rarely correct upon a closer inspection. Like Logical Positivism, some constructivist ideas are based on insights from British empiricism (e.g. Glasersfeld, 1995).

16. Hannah Arendt describes a similar field with the metaphor of the pearl diver, picking up hidden wonders from the abyss, that is, looking at the past (the hidden pearl) with the eye of the present (the daylight) as in 'this meant that the quotations he collected were used not to re-establish a connection to the past, but to arrest the flow of the present and introduce something new' (Gordon, 2001, p. 50).

17. See Dyrberg, 2001 for this idea.

18. This state of nature was a state of war: '... during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre'. In this condition, there is no 'culture of the earth, no navigation ... , no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society ... and the life of man is solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes, 1968, pp. 185–186). Only through a contract in which everybody simultaneously agrees to hand over all power, also over one's own person, to an absolute monarch, could all these things (art, knowledge etc.) exist at all. In recent political theory, this is used as an example of a political logic describing the relationship between power and authority, not only with respect to states, but also for all places describable in vocabularies of

power (see Clegg, 1989, p. 21ff.). Some might object to this linking together of postmodernity with contract theory. They should not, however, because this is exactly the link made by Lyotard himself and by some of his commentators (see Nuyen, 2000). It is the political logic of the language game.

19. This is in fact more in agreement with Kant's original intention. For him, causality was exactly an attribute of the workings of the understanding and not of an independent objective reality. In a Kantian interpretation inspired by Wittgenstein, the categories and forms of understanding are situated within the language games, exactly as I have just done.

20. This touches upon a classic (Greek) distinction between politics and thinking. For instance in: 'Philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society' (Strauss, 1959, p. 221).

21. Compare with Jaques Rancière: 'The government of science will always end up a government of 'natural elites', in which the social power of those with expert compentences is combined with the power of wealth, at the cost once more of provoking a democratic disorder that displaces the boundaries of the political' (Rancière, 2006, p. 69). This distinction between government and democracy, which Rancière implies, is completely equivalent to the distinction between the levels of knowledge/non-knowledge and the field of discursivity in Figure 3.

22. See e.g. recent theories of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

23. See Glasersfeld, 1995 and Fosnot, 1996.

24. There are exceptions (see Standish, 2000 and Rorty, 1999), where the postmodern duality shows itself as a simple parallel structure. First the distinction between knowledge and non-knowledge is produced. This is the schooling of childhood. Critical thinking, the interplay between structures of knowledge and discursive fields, is not introduced until the university years. See also the works of Jacques Rancière, Hannah Arendt, Dana Villa and Mikhail Bakhtin for a more subtle interplay between the two aspects of education. At least, these are my own inspirations for further work on this matter.

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