

The death of postmodernism in indigenous educational theory

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Postmodernism is an attractive concept for the indigenous scholar who comes to understand the close and necessary historical linkages between modernism and Western colonisation. Postmodernism promises a movement beyond the era in which capitalism and Euro-American culture became globally dominant. By definition, the process of globalisation has entailed the loss of human (and non-human) diversity: the subjugation of the territories, languages and cultures of many smaller ethnic groups through assimilation or annihilation.

The concept of postmodernism in educational theory has depended on a comparison with modernity: hence the importance of relativism in understanding its nature. By contrast with the positivist foundationalism of modernity, postmodernism has been negatively defined, as a kind of not-modernism. This characteristic is shared with indigeneity, which can best be defined as ‘not-Western’ – an identity produced by a form of centrifugal motion, ever in danger of collapsing into the centre of gravity. Perhaps it is the transitory nature of postmodernist phenomena that produces a sense of playfulness, while the ability of globalised capitalism to colonise any cultural material produces an apparent hybridity. There is, after all, a fine distinction between cultural hybridity and cultural appropriation.

Indigenous theory in the contemporary milieu has relied on the insights of Foucault, dubbed the “arch postmodernist” (Kirby, 2017), and his concepts of discourse, power and subjectivity. These critical understandings are essential to indigenous political projects of resistance to contemporary colonising forces. Yet the relationship between postmodernism and indigeneity has been fraught: at times theoretically productive, but ultimately ineffectual in terms of macro politics and power relationships in the world. This contradictory relationship is traced by Steven Webster (1993), including as an example the political controversy caused by an essay about the ‘invention’ of Māori culture (Hanson, 1989). By destabilising the essentialist approach to the study of culture that has dominated the development of the discipline of anthropology, Hanson put at risk the academic support for Māori political struggles.

In essence, postmodernism left politics behind, and in so doing allowed capitalism to continue unchecked in its mission to extend market relations to “cover all forms of voluntary behavior amongst individuals” (Olssen & Peters, 2015, p. 55). Postmodernism, notes Webster, “may be seen to be an unacknowledged theory separated from its practice, rather than (as is often claimed) spontaneous practice freed from grandiose theory” (p. 237). From an indigenous point of view, then, the end of postmodernism can be read as an acceptance that Western colonisation has not gone away, no matter how much it may have changed its forms and ways of operating. Perhaps the so-called death of postmodernism, in educational theory at least, is more of a stillbirth: the end of postmodernism is tantamount to an admission that it never really began: its promise unfulfilled; the dream once more deferred.

References

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