



INTERRUPTING **HISTORY**

Rethinking History Curriculum
after 'The End of History'

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Preface: Millennial Concerns

As a way of situating my book, and performing a little *currere*, I would like to share a number of millennial concerns, framed in terms of an aspect of my own curriculum, or life “course.” William F. Pinar, one of the most significant players in the reconceptualization of curriculum studies over the past four decades, uses *currere*, the infinitive form of *curriculum*, in order to privilege the autobiographical aspect of educational experience (Pinar, 1975). From this point of view, *curriculum* is read as the course of one’s life rather than just a school syllabus document or the experience of school-based education. Thus, following Pinar, I begin with a concern that encouraged me to write this preface. Shortly after the millennium, a retiring president of the Australian Association for Research in Education, the dean of faculty at the university where I worked at the time, asked why we couldn’t just return to “good old-fashioned forms of Marxist analysis.” There was humor in his tone, but what was striking to me about his rhetorical question was the idea of a “return” to a particular pre-postmodernist form of analysis. The notion of “return” struck me as strange, given that I had never really been there in the first place. Of course, even a cursory glance at research texts produced in different times and places shows that they are marked by quite different peculiarities and regularities of style and concern. So here was my problem.

I was born the year that Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* was published in France (1966); in the same year, the first English translation of Jacques Derrida’s work appeared in the United States, and Roland Barthes was composing “The Discourse of History.” Barthes’s postmodern turn, marked by the production of *S/Z* (1970), was complete before I started school in 1971. When Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* was translated into English by the postcolonial theorist Spivak in 1976, I was ten years old and facing the death of my grandfather, who had been my “da” in name and in spirit. When Foucault passed away in 1984, the same year Lyotard’s report on the postmodern condition was translated into English, I was completing my final year of high school. Although I flirted briefly with an arts degree in 1985, it was another decade before I began studying for my Bachelor of Education degree. By the time I enrolled at the University of Sydney in 1996 the academy had been responding to postmodern and poststructuralist concerns for more than twenty-five years, and we had finally, and convincingly, entered into the postindustrial world of the Internet, in which Foucault’s shift of concern from

the “mode of production” to the “mode of information,” as Poster (1984) describes it, seemed prophetic. Despite the existence of “old Marxists” in the faculty, poststructuralism had emerged as a distinct form of analysis that not only was agreeable to the postmodern sensibilities of those of us marked by the sign of erasure (Generation X), but also formed part of the intellectual space in which our postpunk academic subjectivities were being fashioned. Thus, although we might be haunted by Marx (as Derrida suggests, and my own critical pedagogy leanings betray), we can never *return* to Marx.

If the decline of Marxism can really be traced back to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Soviet Communism, then there was little hope for me. It wasn’t until 1996, well after Fukuyama (1989) had first announced the end of history, that I returned to study in the academy, which was already becoming a posthistorical institution (Peters, 1998) with the ghost of Marx lingering in those offices of a recalcitrant old guard who had yet to give up on the Revolution. However, even if both the Gen-Xers and the old guard were oblivious to Marx’s passing, we knew that the end of the millennium was fast approaching. As primary school students, we Gen-Xers had calculated ourselves into that future many times, hardly believing that we would be adults, perhaps with children of our own, when the calendar finally had caught up with our imaginations. So millennial concerns had been part of our lives for a considerable period when Gorbachev and the Soviet Union finally went the way of Marx, and I do remember thinking in 1991 as I sat watching the (first) Gulf War unfold on CNN, oblivious to Fukuyama, that I finally might be experiencing the end of history. At the time, I didn’t have Baudrillard’s reassurance that this was just a televisual simulation of war (or as he described it in 1995, a high-tech form of one-sided electrocution), but I did have a baby son, which made the simulacra that much harder to resist.

Of course, we Gen-Xers were not the first generation to anticipate our coming-of-age at Armageddon, but for us, the end of history has *always* been shrouded in a radiation cloud (Anijar, 2004). This is probably why, when a friend at a dinner party asked what my writing was about, she was surprised at my answer that I was considering the implications of the end of history for History curriculum. It was self-evident to her that history had not ended, because events were still transpiring as we spoke. Her reaction demonstrated her investment in reading the end of history through the haze of a mushroom cloud, but it also revealed a great deal about a particular understanding of “history,” and it indicated her lack of familiarity with “posthistorical discourse” in contemporary philosophy, politics, and history theory. What I took to be a topic of great importance from my location within the academy was regarded with incredulity at the dinner table. I make this point because despite

being regarded by influential commentators as “a sign of the times,” the end of history remains a somewhat esoteric concept with a number of diverse and conflicting associations (Jameson, 1998; Niethammer, 1992; Vattimo, 1991).

The idea that history is facing an inevitable end has been around for some time. Historians have noted, for example, that at the turn of the first millennium many European Christians expected the Messiah to return and engage in a “complete winding up of the created order and the imposition of a posthistorical age of divine rule” (Rayment-Pickard, 2000, p. 301). By the time of the Renaissance this view had been rejected by the European intelligentsia and replaced with a secularized Enlightenment view of the end of history as the self-perfection of humanity. However, the constant fear of imminent annihilation—which followed us through the Cold War and seems to be reignited by every new conflict, including the Bush Administration’s War on Terror and recent tensions over rocket testing in the Korean peninsula—has constituted a social sphere in which the religious subtext of an impending apocalypse persists as a cultural undercurrent (Anijar, 2004; Giroux, 2001). Perhaps ironically, it is “technocratic rationality,” a particular legacy of the Enlightenment functioning as the modus operandi of militarily invested governments around the globe, that has painted the apocalypse as more possibility than prophecy.

Over the last few decades of the twentieth century, end-of-history rhetoric emerged as a marker of intellectual debate over the status of history within neoliberal, poststructuralist, and neopositivist traditions. Although we really can only speculate about why end-of-history rhetoric erupted in a multiplicity of forms at this particular historical moment, the timing of its emergence suggests that it is part of, and a reaction to, a much broader secular millennialism, contingent upon the great social, cultural, and intellectual changes wrought during the late twentieth century. Manifestations of a secular “millennial sensationalism” appeared across a range of Western intellectual and media-driven discourses in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Feldstein, 2001). We would see the manifestation of a new world order as a result of the implosion of the Soviet Union; the anticipated failure of some critical computer systems as a result of the Y2K bug, which was itself intimately connected with the idea of time and a symbol of simmering anxieties about the information society (Fosket & Fishman, 1999); speculation the Earth would experience a cataclysmic collision with asteroid 1997XF11 in 2028, a prediction later challenged as inaccurate; fears that we would be wiped out by HIV/AIDS, a new indestructible plague; and in my own country, the urgency of Australia’s push to become a republic, which was strangely ominous as we approached the centenary of federation, and invested with a millenarian

romanticism (Wark, 1997). I do not mean to suggest that these millennial concerns were “false” because they were tied up in an apocalyptic fixation. HIV/AIDS still demands our attention, and has proven to be devastating in communities across the globe, particularly in Africa and parts of Asia; with September 11, we may well have moved closer to realizing a particular kind of new world order; and the inevitability of an Australian republic still seems a cautious bet, though its timing may no longer suggest an arcane destiny. The important point about this list of millennial declarations is that obsession with the end of history is not simply an academic phenomenon confined to the philosophical works that emerged on the French intellectual scene in the latter half of the twentieth century; instead, it has manifested in a variety of popular forms.

The focus of many films and television series and an important theme in an increasing number of books in the late 1990s, the millennium was clearly on our minds. A retrospective look may deem the millennium a twentieth-century obsession induced by an insatiable desire to create meaning—a motivation that drives the protagonist in the books by Umberto Eco and the readers of a Haruki Murakami novel. What Gould (1997) has called “millennium madness” may have given “to the more academic theories a greater resonance with the temper of their times than is customary,” suggesting that there is “at least an ‘elective affinity’” between the fall of communism, the end of modernity, and the end of the millennium, “even if we would be hard put to specify casual links” (Kumar, 1995, pp. 151–152). Likewise, Frederic Jameson’s assertion in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991, based on an article originally published in the early 1980s) that “these last few years have been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by a sense of the end of this or that” (p. 1) is also pertinent. Reflective of the apocalyptic turn in philosophy stretching back to the post–World War II 1950s and the apocalypticism expressed in popular culture prior to the millennium, talk about the end of history was part of the millennial spirit of the times, a key discourse in the context of the *fin de siècle* (Berkhofer, 1995; Derrida, 1994).

While it may be that end-of-history discourse proliferated towards the turn of the millennium because of long-standing anxieties or the perennial search for meaning, it was reworked within poststructuralism into a decidedly anti-millennial form. Take for example Foucault’s (1971/1994) resistance to ideas of continual development towards a shared finality; Derrida’s (1994) rejection of teleological narrative as little more than a confidence trick; Lyotard’s (1991) skepticism about the future offered by science, which he argues is motivated by an obsession with human survival beyond the supernova of our own sun; and

Baudrillard's (1992) loss of faith in both history and its end/ings as reality and its representations implode. Regardless of the reasons for the widespread emergence of end-of-history rhetoric, it remains, like its conceptual cousins "the demise of the author" and "the end of man," intuitively problematic. Certainly, the end of not just the century but also the millennium was bound to have an influence on the academic theories under consideration (Kumar, 1995) as well as the academic curriculum of the late twentieth century.

Although placing the proliferation of end-of-history rhetoric within its contemporary historical context has been an interesting and necessary intellectual exercise, the substance of this book is not actually concerned with the end of history as a millennial discourse *per se*. Instead, it explores representative positions on the end of history that emerged in contemporary political and philosophical debate, and the significance of those positions for school History. In particular, my concern is with contributions to end-of-history discourse that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, after World War II, in the countdown to the year 2000. Had I adopted a different periodization, figures such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx would have figured more prominently in my analyses, because at least one current stream of thought is indebted to their much earlier theorizing (see Fukuyama, 1992). I am aware that the periodization I have adopted here makes end-of-history discourse seem more a manifestation of, or reaction to, a form of secular millennialism than it might have otherwise. But what is important for this book is the meaning of the end of history and the problems it poses for History as a school subject, rather than its attachment to or its operation as an artifact of the (second) millennium itself.