

Oliverio, Stefano

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on education. Journal for research and debate 3 (2020) 9, 5 S.



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Oliverio, Stefano: 'Post-critiquiness' as nonviolent thing-centredness - In: on education. Journal for research and debate 3 (2020) 9, 5 S. - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-230827 - DOI: 10.25656/01:23082; 10.17899/on_ed.2020.9

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-230827>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:23082>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:

on_education

Journal for Research and Debate

<https://www.oneducation.net>

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‘Post-Critiquiness’ as Nonviolent Thing-Centredness

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Abstract:

After situating the proposal of a post-critical pedagogy (PCP) within the coordinates of the contemporary interdisciplinary debate on the ‘end of the critique’ and ‘post-critique,’ the paper focuses on a specific – but pivotal – facet of PCP, namely the appeal to a thing-centred pedagogy. This theme is addressed by approaching it through the lens of some ideas of Michel Serres as well as of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers. Thing-centredness is construed as what contains violence and, thus, the focus is sharpened on the question of non-violence, which is arguably key to PCP and, indeed, to any genuinely educational endeavour.

Keywords:

critiquiness; Michel Serres; non-violence; post-critique; thing-centred pedagogy

1. Situating Post-Critical Pedagogy

The post-critical turn in education can be approached from at least two points of view (obviously not completely unrelated): first, it can be interpreted as the proposition of a paradigm shift in educational research or, more cautiously and accurately, as the proposal of an alternative ‘perspective’ which should help us to regain dimensions of the educational undertaking that the critical framework risks letting recede into the background. Thus, the discussion about critique/post-critique is internal to the field of educational theory and the question is whether there is any compatibility between the two perspectives and if, this is the case, along which lines it can be realized.

In this horizon, one could reconstruct a history of debates about a post-critical stance in education lasting for decades (Mejía Delgado, 2020, pp. 53 ff.) and whose point of departure can be traced back to a paper of Ellsworth (1989). This interpretive move would in no way reduce the topicality and the novelty of the recently published *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Hodgson et al., 2017) but it would include its endeavours and tenets within a broader context, by showing how much, hegemonic though the critical stance has been over the last decades in educational theory, it has also experienced challenges and problematizations. Here the reference is not to objections of scholars and educators unsympathetic with critical pedagogy or appealing to conservative pedagogies but rather of authors who, while recognizing its significance, have come to see it either as not completely in keeping with the task of education in changed scenarios (see Serra & Antelo, 2013) or as resulting in unwelcome outcomes (such as a ‘politicization’ of the educational undertaking: see Noguera Ramírez, 2020, p. 42)

which may require a different spin. While being activated by a post-critical stance, this spin would, moreover, reverberate on our understanding of the critical tradition itself, insofar as one could come to identify ‘post-critical’ elements also in authors of the critical canon.¹

Pursuing this interpretive line would raise a series of questions: is the appeal to a post-critical pedagogy really a different research program (to adopt the phrase of Kai Wortmann in his contribution to this issue) or is a post-critical stance intrinsic to the critical undertaking itself, as long as the latter maintains its self-critical tension and does not ossify into a form of orthodoxy? And, if this is the case, can we really consider a post-critical pedagogy as the inauguration of a different view or is it just ‘parasitic’ to the tradition of critical pedagogy?² Should we rather look forward to a “pedagogy without attributes” (Serra & Antelo, 2013; Noguera Ramírez, 2020) and would only the latter really instantiate the post-critical appeal to a defence of education for education’s sake (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 18)?

While not gainsaying the merits of critical pedagogy, the authors of the *Manifesto* would probably not settle for a view of their endeavour simply in terms of a corrective to excesses or drifts of the critical tradition but would tend to see it as an alternative take on what education is all about. If the “problematic kernel of critical pedagogies” (Noguera Ramírez, 2020, p. 41 ff.) is represented by their bellicosity and mistrust (ultimately linked with a predominantly politicized stance), post-critical pedagogy would reclaim, instead, an ethos of protection and care, grounded in a specific understanding of education built upon an inventive interweaving of motifs from Hannah Arendt, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway and contemporary educational philosophy

and theory.³ In this sense, while one may invoke an interlacement of the two stances,⁴ it should be illegitimate to conceive of the post-critical as only ‘parasitic’ to the critical.

As mentioned at the beginning, the idea of a post-critical stance can be approached also from a second perspective, by situating it within an interdisciplinary web of relations and considering it as the pedagogical inflection of a debate occurring across different domains, from literary criticism to epistemology and philosophy. Thus, the post-critical appeal to a shift from a hermeneutical pedagogy (pivoting on a hermeneutics of suspicion) to a pedagogical hermeneutics (Hodgson et al., 2017) would parallel the call, in literary criticism, for a “post-critical reading” that replaces “guardedness [with] openness, aggression [with] submission, irony [with] reverence, exposure [with] tact” (Felski, 2015, p. 21) in relation to a text.

Moreover, the invitation to go beyond a “critical mood” (Felski, 2015, p. 20) and “critiquiness” (Römhild, 2015) is in keeping also with a major axis of the philosophical stance of Michel Serres. In the rest of this paper, I will focus precisely on how far the question of an “end of the critique” (Serres, 1992a, pp. 181–239) has been developed in his dialogue with Bruno Latour. My aim is not to ‘apply’ their tenets to post-critical pedagogy but rather to show how far some of its themes resonate with (and perhaps help to further elaborate) that philosophical stance. In particular, I will put in the spotlight the question of thing-centredness and argue that the abandonment of the logic of violence – presiding over the dominance of the critique, according to Serres – can be fruitfully addressed in terms of the circuit of thing-centred pedagogy, affirmation and love of the world (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019) which is the tripod of post-critical pedagogy.

2. From Panoptic Theory and ‘Critiquiness’ to Pedagogical Thing-Centredness and Educational Love

Naomi Hodgson has forcefully captured one of the springs of the post-critical project saying that

the purpose here is a reorienting of critique from one that reveals a hidden ‘truth’ (and therefore maintains the place of such critique in the order of things), to one that articulates those aspects of our current conditions that are left out of view by both dominant discourses and practices, and by the negative critiques that show us how we are oppressed by these. (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 81)

The main target is principally (but not exclusively) poststructuralist theory, insofar as it is accomplice with the attitude of wariness and mistrust portrayed above.

Serres (1989) dedicated powerful pages to what he called “panoptic theory”, by showing its intimate relationship with an attitude of critique and suspicion. It is on this bond between theory, critique and suspicion which I will briefly focus. It is to highlight that Serres’ reservations about the ethos of critique are part and parcel of his more general engagement with a recoiling from violence, that “remained all [his] life long the major problem” and the question of his thinking (Serres, 1992a, p. 17). This reverberated also on his thought style,⁵ as a sympathetic reader like Latour (1987, p. 91) has noted:

Serres’ philosophy is free from negation. [...] Nothing is achieved, we all admit too quickly, without struggle, and dispute, and wars, and destruction. Serres’ philosophy is first of all a reflection on violence, on what violence may or may not achieve, and this he does in all spheres of life, in politics, in economies, in scholarship, in physics. The world is innocent as well as positive and new. (Latour (1987, p. 91)

The way in which Serres outlines the web of relations between violence, critique and panoptic theory is evocative and, as is always the case with his reflection, it combines epistemology with explorations in other realms of culture (and, more specifically, ancient mythology). He speaks of a kind of police philosophy that aims at putting itself in a position where it may not be under suspicion, because “the final goal of critique is that of escaping any critique, of being not criticizable” (Serres, 1992a, p. 195). The position of this kind of philosophy is thus behind (or over) the world and its strategies are underhand and judgemental, they are “on the side of judgement” (Serres, 1992a, p. 199), of that violent decision (etymologically: cutting off) that demarcates, classifies and excludes.

Addressing theory in human sciences he harps on similar notes: it is panoptic, ‘all-eyed’, as the Argus of the myth (called Panoptes), who instantiates

the position of those who would critique while never being critiqued: an observing presence with no observable opacity, always a subject, never an object. No one can take Panoptes from behind, he has no behind, no underneath. He is an all-scrutinizing sphere. (Serres, 1989, p. 37)

Likewise, “[a]lways behind the object or the relation,” the “method [of human sciences] is critical, hypocritical. It swindles the swindlers, deceives the deceivers, hides behind the cheaters’ backs” (Serres, 1989, p. 33).

In his suggestive vocabulary, Serres captures the spiral of suspicion (and, relatedly, of denunciation and debunking)

that animates the critical mood and theories, with their negative stance (what the proponents of post-critical pedagogy would call the ‘hatred of the world’) and he advocates, instead, a stance that Latour (1987, p. 91) is tempted to define “positive”. Similarly, Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019, p. 76) have appealed to a “purely positive” manner of conceiving of education, that remains faithful to “the meaningfulness immanent to” the phenomenon of education (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019, p. 77). In a Serresian spirit, we can understand this positive attitude also as the invitation not to address education by over-imposing metalanguages: indeed, “‘Critique’ philosophers firmly install their metalanguage in the centre and slowly *substitute* their arguments to every single object of the periphery” (Latour, 1987, p. 90) and this procedure – applied in educational theory and philosophy – risks finally “impoverishing educational transformation, if not killing it off” (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, p. 77).

To contain the spiral of critique and suspicion and, more radically, violence, Serres (1989) invokes a return to the “object”. If a critical mood is marked by bellicosity and wariness and this is the core of the tendency to politicization (see §1 of this essay), the Serresian response would consist in the valorization of the object, insofar as “the more politics there is, the fewer objects there are and, conversely, the more the objective thrust increases, the more the political one decreases” (Serres, 2001, p. 348).

We should not be misled by the vocabulary of ‘objectivity’: Serres is way remote from any modern discourse on objectivism/subjectivism and his views are rather close to the idea of thing-centredness as spelled out in educational terms by post-critical pedagogy. In accordance with Serres’ (1989) emphasis on objects rather than relations, Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019) warn about the “misconception” according to which “education is *either* teacher-centred *or* student-centred” and they argue that “[t]he dimension which defines them as students and teachers is the *thing* they study, i.e. a particular aspect of the world, a subject *matter*: languages, carpentry, mathematics, cooking, music, etc. [...] education always takes place in relation to a concrete thing, something that has a materiality of its own. The fundamental task of the teacher is then to show that the thing of study actually ‘matters’. In that sense s/he is not in authority, but gives authority to the thing in question. If s/he succeeds in showing that it matters, students are under the authority of the thing too (rather than under the authority of the teacher). This material authority is overlooked by both teacher- and student-centred views” (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, pp. 23–24).

The post-critical ‘thing’ is not a “matter of fact” but a “matter of concern” (Latour, 2004) and, thus, something

around which a collective gathers, being attentive to it because it is thought-provoking or, better, it is worth thinking about,

something that is in and of itself worth of attention and passing on to the next generation [...] something that is important in and of itself – something we should care about, and that is worth of the effort of study. (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, p. 55)

This may be the quintessential post-critical gesture searching for an “Enlightenment without the critique” (Latour, 1987): in outlining the profile of such an Enlightenment, Isabelle Stengers (2015) has noted that we should have become aware that critique turns into a “poison” once it conceives of its function merely as that of dissolving what creates bonds and attachments, whereas in the face of the coming barbarism the question is to recognize “the causes able to make us think, invent, and act, to allow us to repopulate our devastated history” (Stengers, 2015, p. 114).

It is extremely significant that post-critical pedagogy relates this post-critical gesture fundamentally to the gesture of teaching. This may be its most relevant contribution to the reflection on an ethos of post-critique. Indeed, while also in Serres a vibrant pedagogical tension is present and his appeal to a new wisdom is intimately related to the need for a pedagogical revolution (Serres, 1992a, p. 265), he often seems to be sceptical about the ‘constructive’ role of the school, which seems to represent only a preparatory phase: “The goal of the school is the cessation of the school [...] the end and the goal of instruction is the invention” (Serres, 1992a, p. 194) and the latter happens essentially outside the school.⁶ In contrast, a post-critical pedagogical stance vindicates the significance of teaching and construes it in terms of *educational love*, whose dynamics is sustained by the thing (the subject matter) worth thinking and caring about (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, p. 36). Educational love is to be viewed as a redescription of the venerable idea of *studium*, study, a manifestation of “diligence” to oppose to the “negligence” (Serres, 1992b, p. 81) that rages in our era and puts all of us at risk (an us encompassing humans and non-humans).

As a place of study, focusing on matters of concern, the school may become an outpost for new, emerging “modes of working together that would create a taste for the demands of cooperation and the experience of the strength of a collective that works to succeed ‘all together’ against the evaluation that separates and judges” (Stengers, 2015, p. 31). In this respect, it certainly accomplishes a political function but without ceding to the politicizing drift under the sign of bellicosity and mistrust which represents “the problematic kernel of critical pedagogies” (Noguera Ramírez, 2020, p. 41 ff.).

Approached from this perspective, a post-critical or positive/affirmative stance is not parasitic to critical pedagogy but alternative to it, redescribing in different terms the relation between education and politics.⁷

Or should we rather think of them as complementary? By adopting a foolhardy analogy with physics, do we need a sort of pedagogical ‘principle of complementarity’ that takes into

account the validity of both descriptions (the critical and post-critical) of the task of education, while recognizing their incompatibility? Does this kind of ‘complementarity’ constitutively belong to the pedagogical project of the Western tradition with its ‘polemical commonality’ of education and politics as it has emerged since its very beginning in the Greek polis?⁸

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Recommended Citation

Oliverio, S. (2020). ‘Post-critiquiness’ as nonviolent thing-centredness. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 3(9). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2020.9.6

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¹ See, in reference to the thought of Paulo Freire, Mejía Delgado (2020) but also Noguera Ramírez (2020, p. 42).

² I am adopting and adapting the word ‘parasitic’ from Sartre (1985), who distinguishes between the real philosophy and ‘ideology’: the former, “so long as [it is] alive, serves as a cultural milieu for its contemporaries” (p. 19) and represents “the humus of every particular thought and the horizon of all culture” (p. 21); the latter is parasitic to it in that it “get[s] [its] nourishment from [the former’s] living thought” (p. 22), by confining itself to complementing it with some themes or better elucidations of some aspects left under-explored by living philosophy.

³ A sophisticated elaboration of a post-critical stance in reference to contemporary educational philosophy and theory is performed, via a dialogue with Rorty, by Bianca Thoilliez (2019).

⁴ A brilliant reflection on this interlacement of critique and post-critique may be found in Wortmann (2019), arguing “that post-critical pedagogy should simultaneously be anti-critical and critical. That is to say, in one sense of the word, critical pedagogy is misguided, while in another sense of the word, critical pedagogy is necessary for post-critical pedagogy” (p. 468).

⁵ I take the expression “thought style” from Felski (2015, p. 2).

⁶ For a discussion of this fundamentally anti-scholastic attitude of Serres, see Oliverio (2020b).

⁷ For a post-critical reflection on the relation between education and politics see Vlieghe and Zamojski (2020).

⁸ For the questions of what I have called elsewhere a ‘philosophical-educational Big Bang’ and of the ‘worldward’ movement of education as distinct but related to politics, see Oliverio (2018, 2020a).