

# BENJAMIN R. BARBER



Radical Excess & Post-Modernism

Presentation By **Benedetta Barnabo Cachola**

# BENJAMIN R. BARBER

- An internationally renowned political theorist, Dr. Barber( b. 1939) brings an abiding concern for democracy and citizenship to issues of politics, culture and education in America and abroad.
- He is the Walt Whitman Professor of Political Science and director of the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy at Rutgers University



# PERSPECTIVES ON THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM IN EDUCATION

- In this reading, he looks at the possibility that **Post-Modernism** and **Deconstructionism** may become new orthodoxies.
- He sees as a problem replacing a dogma with another one.



# POST-MODERNISM

- The term was coined in 1949, as a reaction to Modernism.
- Influenced by the disillusionment induced by the Second World War.
- Denies the existence of any ultimate principles and hierarchy.
- Reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. Lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody ( which is a characteristic of the "modern" mind).
- Reality is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality.
- In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything.
- Relies on concrete experience over abstract principles.
- Sees one's own experience as fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal.
- Umberto Eco's *The name of the Rose*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and much of E. L. Doctorow's writing are considered to be postmodernist examples of literature.

# DECONSTRUCTIONISM

- Closely tied to Post-Modernism
- Term coined in 1960 by Jacques Derrida in his paper "*Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*". He launched a major critique of traditional Western metaphysics.
- It takes apart the logic of language in which authors make their claims, a process that reveals how all texts undermine themselves in that every text includes unconscious "traces" of other positions exactly opposite to that which it sets out to uphold.
- It undermines *logocentrism*, therefore the 'meaning' of a text bears only accidental relationship to the author's conscious intentions. One of its effects is that it has loosened language from concepts and referents.
- It challenges to the attempt to establish any ultimate or secure meaning in a text.
- Based on the premise that much of human history, in trying to understand, and then define, reality has led to various

# POST-MODERNIST & DECONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW OF EDUCATION

- Teachers should have a socially transformative role, help students “deconstruct” the dominant group’s vision of social reality and justice, and to replace dominant conceptions of knowledge with visions of social reality based on their own experience of it.



## BARBER'S STANCE ON THIS VIEW:

- Questioning the elite's views and voice can be a pedagogical tool as long as it does not end in total nihilism; denying any objectivity, any rationality, any esthetic value has no pedagogical value



# BARBER'S PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW:

- Barber concedes that progressive educators start from a positive starting point: they seek more equality, more justice and better education for all, but he disagrees on how they go about it. He sees hyperskepticism and hyperpluralism as negatives:
  - *Hyperskepticism, where each argument turns endlessly on itself and where values are rendered relative.*
  - *Hyperpluralism, since the over-differentiation destroys any possibility of integrating a community.*



# BARBER'S PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW CONT.

Barber thinks that questioning everything as a representation of power and interest; that removing reason and justice leaves us without the ability of establishing a positive affirmative pedagogy.

A teacher cannot teach when his/her only choice is between dogma and nothingness, between orthodoxy and meaninglessness, between someone's value hegemony and the relativism of all values.



# BARBER'S VIEW OF EDUCATION:

- It should be a dialectic in which there should be a balance between probing and accepting, between questioning and giving an answer, between a dogmatic belief in absolutes and cynical negation of all belief.
- It starts with questioning, but at one point there is the need for answers to be accepted.



# BARBER ON CULTURE

Barber sees as a negative the non assigning a value to anything, the non making distinctions between high and pop culture. The only result is:

“To annul the power of the word ‘culture’ as a standard of human organization, aesthetic and intellectual evolution, and general excellence does nothing to enhance cultural pluralism or learning in the name of liberty and respect. On the contrary, it creates the impression that there are no standards of excellence whatsoever other than the bogus claims advanced by elites”. (Barber p. 206)



# TERMS & DEFINITIONS

- **Postmodernism:** In literature, it is a reaction against an ordered view of the world and therefore against fixed ideas about the form and meaning of texts. This reaction is reflected in eclectic styles of writing through the use of such device as pastiche and parody as well as development of such concepts as the absurd, the antihero and the antinovel, and magic realism. The perception of the relativity of meaning has also led to the proliferation of critical theories, most notable deconstruction and its offshoots. (Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature)
- **Deconstructionism:** A method of literary criticism, which assumes that language, refers only to itself rather than to an extra textual reality and which asserts multiple conflicting interpretations of a text and bases such interpretations on the philosophical, political, or social implications of the use of language in the text rather than on the author's intention. It takes apart the logic of language in which authors make their claims, a process that reveals how all texts undermine themselves in that every text includes unconscious "traces" of other positions exactly opposite to that which it sets out to uphold. It undermines *logocentrism*; therefore the 'meaning' of a text bears only accidents relationship to the author's conscious intentions. One of its effects is that it has loosened language from concepts and referents. (Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature)
- **Skepticism:** skepticism refers to the teachings and the traits of the Skeptikoi, a school of philosophers of whom it was said that they "asserted nothing but only opined" (Liddell and Scott). In this sense, philosophical skepticism, or Pyrrhonism, is the philosophical position that one should avoid the postulation of final truths. Turned on itself, skepticism would question that skepticism is a valid perspective at all. (Wikipedia)
- **Reductionism:** philosophical position that a complex system is nothing but the sum of its parts, and that an account of it can be reduced to accounts of individual constituents. (Wikipedia)



# TERMS & DEFINITIONS CONT.

- **Solipsism:** (Latin: solus, alone + ipse, self) is the philosophical idea that "My mind is the only thing that I know exists." Solipsism is an epistemological or metaphysical position that knowledge of anything outside the mind is unjustified. The external world and other minds cannot be known and might not exist. In the history of philosophy, solipsism has served as a skeptical hypothesis. (Wikipedia)
- **Nihilism:** is a philosophical position which argues that Being, especially past and current human existence, is without objective meaning, purpose, comprehensible truth, or essential value. Nihilists generally assert some or all of the following: there is no reasonable proof of the existence of a higher ruler or creator; a "true morality" does not exist; objective secular ethics are impossible; therefore, life has, in a sense, no truth, and no action is objectively preferable to any other. (Wikipedia)
- **Subjectivism:** philosophical tenet that accords primacy to subjective experience as fundamental of all measure and law. In an extreme form, it may hold that the nature and existence of every object depends solely on someone's subjective awareness of it. (Wikipedia)
- **Cynicism:** was originally the philosophy of a group of ancient Greeks called the Cynics, founded by Antisthenes. The Cynics rejected all conventions, whether of religion, manners, housing, dress, or decency, advocating the pursuit of virtue in a simple and un-materialistic lifestyle. Currently, the words 'cynicism' generally describes the opinions of those who maintain that self-interest is the primary motive of human behavior, and are disinclined to rely upon sincerity, human virtue, or altruism as motivations. (Wikipedia)



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