

Interrupting History

**A critical-reconceptualisation of
History curriculum after ‘the end of history’**

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

.....

Signed

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, as it must be, for allowing me the time I needed to complete this project, and for being as excited as I was, as I finished it.

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo (1991), has described ‘the end of history’ as a motif of our times. While neo-liberal conservatives such as Francis Fukuyama (1992) celebrated triumphantly, and perhaps rather prematurely after the fall of the Berlin Wall, ‘the end of history’ in the ‘inevitable’ global acceptance of the ideologies of free market capitalism and liberal democracy, methodological postmodernists (including Barthes, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Foucault), mobilised ‘the end of history’ throughout the later half of the twentieth century as a symbol of a crisis of confidence in the discourse of modernity, and its realist epistemologies. This loss of faith in the adequacy of representation has been seen by many positivist and empiricist historians as a threat to the discipline of history, with its desire to recover and reconstruct ‘the truth’ of the past. It is argued by defenders of ‘traditional’ history (from Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994; R. J. Evans, 1997; Marwick, 2001; and Windschuttle, 1996; to Zagorin, 1999), and some postmodernists (most notably, Jenkins, 1999), that if we accept postmodern social theory, historical research and writing will become untenable. This study re-examines the nature of the alleged ‘threat’ to history posed by postmodernism, and explores the implications of postmodern social theory for History as curriculum.

Situated within a broadly-conceived critical-reconceptualist trend in curriculum inquiry, and deploying a form of historically and philosophically oriented ‘deconstructive hermeneutics’, the study explores past attempts to mount, and future possibilities for, a curricular response to the problem of historical representation. The analysis begins with an investigation of ‘end of history’ discourse in contemporary theory. It then proceeds through a critical exploration of the social meliorist changes to, and cultural politics surrounding, the History curriculum in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, from the Bicentennial to the Millennium (1988-2000), a period that marked curriculum as a site of contestation in a series of highly public ‘history wars’ over representations of the nation’s past (S. Macintyre & A. Clark, 2003). It concludes with a discussion of the missed opportunities for ‘critical practice’ within the NSW History curriculum. Synthesising insights into the ‘nature of history’ derived from contemporary academic debate, it is argued that what has remained uncontested in the struggle for ‘critical histories’ during the period under study, are the representational practices of history itself. The study closes with an assessment of the (im)possibility of History curriculum after ‘the end of history’. I argue that if History curriculum is to be a critical/transformational enterprise, then it must attend to the problem of historical representation.

IMPORTANT NOTE

To hopefully eliminate some confusion that comes when attempting to determine the referent of the term ‘history’, I follow the convention of recent History curriculum studies (see A. Clark, 2004), rather than the work of Jenkins (1999; 1997), as far as the use of capitalisation is concerned. Jenkins describes ‘upper case History’ as metanarrative, and ‘lower case history’ as the practice of historians. This convention, while useful, does not allow distinction between the practise of the discipline, and the learning and teaching of the discipline, of importance within this study. Therefore, at all times throughout this dissertation, History (with a capital ‘H’) is used as the title of the subject taught in schools and universities (as with Economics, Mathematics, or Geography), while history (with a lower case ‘h’) is used to describe the academic discipline or ‘the past’ itself. Where I wish to make clear that ‘history’ is being mobilised with metanarrative associations, it is placed ‘under erasure’ through the use of single inverted commas. The only exception to these rules is (1) where the referent is left deliberately ambiguous (and therefore potentially multiple), as is the case on most occasions where discussion is focused upon ‘the end of history’; or (2) where normal punctuation conventions dictate the necessity of capitalisation.

PREFACE

Millennial concerns

As a way of prefacing my dissertation, and performing a little *currere*,¹ I would like to share with you, my reader, a number of ‘millennial’ concerns, framed in terms of an aspect of my own ‘curriculum’ or life ‘course’. Let me begin with a concern that was not my own, but encouraged me to write this preface. Recently, a retiring president of the Australian Association for Research in Education, the Dean of the faculty in which I work, asked why we couldn’t just return to “good old fashioned forms of Marxist analysis”. There was humour in his tone, as always. However, what was striking to me in 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,² given that I had never really been where he was suggesting we should return to. Of course, even a cursory glance at research texts produced in different times, and places for that matter, 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 Foucault’s *The order of things* was published; the same year that the first English translation of Derrida appeared in the United States, and Barthes was composing *The discourse of history*. Barthes’ postmodern turn, marked by the production of *S/Z*, was complete before I started school in 1971. When Derrida’s *Of grammarology* was

¹ Pinar (1975a) uses the infinitive form of curriculum in order to privilege the autobiographical aspect of educational experience. Thus, curriculum becomes the course of one’s life, rather than just a school syllabus document, or the experience of school based education.

² Although there is probably an argument to be made here about different conceptions of time, I am not rejecting the concept of ‘return’ because of a commitment to the linearity of history. Without elaborating further, I would propose that Deleuze’s notion of the rhizome constitutes an alternative (like Foucault’s notion of ‘discontinuity’) that moves us beyond the binary of linear and cyclic conceptions of time and history. But that is an argument for another time.

translated into English by the postcolonial theorist Spivak in 1976, I was ten years old, and facing the death of my grandfather, who in name and in spirit had been my ‘Da’. 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 would flirt briefly with an Arts degree in 1985, it would be another decade before I started my education degree. When I finally enrolled at the University of Sydney in 1996 the academy had been responding to postmodern and poststructuralist concerns for over twenty-five years, and we had finally, convincingly, entered into the post-industrial world of the internet, in which Foucault’s shift of concern from the ‘mode of production’ to the ‘mode of information’ (Poster, 1984, p. 127), seemed somehow prophetic. Despite the existence of ‘old Marxists’ in the faculty, poststructuralism had emerged as a distinct form of analysis that was not only agreeable to the postmodern sensibilities of those of us marked by the sign of erasure (Generation X), but formed part of the intellectual space in which our post-punk academic subjectivities were being fashioned. Thus, while we might be haunted by Marx (as Derrida suggests, and my own Vygotskian and ‘Critical Pedagogy’ leanings betray), we can never *return* to Marx.

If the decline of Marxism – that had lead to my Dean’s lament – 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, already on its way to becoming a post-historical institution (Peters, 1998), with the ghost of Marx lingering in those offices of a recalcitrant old-guard who were yet to give up on the Revolution. However, even if we Gen-Xers and the ‘old-guard’ were both oblivious to Marx’ passing, we shared the knowledge that the end of the Millennium was fast approaching. As primary school

students, we Gen-Xers had calculated ourselves into that future so many times, with disbelief that we would be adults, perhaps with children of our own, when the calendar finally caught up with our imaginations. So ‘millennial concerns’ had been part of our life 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 might finally be experiencing the end of history. I didn’t have Baudrillard’s (1995) reassurance then, that this was just a simulation, 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, though for us ‘the end of history’³ has *always* been shrouded in a radiation cloud.⁴ Which is probably why, when asked at a dinner party what my thesis was about, I was met with disbelief when I suggested that it considers the implications of ‘the end of history’ for History curriculum. It was to my companion self-evident that history had not ended, as events were still transpiring as we spoke. Of course, her objection betrayed a great deal about her particular conception of history, and lack of familiarity with ‘post-historical discourse’ in contemporary philosophy, politics, and history theory. However, it also alerted me to the fact that what I took to be a topic of great importance from my location in the academy was regarded with incredulity at the dinner table. I make this point because despite being regarded by some commentators as ‘a sign of the times’ (Vattimo,

³ Throughout this entire dissertation, I use quotation marks “to serve as a precaution” (Derrida, 1978/1993) and to mark out what I am using ‘under erasure’. According to Derrida (quoted in R. J. C. Young, 2001), to hold a term ‘under erasure’, is “to preserve as an instrument something whose truth value he [the author] criticizes” (p. 420). As a rhetorical device, ‘the end of history’ constructs a space within which ‘history’ can be discussed while holding it ‘under erasure’.

⁴ See the insightful paper by Anijar (2004) for an analysis of how Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Post-Millennials have handled living in a world constantly threatened by ‘the bomb’.

1991), ‘the end of history’ remains somewhat esoteric as a concept, and has a number of diverse and conflicting associations.

Versions of the idea that history is facing an inevitable end have been around for some time (Niethammer, 1992). We know, for example, that at the turn of the first Millennium, Christians expected the Messiah to return and to engage in a “complete winding up of the created order and the imposition of a post-historical age of divine rule” (Rayment-Pickard, 2000, p. 301). Such a view was largely rejected among the European intelligentsia by the time of the Renaissance, and was replaced with a secularised Enlightenment view of ‘the end of history’ as “the self-perfection of humanity” (Rayment-Pickard, 2000, p. 301). However, the “prolonged fear of imminent annihilation” (Giroux, 2001, p. 197) that followed us through the Cold War, and that may have been reignited by the ‘War on Terror’, has constituted a social sphere in which an “ever-present Western religious subtext of the apocalypse” (Anijar, 2004, p. 127) persists as a cultural undercurrent. Perhaps ironically, it is ‘technocratic rationality’, as a particular legacy of the Enlightenment, functioning as the *modus operandi* of militarily-invested governments around the globe, which has painted the apocalypse as more possibility than prophecy.

Over the past couple of decades, ‘end of history’ rhetoric has emerged as a marker of intellectual debate over the status of history in the academy, from within neo-liberal, poststructuralist, and neo-positivist traditions. Although we can really only speculate why ‘end of history’ rhetoric has erupted in a multiplicity of forms at this particular historical moment, the timing of its emergence makes it seem likely that it is both 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. What is worth noting is

that manifestations of a secular millennialism, or at least a “millennial sensationalism” (Feldstein, 2001, p. 312), appeared across a range of ‘Western’ intellectual and media-driven discourses in the last two decades of the Twentieth Century. Who is likely to forget: we were about to see the manifestation of a New World Order as a result of the implosion of the Soviet Union (Brandon, 1992; Fukuyama, 1989; Galtung & Vincent, 1992; D. A. Smith & Böröcz, 1994); the collapse of computer systems as a result of the Y2K bug (P. Stanley, 1998), itself intimately connected with the idea of time, and perhaps a manifestation of deep anxieties about the information society (Fosket & Fishman, 1999); the ‘urgency’ of Australia’s push to become a republic, strangely ominous as we approached the centenary of Federation, and invested with a millenarian romanticism (Wark, 1997); speculation the Earth would experience a cataclysmic collision with asteroid 1997XF11 in 2028, which later was proven to be inaccurate (Polsani, 1998); we would be wiped out by HIV AIDS, a new indestructible plague (see Carter, 1987; Haver, 1996; Kinsella, 1989, for a sceptical view about the HIV AIDS epidemic). The list could go on. Importantly, highlighting these various millennial concerns is not meant to suggest that they are somehow ‘false’ by being tied up in an apocalyptic fixation. HIV AIDS still demands our attention, and has proven devastating for communities across the globe, particularly in Africa; with September 11, we may well have moved closer to realising 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 be suggestive of 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 later half of the twentieth century, but has manifested in a variety of popular forms.

The focus of a growing number of films and television series (Broderick, 1993; Combs, 1993; Rowlands, 2003), and an important theme in an increasing number of books (Bongie, 1991; S. Brown, Bell, & Carson, 1996; Castells, 1998; Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001; Gould, 1997; Laurance, 1999; Tiffin & Terashima, 2001), ‘the Millennium’ has obviously been on ‘our mind’. It is also likely that a retrospective glance may figure ‘the Millennium’ a twentieth century obsession, motivated by an insatiable desire to create meaning where perhaps there was none, like the protagonist in a book by Umberto Eco (see *Foucault's pendulum*, Eco, 1988), or the reader of a Haruki Murakami novel (try reading for example, *Hard-boiled wonderland and the end of the world*, Murakami, 2001). Resultantly, what Gould (1997) has called ‘Millennium madness’ may well have given “to the more academic theories a greater resonance with the temper of their times than is customary” (Kumar, 1995, p151). Kumar (1995) is right to suggest 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” (p. 152). Likewise, Jameson’s assertion (from a text 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” (Jameson, 1991, p. 1), is also pertinent. Besides being reflective of what Derrida (1994) has referred to as the apocalyptic turn in philosophy – which he argues stretches back to the post-WWII 1950s – and what Berkhofer (1995) describes as “the apocalypticism expressed in popular culture” prior to the Millennium (p. 1), talk about ‘the end of history’ may well be part of the millennial spirit of the times, a key discourse in the context of our *fin de siecle*.⁵

⁵ Literally translated “end of cycle”, here *fin de siecle* is used as a signifier of the end of the second Millennium.

While the idea of ‘the end of history’ may have proliferated toward the turn of the Millennium because of some deep-seated anxiety, or motivated search for meaning, it has been 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) scepticism of the future offered by science that he argues is motivated by an obsession with human survival beyond the super nova of our own sun; and Baudrillard’s (1992) loss of faith in both history and its end/ings as reality and its representation implode. Regardless of the reasons for the wide-spread emergence of ‘end of history’ rhetoric, it remains like its conceptual cousins, ‘the demise of the Author’, and ‘the end of Man’, intuitively problematic (Burke, 1998). As Kumar (1995) notes, “the onset of the end, not just of another century but of another Millennium, is bound to have an effect on the theories under consideration” (p. 151). There can be little doubt that this was the case concerning the academic curriculum of the late twentieth century; and my course through the humanities as an undergraduate in Education, History, and Linguistics, during the last days of the second Millennium.

Although it has been an interesting, and perhaps necessary intellectual exercise, to place the proliferation of ‘end of history’ rhetoric within its contemporary ‘historical’ context, this dissertation is not actually concerned with ‘the end of history’ as a millennial discourse. Instead, it represents an attempt to address the dearth of discussion in educational literature about the significance for school History of recent debates over the status of historical knowledge, by exploring what are representative positions on ‘the end of history’ that have emerged in contemporary political and philosophical debate. 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 towards the year 2000. Had I adopted a different periodisation then figures such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx may well have figured more prominently in my analyses, since at least one current stream of thought is indebted to their much earlier theorising (see Fukuyama, 1992). I am aware that the periodisation adopted for this study does make the appearance of ‘end of history’ discourse as a manifestation of, or reaction to, a form of secular millennialism, stronger than it might have otherwise. However, it is the meaning of, and problems posed by, ‘the end of history’ for History as a school subject (an object of study), and not any status it may hold as both millennial and/or anti-millennial discourse, that is explored in this dissertation.

I defend my decision to confine this study to discourses that became popular in the late twentieth century, on the basis that post-war ‘end of history’ discourse emerges from a context increasingly dominated by globalised capitalism, postmodern philosophies, and fast-paced information technologies – a world quite different from that experienced by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx. Following Malinowski (1923), we might say that the ‘context of culture’ in which ‘the end of history’ was discussed by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx, is quite different from the context in which Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard and Fukuyama have produced (and sometimes exchanged) their views. I would suggest then, that post-war ‘end of history’ discourse is indeed of a different genus than the nineteenth century variety, and deserves to be considered in its own right. Legacies of earlier thinkers are discussed only where this assists with understanding ‘the end of history’ as it operates in contemporary discourse (thus, references to Hegel, Nietzsche, and Marx are not completely absent). However, my aim is not to develop a history of ‘end of history’ rhetoric, so common to work in the area of philosophy, in which an idea is tracked to and from its

apparent origin, or in which a series of analyses “move towards the present, demonstrating the gradual production of an adequate theory” (R. J. C. Young, 1990, p. vi), an approach troubled by postmodern theory. Instead, I have elected to confine my study to the development of a curricular response to that ‘end of history’ rhetoric, which is closely associated with our times: the end of the cold war after the collapse of soviet communism; the turn of a new Millennium; the spread and obsession with information communication technologies; the rise of mass media; and most importantly, the epistemological crisis associated with the widespread ascendancy of postmodern scepticism within the humanities.

In confining my exploration to contemporary ways of thinking about ‘the end of history’, I share Green’s (1995) ironically framed “idealist ambition” to rethink curriculum after postmodernism (p. 405); to explore the challenges and possibilities arising from a postmodern conception of the school curriculum and the practice of a ‘posthumous’ history pedagogy. This preface then has been a way for me to explore concerns that ‘end of history’ discourse is nothing but a passing fad, thematised by, perhaps even contingent upon, a conjunction of calendar, theory, and autobiography. However, this is not to trivialize its usefulness as a problematic. As you read this thesis, we are already past the limiting horizon of the Millennium, and ‘the end of history’ continues to signify important debates in the academy, some of which problematise the possibility of history itself. Regardless of its own ‘historical ground’, I would assert the productivity of ‘the end of history’ as a ‘diffractive lens’ (Gough, 1998) through which to rethink History curriculum, particularly at this time when neo-liberals and conservatives would have us ‘give up the ghost’ in our struggles for critical and effective histories.

