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The day after: education in the postmodernist fallout

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Terry Eagleton suggests that the postmodernist view of history as hence forward post-metaphysical, post-ideological and even post-historical, was dealt a fatal blow by the resurgence of the grand narratives we have thought we had left behind us, leaving postmodern thinkers ‘off-guard’, a state from which he doubts that we have recovered (Eagleton, 2016). At the same time, as Michael Peters points out, while ‘post’ and ‘after’ terms implicitly invoke apocalypse (the end of modernism, the end of metaphysics, the end of humanism, the end of Man, the death of God, the end of value), they also suggest an opening for ‘a new beginning’ or ‘a return’. He notes that these eschatological narratives of endings (and beginnings) are endemic to Western culture and help define both its cultural specificity and its sources of renewal, which is, of course, to say, a continuation of sorts (Peters, 2008). This last point is crucial because it raises the question of just what these culturally specific sources of renewal and continuity are.

I offer here a view that I will for the sake of brevity simply ascribe to Hannah Arendt: the idea of breaks and bindings within a civilization are always carried out through institutions for, and practices of, education (Arendt, 1961). It is by welcoming the ‘newcomers’, the next generation, into a common world that we ensure both its continuation and its renewal. As educators, we can’t do much more than show them what is and what has been, what we do, why we do it, what has worked and what has not. But what makes renewal, or as Arendt says, ‘futurity’, possible is that the newcomers can choose to do otherwise. Arendt dates the great cultural rupture long before the advent of postmodernism, which I think she would see as so much fallout from the cataclysm of the Newtonian worldview, together with the advent of mass society, but she argues that however mechanistic, functionalistic and economic our society has become, however unfathomable and irrevocable the loss of a shared common culture that commands authority not by authoritarian edict but rather by genuine acknowledgement, we have no reason to abandon hope and investment in the future, if we ‘love the world enough’ to take responsibility for it.

This we do by taking seriously the form and content of our educational institutions as foundations for society, as ‘institutions of truth’, rather than as consumer services, factories for the production of labour skills or indoctrination camps for whatever political winds happens to be blowing at the time. Since teacher’s education has effects for coming generations, the single most important question for what to do ‘after everything’ is what to do about the education of teachers. Arendt’s answer to this question is at one and the same time liberal and conservative. It is liberal insofar as she sees politics as enjoining equals in deliberation of matters of common concern, which means that teachers have the mission of forming capable and autonomous citizens. But she is conservative to the extent that she sees that role as entailing an unequal relationship between teacher and pupil: the pupil must recognize the legitimate authority of the teacher regarding the question of what there is and why it is if education is to take place at all. Without recourse to such theoretically laden terms as ‘objectivity’ or ‘universality’, Arendt suggests than rather than searching for new isms, we should begin the task of rebuilding our

world, brick for brick, from the ruins of a once common culture, starting with our institutions for the establishment, maintenance and repair of recognizable truths.

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Notes on contributor

Sharon Rider is a professor of Theoretical Philosophy at Uppsala University. Her most recent book is *Post-truth, Fake News: Viral Modernity and Higher Education*, eds. Michael Peters, Sharon Rider, Mats Hyvönen & Tina Besley (Springer 2018).

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