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Rethinking the Representation Problem in Curriculum Inquiry

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ABSTRACT: The consolidation of Reconceptualism as a distinctive tradition in curriculum inquiry is commonly understood to go hand-in-hand with the decline and even eclipse of an explicit political orientation in such work. This paper offers an alternative argument, focusing on a re-assessment of what has been called the representation problem and exploring this with reference to the ‘modernism-postmodernism’ debate. Discussion is addressed to knowledge, representation and praxis. A case is made for understanding representation in terms of both semiotics and politics, drawing on postmodern political theory and philosophy. This means among other things revisiting the so-called reproduction thesis, as in effect ‘unfinished business’, and seeking to rethink the relationship between reproduction and representation as organising categories in and for curriculum and social analysis. The paper thus brings together curriculum history and curriculum theory, as well as an Australian perspective to an important and enduring focus for discussion and debate in the contemporary curriculum field.

Keywords: curriculum theory/representation/Reconceptualism/politics/knowledge

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Introduction
What knowledge is of most worth? What should the schools teach? These and like questions are at the heart of the field of curriculum inquiry as it has formally developed over the past century. Such questions foreground the issue of knowledge: the ‘what’ of teaching and learning, and of schooling. At the same time, they point to the matter of purpose and value: the ‘why’. What is the purpose of schooling, organised as it has been historically around the question of knowledge, or particular socially valued formations of knowledge? More recently, though, there has been a noticeable shift in at least some of the work that has been done in the field, which is broadly from knowledge to identity as an organising principle.

For instance, Pinar (2004: 2) argues that “curriculum theory is the interdisciplinary study of educational experience”, later qualifying this somewhat to refer to “that interdisciplinary field committed to the study of educational experience, especially (but not only) as that experience is encoded in the school curriculum, itself a highly symbolic as well as institutional structuration of (potentially) educational experience” (Pinar, 2004: 20). The key word here is ‘experience’: an always-already problematical concept, it nonetheless gestures in this instance, I suggest, to issues of subjectivity and learning, identity and agency. Wexler (1992) too has argued along such lines, positing a shift in emphasis from the ‘cognitive mission’ of curriculum and schooling to a greater focus on the symbolic, and on particular notions of identity work and affective practice. This would seem to call for exploration of the concept of subjectivity in and for curriculum inquiry: the problem of the subject of schooling, with curriculum hence to be understood as a discursive practice producing subjects and subjectivity, or forms of social identity. This remains a matter to be further investigated.

Nonetheless, it would appear that knowledge, now problematised and more thoroughly complexified, and arguably always in a dialectical relationship with power and identity, remains central to the curriculum inquiry project. In this regard, what this means is an emphasis not just on epistemology but also, and more importantly, on representation, with the latter to be understood, I want to argue, as a key and recurring issue for curriculum-theoretical interrogation and elaboration. In what follows, I develop a set of readings and arguments, with a view to rethinking what has been called the representation problem in and for curriculum inquiry. This is done with a two-fold concern, firstly to re-assess the relationship between curriculum and politics, or the assertion of curriculum as a specific form of socially critical engagement and political praxis, and secondly as a contribution to curriculum history.

Curriculum, ‘Reproduction’ and the Representation Problem
I begin by asserting that curriculum inquiry as a distinctive field, emerging and consolidating over the past century, has from the outset been a modernist enterprise.

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1 This is a revised version of a paper first presented at the 2nd World Curriculum Studies Conference, held in Tampere, Finland, May 21-24, 2006 (Green, 2006).

2 In this regard, work such as that of Kress (2000) and others associated with educational linguistics, discourse analysis and social semiotics is pertinent, particularly with regard to what might be called the enacted curriculum. Here, my focus is more abstract and theoretical.

3 I acknowledge recent work expressly on the question of knowledge in curriculum inquiry by educational-sociology scholars such as Michael Young and Rob Moore (eg Moore and Young, 2001; Moore, 2007; Young, 2008). However my argument is constructed along different lines here, and I reserve for another occasion a critical engagement with their work.
par excellence, even as it has struggled in more recent times to shake off its modernist legacy. This is not a new or original claim. Scholars as otherwise diverse as Bill Doll (1993) and David Hamilton (1989) have explored similar arguments, as has Patti Lather (1991), and Bill Pinar and his colleagues’ monumental touchstone volume of 1995 (Pinar et al, 1995) attests to both the centrality of these issues and debates and their continuing significance4. The challenge remains however, in my view, of how best to understand this tension at the heart of the project and the discipline – something that partly involves the exercise of a particular kind of historical imagination. It is also a profoundly political matter. In this regard, I take issue with the compartmentalisation of politics and what might be called the realm of ‘post-theory’ in contemporary curriculum inquiry – the distinction made all too strongly (in my view) between “curriculum as political text” and “curriculum as poststructuralist, deconstructed, postmodern text”, as discrete ‘chapters’ in curriculum history (Pinar et al, 1995). In this re-reading, the work of Ernesto Laclau offers interesting possibilities, although it seems to be little drawn on in curriculum scholarship per se.

In what I consider a very important essay, Laclau (1993) explores “some of the consequences that follow – for both political theory and political action – from what has been called our ‘postmodern condition’”. He continues:

> There is today the widespread feeling that the exhaustion of the great narratives of modernity, the blurring of the boundaries of the public spaces, the operation of the logics of undecidability, which seem to be robbing all meaning from collective action, are leading to a generalized retreat from the political (Laclau, 1993: 277).

He is particularly concerned with what he sees as the limited and limiting response of critiques that simply negate the terms of argument that are associated with those “distinctive features of modernity [that] are so deeply entrenched in our usual forms of conceiving society and history” (Laclau, 1993: 279). For him, what is required is a much more rigorous exercise of scholarship and critical-intellectual work, whereby, instead of “simply inverting the contents of modernity”, the task becomes one of thinking otherwise and differently, and of “deconstruct[ing] the terrain” on which such simplistic displacements or reversions are possible. Rejecting out of hand familiar charges of nihilism and the like, he emphasises contingency, contradiction and complexity: a new stance, altogether. This involves, as he writes:

> on the one hand, a new attitude towards modernity: not a radical break with a new modulation of its themes; not an abandonment of its basic tenets but a hegemonization thereof by a different perspective.

Further, and importantly;

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4 See also Englund (1996) and Ljunggren (1996) for intriguingly parallel arguments to the account I am presenting here, in some respects at least, albeit from a more sociological perspective – also noteworthy, I might add, because they emerge from the Swedish academic-scholarly context.
This also involves, on the other hand, an expansion of the field of politics instead of its retreat – a widening of the field of structural undecidability that opens the way to an enlargement of the field of political decision (Laclau, 1993: 280-281).

Central to his argument here is a particular understanding of representation and power, and I want to build on that in what follows. For the moment, it suffices to say that Laclau’s work, along with that of certain others, offers other and productive ways of engaging the modernism-postmodernism debate, within which it becomes possible to continue the task of thinking anew the project of curriculum inquiry.

Within this framework, my focus here is on what has been described as ‘the representation problem’, proposed as a major issue for curriculum inquiry and praxis. The organising problematic here is the category of representation. The Swedish scholar Ulf Lundgren, working within a modernist neo-Marxist perspective in educational studies, first formulated a meta-theoretical account of education, curriculum and schooling predicated on a particular relationship between ‘reproduction’ and ‘representation’. This formed the basis for various curriculum-theoretical initiatives in Australia, notably in the work of Stephen Kemmis. Although undoubtedly important work in and for the field, arguably this articulation of curriculum inquiry and reproduction theory arrived very quickly at a conceptual impasse, which I see as directly linked to its modernist heritage and its associated view of representation. That is, although generative in developing socially-critical understandings of curriculum and schooling, in Australia and elsewhere, this account had inherent in it from the outset significant problems, both politically and theoretically – as outlined below. Consequently it was challenged by a growing body of work critiquing and problematising the reproduction thesis, on the one hand, and on the other, exploring alternative framings for curriculum inquiry and critical educational studies. These more recent initiatives are associated with the modernism-postmodernism debate, as well as the ‘post-linguistic turn’ in curriculum theorizing, involving an important shift from a ‘realist’ to a ‘semiotic’ understanding of curriculum.

As an aside, I want to make two points. The first concerns the account provided in Pinar et al (1995) of the explicitly political agenda in curriculum inquiry, among a range of ‘discourses’. That account among other things is largely limited to the North American scene, with at best an Anglo-American ambit of reference, albeit with some notable exceptions. This is something that is now widely acknowledged, including by the authors, and to some extent corrected in subsequent work. For me, writing from the Antipodes, as I do, it is something nonetheless I remain acutely aware of (Gough, 2003). My second, related point concerns the fate and fortunes of so-called reproduction theory, and arguably the persistence in educational studies of the reproduction thesis, in one form or another, along with its associated baggage. I raise here, but leave undeveloped, the possibility that this argument was simply bypassed and discarded, rather than being properly theoretically and politically interrogated, and surpassed. At the very least, more work is required in this regard, I suggest. This is partly because the fundamental challenge of intergenerational (dis)continuity remains, along with the question of the role and significance of education and schooling in this.
The Deakin School: Working (at) the Limits

Whether it be a striking omission or simply a minor footnote in Anglo-American accounts of reproduction theory and curriculum inquiry, at issue here is the work associated with Ulf Lundgren and Stephen Kemmis, working out of what I will call the Deakin School – that is, work associated, from the early 1980s on, with the program in curriculum studies at Deakin University, Australia. Lundgren of course was drawing from a much longer tradition in education studies in Europe, something that has recently moved more into international focus (Gundem and Hopmann [eds], 1998). Lundgren’s 1983 monograph (‘Between Hope and Happening’) was expressly written for the Deakin program, with an extensively revised version (‘Between Education and Schooling’) published in 1991. Kemmis published a monograph (‘Beyond Reproduction Theory’) in 1986 (Kemmis and Fitzclarence, 1986), and subsequently developed and reiterated the argument through a series of papers, running alongside his work in educational action research and critical social science. Arguably this set of publications constituted an important and yet much under-appreciated research program in curriculum inquiry, even in Australia. It faltered and eventually petered out in the early to mid 90s, to all intents and purposes, although I would suggest that it went underground at this time, rather than disappearing altogether. However I have no doubt that it had indeed reached a conceptual impasse by then, and its inability to resolve this in any satisfactory, sustainable way was the main reason behind its diminishing explanatory and executive power. It is worth noting here too that what I call, for convenience, the Deakin School’s distinctive orientation on curriculum theory and curriculum inquiry was not at all parochial. It drew from North American and European antecedents and traditions, and was clearly part of a more general awakening and resurgence of curriculum thought in the 1970s and early 80s, across the international scene (Pinar et al, 1995: 229-230; cf Green, 2003).

Lundgren’s curriculum theory was broadly neo-Marxist in its emphasis and its language. It was addressed to and organised around questions and problems of knowledge and of schooling, and focused very firmly on the relationship between education and society. Central to its argument was a working distinction between ‘text’ and ‘context’, with curriculum understood in effect as a particular realisation of the text-context nexus: “the concept of ‘curriculum’ can never be grasped without an understanding of the interplay between text and context” (Lundgren, 1991: iv). A further crucial distinction is between ‘production’ and ‘reproduction’, and hence between ‘social production’ and ‘social reproduction’. These are all conventional enough terms within the discourse at issue here, and subject to the various criticisms and critiques that are now readily available in the literature. These concepts, arguments and discourses are carried on through Kemmis and Fitzclarence’s (1986) monograph on ‘curriculum theorising’ and in subsequent work associated with the program.

The important innovation in Lundgren’s account is his introduction of the notion of representation, and his argument for a particular kind of relationship between ‘representation’ and ‘reproduction’, within his overarching politico-conceptual framework. The question he asks is this: When does pedagogy become a social problem needing an elaborated conceptual apparatus? His answer: When production

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5 Lundgren was also significantly influenced by Dewey, as he acknowledged.
and reproduction process are separated from each other. Representation arises out of difference, or when a difference is made manifest in the social world. In this case, a break is asserted between production and reproduction, a violence effected, a spacing. As Lundgren (1991: 4) writes:

When production processes are separated from reproduction processes, … a representation problem arises, that is, how to represent production processes so they can be reproduced becomes a problem.

He goes on to argue that when a ‘division’ is created, or forced, between “production processes” and “reproduction processes”, “two social contexts are formed: one for production and one for reproduction”. That is:

With this division into two social contexts, a social division of labour is established between the production and the reproduction spheres. What goes on in both of these processes will still be interrelated, but now the relation will be indirect and communication will mainly depend on texts (Lundgren, 1991: 4).

Out of this ‘splitting’ comes the necessity of mediation and the force of textuality: “Thus the representation problem has to be solved by texts” (Lundgren, 1991: 4). Later, he makes a further set of distinctions between ‘texts for pedagogy’ and ‘texts about pedagogy’, and between ‘contexts of formulation’ and ‘contexts of realisation’ – further assertions of difference and delay, or relay. As he concludes:

I define curriculum as ‘the necessary solution of the representation problem’ and the representation problem as ‘the object of discourse for pedagogy’. The object of discourse for pedagogy opens up as a domain for thinking and the construction of specific social realities when social production and reproduction are separated from each other (Lundgren, 1991: 5).

Language thus emerges as a ‘universal’ problematic, or perhaps as a register of the Fall. Curriculum thus understood is contaminated by representation.

Kemmis’s work further develops the argument, sharpening and refining it, without however resolving its difficulties, its ‘aporias’. Usefully foregrounded is the question of (re)generation, which is sometimes overlooked or downplayed in mainstream reproduction theory, although not in ‘reconceptualist’ curriculum inquiry:

Lundgren regards the central problem of curriculum as the representation problem: a problem that arises when a society reaches a point at which it must organise itself to ensure that the knowledge needed by future generations will be passed on (Kemmis and Fitzclarence, 1986: 29).

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6 A further, important element of Lundgren’s theory is the notion of ‘curriculum code’. I don’t deal with it here; however, the potential links with Basil Bernstein’s work are intriguing – although this was not the road taken in this particular instance, or since.
This is later further glossed with reference to Walter Feinberg’s account of social reproduction, emphasising the key role of education in “maintaining intergenerational continuity” (cited Kemmis and Fitzclarence, 1986: 88). That remains the preferred scale at which the account works, in fact – a point acknowledged in a later essay, although immediately qualified (Kemmis, 1992a: 16). As is the case elsewhere in this literature, curriculum theory is principally identified with, and as a form of, social theory. In terms of curriculum itself, as concept and as practice, the problem of representation arises, once again, in all its seeming intractability and its vexing necessity. As Kemmis writes:

Arguably, the notion of representation, in one form or another, is a sine qua non of educational and educational research. For education, the challenge to the notion of representation raises the question of whether a curriculum can, in any adequate sense, represent the world for rising generations; for educational (and social, and cultural) research, it raises the question whether ‘education’ or ‘curriculum’ can be represented in forms which allow them to be treated as objects of study (Kemmis, 1992: 2).

How then to meet this challenge?

Kemmis’s argument can be traced through three papers written in the early 90s – “Reproduction without Representation? A Note on Reproduction Theories of Curriculum in Postmodern Times” (1992a), “Educational Research and Postmodernisms” (1992b), and “Curriculum as Text” (1993a). At the outset, it should be said that a Habermasian standpoint runs through the argument generally, consistent with and continuing Kemmis’s longstanding engagement with critical social science (‘critical theory’). A feature of these papers however is their use of references from literature and the fine arts. Hence one paper begins with Foucault’s discussion of Velaquez’s Las Meninas, and briefly draws in Magritte, while another opens with Eric Auerbach’s Mimesis before focusing on a range of ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ novels, ranging from Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse and Lawrence Durrell’s ‘Alexandria Quartet’ through Calvino, Marquez, Rushdie to culminate in George’s Perec’s Life: A User’s Manual and Milorad Pavic’s Dictionary of the Khazar. At once rich sources of metaphor and ‘textshops’ in their own right, such artworks (and their attendant commentary) are also laboratories for research on representation:

What these novels teach, I submit, is that textual practice is an active process of construction of relationships between authors, texts and readers, and that our tasks as curriculum developers and teachers is not only to tell curriculum stories to students but also to engage them actively in constructing stories for themselves and in reconstructing the stories told by others (Kemmis, 1993a: 51).

This includes the ‘stories’ of science, and other seemingly more worldly domains of knowledge and experience. Hence:

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7 In this regard, see Kemmis (1993b, 1995, 1998).
To understand – and to practise – the art and science of representation which underpins the development of curricula, we may need to remind ourselves and our students of the art of representation in science and the science of representation in art (Kemmis, 1993a: 52).

Representation is understood from the outset as intensely problematic, and curriculum presented explicitly as ‘text’⁸. A shift is outlined from ‘map’ to ‘text’, as different metaphors for representation and for curriculum, and the point is to stress the fallibility and complexity of both. Or rather, the consequences of conceptualising curriculum with regard to representation become clearer, with an attendant loss of certainty, and also a heightened sense of anxiety.

The links between representation and reproduction are also foregrounded, building on from Lundgren. Reproduction theories in curriculum inquiry are seen as continuing to have explanatory power, although necessarily modified to take greater account of contestation and transformation, and “an opening up of the field of reproduction theory to the challenge of postmodernisms” (Kemmis, 1992a: 14). That is: rather than simply rejecting the reproductionist position in curriculum theory (and the notion of ‘curriculum as political text’), in part because of the critique of representation, it is possible to take the alternative view that “the representation problem is still a very fruitful way of theorising the central problem of curriculum, while acknowledging that new levels of analysis can supplement and extend the central insight that it articulates” (Kemmis, 1992a: 15). Yet, as clearly recognised, “[t]he alleged theoretical meaninglessness of the notion of representation is of special significance for reproduction theory in education”, and this is because “without some notion of representation, it is difficult to see how any form of social reproduction could be possible” (Kemmis, 1992a: 16). It is at this point that Kemmis’s account enters into murky territory, as I see it. In short, and despite his earlier assertion, he attempts to resolve the dilemma by disengaging reproduction from representation, forcing a break between the two, or at least uncoupling them. “Perhaps”, he writes, “to overcome this difficulty, one could find a way of describing the dynamics of reproduction which avoided the notion of representation” (Kemmis, 1992a: 16). He then goes on to outline what he describes as ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ positions vis-à-vis representation, with his preference being clearly for the latter – “a fallibilistic view of representation” (Kemmis, 1992a: 16), which he links to “the assertion of a network of relationships between speakers and hearers and matters under discussion in particular communicative contexts” (Kemmis, 1992a: 16). At this point I think the argument is foundering. A particular limit has been reached. Elsewhere, in an associated account of the overdetermined ‘crisis’ that postmodernism provokes, he symptomatically brings together “representation, rationality and reproduction” (Kemmis, 1992b: 4), seeing all of these as under attack and looking now for other ‘solutions’, other games to play, and other discourses. There is, however, no resolution here of the conceptual and political difficulties that continue to challenge the overall argument, leaving this version of reproduction theory and the representation problem to sit on the shelf, as it were, to be mobilised or not, frozen in time, place-markers of a stalled project.

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⁸ See Pinar and Reynolds (1992) for another account of ‘curriculum as text’.
Rethinking the Representation Problem; or, Postmodernising Curriculum Inquiry

At this point I want to take up the issue of representation more directly, bearing in mind that I have already indicated that it is a central matter of concern with regard to the modernism-postmodernism debate. Moreover, just as there is a field of complex, contradictory possibilities opened up in that debate, it should follow that this holds also with regard to representation. My starting-point is the claim that both Kemmis and Lundgren, and therefore the Deakin School more generally, were working with a quintessentially modernist notion of representation; moreover, that this is an only partially reconstructed modernism – one that is relatively untouched by the postmodernist challenge, or indeed by poststructuralism; finally, that this is why the argument comes up against a fundamental impasse. Notwithstanding Kemmis’s strenuous effort to work up a differentiated account of representation, it can be claimed that the resources were simply not available for him at that time to move the argument on, or to avoid its fatal contradictions and aporias.

A similar picture emerges in other forms of socially-critical scholarship in curriculum inquiry. Pinar et al’s (1995) synoptic account of the field points to the work of Philip Wexler and Tony Whitson, among others, including Peter McLaren and Patti Lather, as picking up on the possibilities of poststructuralism and postmodernism in this regard, particularly those associated with the new politics of discourse, textuality and the symbolic (Pinar and Reynolds [ed], 1992). Wexler’s relatively early work is especially pertinent and important here (eg Wexler, 1987). At issue is what might be described in this context as a pervasive problem of realism. As I have argued elsewhere (Green, 1986), this is a defining characteristic of reproduction theory, through its various mutations, and it features across the field of curriculum inquiry and educational research more generally, albeit with varying degrees of sophistication. Realism in this case coincides and is complicit with economism. I see this argument as confirmed by Wexler’s (1987) social analysis of curriculum inquiry and educational sociology in the context of an emergent ‘semiotic society’, for which literary theory becomes a new analytic and conceptual resource. It is worth noting here that, as I understand it, Wexler was referring in this respect largely to poststructuralist theory and philosophy. This is what Culler (1983: 8-9) referred to as simply ‘theory’, as a new heterogeneous, transdisciplinary genre of writing and critique, though one would want to add today social semiotics and cultural studies (see also Mowitt, 1992). Relevant here too is Wexler’s emphasis on what he calls ‘informationalism’, with reference to “… the basic productive energy or force of production” and what he describes as “[f]undamental changes … taking place in social production, in the culture of consumption, and in the structure of persons” (Wexler, 1987: 154). This is what I have signalled elsewhere, in gesturing towards a paradigmatic shift from ‘production’ to ‘information’ and from ‘reproduction’ to ‘representation’ as organising principles for a newly emergent social formation, identified variously as postmodernity and post-industrialism (Green, 1993, 1998).

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9 In a personal communication regarding this paper, Kemmis questions my account of his ‘modernism’ and ‘realism’, suggesting that I may be working myself with “a correspondence view theory of representation”, whereas I would be better advised to adopt a “coherentist position on truth”, as he does, which involves rather “the ‘weak’ realism of the fallibilist view”. I suspect we are talking past each other here – and besides, I hope this paper attests to my respect for Kemmis’s work. Nonetheless I remain convinced that his argument, in this series of papers at least, is susceptible to a deconstructive analysis, along the lines I develop here – and perhaps a register of the larger debate between Derrida and Habermas. For an account from the philosophy of science that seems to be at least compatible with my own position, see Arbib and Hesse (1986).
2006). These are, arguably, the new conditions within which contemporary curriculum theory is to be formulated.

With regard to representation itself, and particularly its relation to and significance for education and educational research, a number of points can be made. There is no doubt that representation has emerged as intensely, profoundly problematical, and that this has impacted on a range of intellectual fields, right across the spectrum. This is because, in part, as commentators such as Rosenau (1992) have indicated, it has been a foundational category for many disciplines, if indeed not disciplinarity itself. Postmodernism has been seen, accordingly, and not altogether correctly, as ushering in a new program of anti-representationalism. A common response has been to look for ways of working around the critique, if not with it, often seeking a ‘weaker’, more pragmatic thesis that enables one to move on albeit more carefully, accepting the loss of certainty while recognising the fragility of the endeavour. Kemmis’s account is exemplary in this regard. But it also attests to the debilitating nature of the either/or logic that operates in such accounts, whereby the only recourse in the end is to reject the notion of representation altogether, and to attempt to work without it. Some versions of postmodernism also fall into this modus operandi. This has various implications for curriculum inquiry, and varying degrees of productivity. Whether or not the possibility still exists to reconceptualise and re-articulate representation – to think it differently – is of course open to debate.

Picking up Laclau’s account of representation and power is apposite at this point. As Laclau writes: “[S]howing the opaqueness of the process of representation is usually considered equivalent to a denial that representation is possible at all” (Laclau, 1993: 179). This is because representation is characteristically understood in terms of transparency, a more or less direct relationship between the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of representation, or between the object and the means of representation. There is no interruption of the flow of exchange between the two, no difference, just an untrammeled relay between identities, with no delay. Representation is “[e]ssentially the fictio iuris that somebody is present in a place from which he or she is materially absent. The representation is the process by which somebody else – the representative – ‘substitutes for’ and at the same time ‘embodies’ the represented” (Laclau, 1993: 289-290). ‘Representative’ and ‘represented’ are bound together in a complex interplay of presence and absence, within however a generalised economy, a loaded system, a metaphysics of presence, an illusory equilibrium. Hence, as Laclau (1993: 290) puts it: “from neither the side of the representative nor that of the represented do the conditions of a perfect representation obtain – and this is the result not of what is empirically attainable but because of the very logic inherent in the process of representation” (my added emphasis). This logic produces a necessary difference; something is added, always. Laclau is working within political theory here, but the principle holds for language generally, and for pedagogy: “every pedagogical exposition, just like every reading, adds something to what it transmits” (Ulmer, 1985: 162; see also Derrida, 1982). Equally important, however, there can no easy, reassuring reference back to the security of an identity, an ‘origin’, since the violence of representation is such that presence is effectively denied, or cancelled, and a fundamental difference is thereby re-asserted. Everything is dangerous, destabilised. Hence: “[R]epresentation is the name of an undecidable game that organizes a variety of social relations but whose operations cannot be fixed in a rationally graspable and ultimately univocal mechanism” (Laclau, 1993: 291).
Moreover, representation is inherently, inescapably political. Representation and power go hand-in-hand. This is where political theory does have relevance for curriculum inquiry. Representation entails speaking for as well as speaking about – advocacy as well as knowledge. It is at once political and semiotic, as Whitson (1988) demonstrates. Opening ourselves up to the power of representation, Laclau contends, widens the terrain of politics and the horizon of possibility, “enlarg[ing] the field of political decision” (Laclau, 1993: 280-281). This means accepting power as a primary force, and a fundamental condition of democracy. This is perhaps especially so in an emergent and indeed now consolidating ‘semiotic society’, in a turning to the Postmodern. Laclau (1993: 291) again:

We live in societies in which we are increasingly less able to refer to a single or primary level as the one on which the basic identity of the social agents is constituted. This means, on the one hand, that social agents are becoming more and more ‘multiple selves’, with loosely integrated and unstable identities; and on the other, that there is a proliferation of the points in society from which decisions affecting their lives will be taken.

Difference is everywhere, and disequilibrium, a proliferation of opportunities: “The constitutive role of representation in the constitution of the will, which was partly concealed in more stable societies, now becomes more fully visible” (Laclau, 1993: 291). Representation becomes then a matter of contestation and struggle, of debate and dissent: “power is the very condition of emancipation” (Laclau, 1993: 293). A new opportunity arises here for rethinking the notion of curriculum as political text.

‘Representation’ Re-articulated?
In an intriguing account of complexity and representation in education, Osberg and Biesta (2003)10 assert that modern, Western schooling is “almost invariably organised as an epistemological practice”, with knowledge firmly foregrounded as a guiding principle:

Educational institutions present knowledge about the world ‘outside’ and for that very reason they rely upon a representational epistemology. This is an epistemology which says that our knowledge ‘stands for’ or represents a world that is separate from our knowledge itself (Osberg and Biesta, 2003, 84).

In thus highlighting “education as a representational practice”, they accept the argument that representation has been thrown into crisis – certainly representation in its traditional or classical sense. Importantly, however, they don’t reject the notion out of hand, nor do they propose that education can or needs to proceed without representations or representational work. Rather, they offer alternative ways of understanding representation, with varying implications for education.

10 Subsequently published, and to some extent revised, as Osberg, Biesta and Cilliers (2008). See also Biesta and Osberg (2007), Osberg and Biesta (2007) and Osberg and Biesta (2008b). The emphasis throughout is more on notions of ‘complexity’ and ‘emergence’, whereas my interests lie in reworking representation as such. Nonetheless I believe our arguments are complementary.
They begin by suggesting that it is significant, and noteworthy, that modern educational practices and institutions rely as they do “upon an epistemology, rather than, say, a political, ethical or relational theory” (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 86). Moreover, it is a “representational epistemology”, which they describe as

An epistemology that holds that we can know things about the world by making representations of it and that the purpose of these representations of the world is to enable us to move towards an understanding of what the world is really like, once and for all, (even though we may never get there) (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 85).

The problem, however, as they argue, is that such a position begins (and ends) with an insistent realism. On one side, it seeks to do away with mediation altogether, “with the ‘re’ and mak[ing] educational institutions into places where the world itself is presented” (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 87). On the other, it becomes complicit with the ‘metaphysics of presence’, Derrida’s formulation for the logocentric view that a world simply exists ‘out there’, more or less unproblematically, as a selfsame, singular Identity.

What is worth noting here is the manner in which reference is made to a state prior to representation – prior, that is, to what might be called the descent into representation. Regarding the claim that “historically educational practices were initially practices of presentation”, or production, Osberg and Biesta cite Mollenhauer’s (1983) evocation of a time prior to industrialisation when “the new generation could learn through direct participation in the existing ways of life, by mingling, competing and working with adults in the ‘real’ world” (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 86). As they write:

Mollenhauer’s claim is that it is only when a separate educational world was constructed, that the question of representation became a central educational question (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 86).

This raises inevitably the issue of selection:

Since we obviously cannot get the whole world into the school, we have to select which forms of life to represent in the school. We must select what is valuable from what isn’t, and we must then represent this selection in appropriate sequences and formats (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 86).

This is strikingly akin to a similar moment in Lundgren’s account. Observing an earlier period when ‘instruction’ and ‘upbringing’ were not yet distinguishable, he refers to societies “characterised by a limited division of labour and having a homogeneous culture (such as a nomadic aboriginal tribe or an agricultural society)”. He then argues that in such situations “the upbringing of the child in the ‘home’ (the

11 It has been suggested (by one of the reviewers) that Lundgren might well have been drawing on Mollenhauer, perhaps given their common European provenance. I have no evidence of that at hand.
village or whatever constitutes the primary social context) is sufficient for the reproduction of society”. Moreover:

By means of imitating their parents, children learn to identify with the culture and to manage their worlds. In a society of that type, upbringing is based upon a consensus and upon a direct relationship with the natural world (Lundgren, 1991: 3).

It is only later, arguably with industrialisation, but also as an effect of writing and (later) print culture, that divisions appear, and textuality emerges as a necessary supplement:

When production and reproduction processes in a society are inextricably interwoven, the problem of reproduction is intimately related to the problems of production. The child learns the knowledge and skills necessary for production by participating in production. There is no need to have a special language for education; there is no need for thinking in terms of objectives, goals or methods for teaching. The problem of learning is the problem of production. (Lundgren, 1993: 4).

It is only when there is a break between production and reproduction that representation emerges as a problem for education, as discussed previously – the ‘representation problem’, which is to say, the curriculum problem.

Repeated thus across Lundgren and Mollenhauer, I want to describe this as a primal scene: a moment in time (and of desire) when there was simply no need for representation and its associated notions (difference, language, etc) – a moment outside or, and prior to, representation. Whether or not it is ‘true’, or perhaps is an anthropological fiction, a fantasy, is of little concern here, since what is important, I suggest, is the manner in which it works rhetorically, and what it means for the critique of representation in and for curriculum theory, and for curriculum inquiry more generally. Moreover, as Derrida teaches us, it is precisely such moments that carry the seeds of deconstruction in the texts of theory and philosophy, including those associated with the curriculum field. In this way, among other things, it becomes in this particular instance possible to read Lundgren and (especially) Kemmis differently, and more positively, as working right at the limits of their own discourse, and pushing at its boundaries and constraints. At the same time, it indicates the necessity and the value of a Derridaen intervention in this whole debate.

Returning to Osberg and Biesta, however, their focus is not primarily a deconstructive re-working of representation, following Derrida (although they acknowledge the productivity of such a move). Instead, they develop an argument informed by complexity theory and computer science, drawing on the important work of Paul Cilliers (1998) – an account which is itself, interestingly enough, in explicit dialogue with postmodernism. What emerges is described as “a different ethic or ‘way of being’ in education, that is less concerned with representing the real as it is with

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12 See Moeller (2003) for a recent account of Derrida and representation – this time, making specific reference to Western and Eastern views of representation, a comparison that might have value in taking yet another stance regarding this matter.
living it out in different ways” (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 84). That is, they are seeking a different (‘temporal’) epistemology which takes account of representation differently, attends to complexity and indeed recognises its priority, and has an explicit ethical dimension. Following Cilliers’ (1998: 59) critique of “the classical notion of representation” and the case he makes for what he calls ‘distributed representation’ – a new understanding that might perhaps be described, in Derridaean terms, as ‘representation under erasure’ – they go to argue that “[o]ur models are tools, not pictures of reality” (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 91). Social life is too complex for the modernist ‘modelling’ that we have worked with to date (Doll, 1993). “Complex issues demand complex descriptions, and a certain humility” (Cilliers, 1998: 57). Osberg and Biesta draw on Ian Hacking and also Dewey to conclude that it is not the case “that we should no longer attempt to develop knowledge, models or theories”, or indeed engage in representational work – though “we shouldn’t think of them as ‘copies’ of the world ‘out there’”, however sophisticated. Rather, “we should understand knowledge, models and theories as tools that we use in engaging with the ‘world’” (Osberg and Biesta, 2003: 97). Representation in such a view becomes in(ter)vention.

Curriculum Inquiry, Representation and the Postmodern Turn

Within the curriculum inquiry literature, one of the few explicit accounts of representation is that of da Silva (1999). Indeed, his aim is to develop a particular understanding of curriculum as representation, drawing directly on poststructuralist theory and philosophy, notably the work of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida. Again the focus is on questions of knowledge and identity, meaning and power, and (importantly) on both critique and possibility. The starting point is, once again, a diagnosis of the current state, and status, of epistemology. As he writes,

In the context of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’, epistemology has to do fundamentally with representation: with the relationship between, on the one hand, the ‘real’ and ‘reality’, and on the other, the forms through which this ‘real and this ‘reality’ become ‘present’ to us – re-presented (da Silva, 1999: 8).

A general ‘crisis’ of representation is widely acknowledged, along with a loss of certainty and a failure of confidence in the ‘grand narratives’ that have long sustained the historical project of modernity, together with a pervasive sense of ontological insecurity. In this context, “[a] process of epistemological destabilisation … is underway” (da Silva, 1999: 8). Much of the paper is spent in reviewing various aspects of this ensemble, and something of its recent history – bearing in mind that this history arguably reaches back over the history of the West. The relationship between representation and power is stressed, with the former seen as “not simply a carrier of power, a simple point of mediation between power as a determining force and power as an effect”; rather, “[p]ower is inscribed in representation” (da Silva, 1999: 18) – representation is a form of power. Especially pertinent here is the discussion of realism. Representation is described as “at its most efficacious when it presents itself in its realist disguise” (da Silva, 1999: 23), suggesting that there is a fundamental complicity or perhaps simply a fatal attraction between realism and representation. A strong position is taken with regard to, and within, the politics of representation: “Realist representation is fundamentally conformist: even (or mainly) when it is involved in social critique” (da Silva, 1999: 24). This argument recalls
another, much earlier account, bringing together media education and discourse theory, which worked from the notion that “the school curriculum as we have inherited it and as it remains today, is essentially realist” (Alvarado and Ferguson, 1983: 20; cf Wexler, 1987) – a point I shall return to. Here, it suffices to indicate the manner in which representation is mobilised here as a resource for critical pedagogy and curriculum theory.

When da Silva turns his attention directly to curriculum, it is notable that he resumes the question of knowledge:

As a site of knowledge, the curriculum is the expression of our conceptions of what constitutes knowledge. In general, the notion of knowledge that is expressed there is fundamentally realist (da Silva, 1999: 28).

As such, it participates in the general economy of representation as presence. Knowledge ‘transcribes’ reality. The passage between the world and the curriculum, and between the curriculum and the learner, is basically unproblematical, a technical challenge, something to be facilitated by ‘best practice’, whether that be in pedagogy or in research and disciplinary knowledge production. Indeed, in effect the passage itself is denied. Yet such a view must be refused, and countered:

Curriculum is itself a representation: not only a site in which signs that are produced in other places circulate, but also a place of production of signs in its own right (da Silva, 1999: 28).

Moreover, this is never innocent, always a matter of power, of struggle and contestation. Curriculum is understood therefore as “a struggle around sign, around representation” (da Silva, 1999: 29). As with Alvarado and Ferguson (1983: 32), at issue here is the saturation of curriculum and knowledge with power. Realism as a curriculum dominant is refused: “[t]he realist concept of knowledge and curriculum suppresses …any notion of politics” (da Silva, 1999: 29). What is offered, instead, is a view of curriculum as a semiotic practice, as opaque, as (‘writerly’) text, a site of both materiality and productivity, precisely as representation. Moreover: “The text that constitutes curriculum is not simply a text: it is a text of power” (da Silva, 1999: 30; my emphasis). Curriculum is not simply a relay, then, or a means of exchange; the ‘passage’ itself is significant, a field of signification, unruly, that interrupts and arrests its own consumption. As such, it involves, necessarily, both a rhetorical, aesthetic dimension and a political dimension: “To conceive of curriculum as representation implies to see it simultaneously, inseparably, as a poetics and as a politics” (da Silva, 1999: 30) – the poetics and politics of curriculum as representation.

Crucial to such a view is a new understanding of the use-value of representation in curriculum, and of curriculum as the negotiation of the ‘representation problem’. In shifting from a realist to a semiotic view, what emerges is a sense of representation as not simply fragile or fallible, a site of danger, but as mutable, open to change, something to be worked on and with, and hence a site of possibility. Accordingly, as da Silva (1999: 30) writes:
To conceive of curriculum as representation means … to highlight the work of its production, it means to expose it as the artifact that it is. To see curriculum as representation means to expose and question codes, conventions, stylistics and artifices through which it is produced: it implies to make visible the marks of its architectural construction.

This is not simply to be reflexive about the manner in which curriculum is produced, in its various sites of realisation, ranging from the classroom to the academy, via policy and the bureaucracy, to the more distant reaches of curriculum and educational history. Rather, it is to bring together knowledge and power in a ‘meta-critical’ reassessment of the worldly praxis of curriculum.

Conclusion: In(ter)ventions as Curriculum Work

My aim in this paper has been to return to what I continue to see as a critical moment in curriculum history, and hence to attend to what I have described here as (still) unfinished business: on the one hand, the vexed question of the political project of curriculum inquiry, or ‘curriculum-as-political-text’; and on the other, to propose that a postmodern (‘deconstructive’) account of representation offers intriguing possibilities in this regard. There has been a tendency, in some quarters at least, to argue for the effective eclipse of politics in curriculum inquiry, or for the glossing-over of political struggle and social change with the rise of a supposedly quite distinct ‘identity politics’, following the apparent decline of explicit concern about matters of class and economy and increasing interest in and emphasis on other forms of social difference and inequality. The shift to poststructural(ist) and postmodern work is seen as a marker therefore of turning aside from the ‘real’ problems of the World, to engage in textual play and symbolic work, as if that was all it was. Others welcome a respite from what might be called conspicuous politics, but risk becoming caught up in other sorts of academic ‘language games’ and indeed narrowing the full scope of the political, in all its material-semiotic complexity. Postmodernising the representation problem might well open up possibilities in this regard, with representational practice seen now in a post-realist light, and as a matter of both intervention and invention – of working in and on the World. Representation thus becomes a primary term of reference, and productively so. Hence, among other things it has priority over the reproductionist thesis, as now a particular story about intergenerational (dis)continuity, power, and the dialectic of difference and identity. Curriculum work understood in terms of the politics and poetics of representation readily connects, in short, with seeing curriculum as “the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world” (Pinar et al, 1995: 847-848; see also Pinar, 2004: 20).

Whether or not there is still a measure of possibility in so-called reproduction theory in curriculum theory is unclear. At the very least, it remains an open debate. Discursively, the links between ‘reproduction’ and ‘generations’ are resonant, and worth continued investigation. It bears recalling that education within such a view has been described in terms of “the maintenance of social identity across generations” (Walter Feinberg, cited Kemmis and Fitzclarence, 1986: 88-89; Kemmis, 1992a: 13). This is acknowledged as a process fraught with difficulty and danger. That remains the case even when the stress is placed on reproduction and transformation, maintenance and renewal. What is at issue here is the threat of difference – not just
the ineluctability of difference but the (post)structural priority of difference over identity. As theorists of representation and power, discourse and subjectivity argue, identity is always a struggle, a momentary ‘fixing’ in the overflow of signification. Difference is everywhere, and insistent: an ever-present danger. Hence, as da Silva (1999: 31) writes, curriculum is an exemplary site for “the production of identity and alterity”, or the negotiation of difference and its productivity, as “a privileged terrain of struggle around representation”. The implication for curriculum inquiry is profound, as is the challenge.

References


