Navigating Through the Storm

Reinventing Education for Postmodern Democracies

Aharon Aviram
Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel

This book aims to systematically tackle the most severe crisis to ever beset Western education systems, which stems from the growing clash between the Platonic-modern civilization – still very much at the core of prevailing education systems – and the postmodern civilization which has become dominant in Western societies in the last generations. The book counters this crisis by radically and systematically rethinking education for postmodern democracies, beginning by comprehensively analyzing the main features of current postmodern "storms" along with their engulfing socio-cultural and educational implications, and proceeding to offer a theoretical and practical blueprint designed to harness these storms for optimally realizing the basic Humanistic values that should guide education in liberal democracies: personal autonomy, morality and dialogical belonging.

Intended audience:
Researchers, students, practitioners and policymakers in all fields of education; parents of school-age children; and anyone who values the importance of education for the future of developed societies.

A terrific book. Aharon Aviram’s trenchant critique of massive educational failure in postmodern democracies is combined with a hopeful agenda for radical educational change. An outstanding contribution to educational research.
— Eamonn Callan, Professor of Education, Stanford University

Educational practices no longer prepare individuals to become effective co-creators of their own futures, and educational establishments are undergoing irrelevant reforms. Aharon Aviram analyzes this state of affairs and presents a set of thought-provoking and fresh proposals for an alternative that deserve the serious consideration of all who truly wish to re-envision learning and education for the 21st Century.
— Jim Dator, Director - Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa; Former President - World Futures Studies Federation

The book gives us a very timely wakeup call from the 19th century slumber that many still inhabit and the ensuing common mythical quick fix solutions usually suggested for the deep crisis of Western educational systems in postmodernity. It offers detailed and valiant democratic-humanistic educational goals and guidelines for policy and decision making in the “uncharted waters” of postmodernity.
— John P. Portelli, Professor and Co-Director - Centre for Leadership and Diversity, OISE, University of Toronto

A magnificent book, enormously interesting, important and disturbing. Essential reading for those struggling to understand the tectonic shifts in philosophy, technology and general lifestyle responsible for that weltanschauung which has pushed contemporary educational systems ‘beyond their expiration date’, so necessitating a fundamental ‘reinvention of education from scratch’.
— John Abbott, President - The 21st Century Learning Initiative
Navigating Through the Storm

*Reinventing Education for Postmodern Democracies*
EDUCATIONAL FUTURES
RETHINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE
Volume 34

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Navigating Through the Storm

Reinventing Education for Postmodern Democracies

Aharon Aviram

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The ideas portrayed in this book have been maturing over two decades of work that my colleagues in the Center of Futurism in Education at Ben-Gurion University in Israel and I have been doing in schools and educational systems, both in Israel and abroad. These ideas were first portrayed in papers I published in both English and Hebrew throughout the 1980s and 90s and then in a systematic integrative view on the need to reinvent education in a volume entitled “Navigating in the Storm” published in 1999 in Hebrew. The responses the book generated and further practical and intellectual experiences I have had since led to the extensive contemplation on and elaboration of the vision reflected in the revised and expanded version in this book before you, which I chose to name “Navigating through the Storm.”

In our day-to-day work, my colleagues reinforced my belief in the need for and possibility to develop and implement educational processes which are completely different from those currently referred to as “educational”; they provided me with intellectual inspiration to dream of a different kind of education, while serving as a sounding board for me during our work together and throughout the writing process of this work, at times challenging my dreams with “reality checks” and calls to reexamine and refine my thesis, for as we all know, doubts can fertilize intellectual inspiration. I owe them all a debt of gratitude.

My thanks especially to Noga Arbell, who together with me did the meticulous work of editing and reworking the English version of the manuscript needed to adapt it to a non-Israeli audience, and to my colleague Yael Ronen who accompanied and systematically supported all aspects of this very demanding adaptation process and in her diligence, commitment, high professionalism, and wisdom made this version of the book possible.

That said and done, the responsibility for the final version is, of course, mine, and mine alone.
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INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION IN A STORMY WORLD

In this initial chapter I make the first steps towards clarifying the essence of the main argument of the first part of the book. This first part of the book is predicated on and provides great detail of the claims that modern education systems are foundering in postmodern democracies, and thus require that education in postmodern democracies be reinvented using a process of mindful, strategic thinking. The book’s second and third parts follow the mindful strategic thinking such reinvention requires and outline a detailed, systematically substantiated blueprint of altogether new educational processes and goals designed to optimally realize democracy’s most basic Humanistic values in the new postmodern situation.

These critical claims were crystallized during my work with tens of schools and educational systems over the last twenty years, both in Israel and abroad, and within an ongoing “conversation” I have had with the main relevant theoretical and empirical discourses. They are the motivational force behind this book, both in its “deconstructionist” stance in the first part, and in the “constructionist” stance in the other two parts. I will delineate them in this chapter in three rounds: in the first section I will portray them in the most general way through the ship metaphor reflected in the title of this volume; I will then proceed to present the book structure which reflects these claims and their constructionist consequences in a schematic way; then I will continue to the third round that clarify those claims in a much “thicker” and detailed manner. These preliminary descriptions are not aimed to systematically substantiating these claims which will be done in during the first part of the book itself.

A SHIP LOST IN UNCHARTED STORMY WATER

Imagine, if you will, a ship, a large vessel carrying passengers, which all of a sudden finds itself in unknown and uncharted water. The ship’s captain and crew are unfamiliar with the rules of navigating through this new ocean, as they did not expect to reach this part of the world nor did they prepare for it. Everything they thought they knew about currents and winds, the instruments they use to determine direction, the ship’s helm, even the North Star—none of these apply, function, or respond in any comprehensible way.

Now imagine that this ship, which is drifting aimlessly, as its sailors no longer have any effective way to guide its progression or even define a direction toward which they should be guiding it, is caught in a powerful storm. The ship is thrown in all directions, tsunami-size waves wash over its deck and its hull is broken by the rocks it is thrust against. By this point, the passengers of the ship are panicked.

*This title is a paraphrase of Richard Livingstone’s *Education for a World Adrift* (Livingstone, 1944).
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The captain, wishing to protect his and his staff’s professional honor, not to mention prevent demands for refunds, does everything in his power to at least seem as if he is still in control of the battered vessel. He and his crew use their now useless nautical knowledge to feign such control, to pretend to be working hard to navigate the ship and lead it to a known, safe haven.

As the ship drifts aimlessly deeper and deeper into the storm, the sailors’ simulated efforts to guide it become more and more feverish and less and less effective. They have no idea where they want the ship to go or how to navigate it there, yet they are too panic-stricken to make any mindful effort to learn even the most basic of the new rules of the uncharted waters and winds around them and to extrapolate from them new navigation guidelines. They are certainly in too much of a frenzy to be able to think rationally about locating a goal they would like to direct themselves towards. Instead, they waste their final and quickly draining resources on not losing face in front of their passengers, and continue to use the same knowledge and skills which have already proven useless in their struggle to weather the storm, completely ignoring the risk they stand of drowning the ship altogether.

The first part of the book you are about to read depicts just such a ship caught in a similar storm roaring in uncharted water. The proverbial storm in uncharted water is the series of postmodern upheavals which demolished every aspects of the human situation known until about twenty or thirty years ago in but a few short decades. The ship so badly damaged by this storm is Western education systems whose captains, officers, and primary decision makers have yet to recognize both the totally new nature of the stormy reality they find themselves in and their inability to clearly and consistently point at any desired and realizable goal within it, let alone mindfully navigate towards it.

The captain, officers, and sailors’ desperately feigned rescue and navigation attempts are analogous to the endless, ever repeating, series of superficial changes and reforms Western educational systems are plagued with. These “changes” have become an integral, often ritualistic, part of educational activity in almost all Western educational systems over the last two generations. The “reforms” are often depicted as “holistic,” “systemic,” and aimed to enhance “paradigmatic change” in one educational system or another. However, as these reforms are irrelevant to the real fundamental causes of the crisis, they are neither systemic nor actual reforms. They certainly deepen the hold of the old paradigm and render the dire situation of education systems ever more hopeless with each failed “attempt.”

The goal of this chapter, and, in a more substantiated way, of the first part of the book, is to give citizens, decision makers, and educational communities in postmodern Western democracies a much needed and overdue wakeup call. This wakeup call is essentially different in its nature, suppositions, and goals from the many texts lamenting and deploring the sad situation of education systems/students/teachers in various Western counties, a lamentation that has become part and parcel of the common ritual of “educational reform.”

These texts usually begin with deploring the hopeless situation of the education system from one or a few perspectives (falling grades, expending inequalities, increasing violence, addictions, teachers’ burnout, etc.), diagnose The root problem(s)
(teacher exclusion from school’s decision making, school’s rigid dependency on an external bureaucracy, school’s immunity to “free market forces,” formal frontal teaching methods, and so on and so forth) and end with pointing to some panacea or combination of panaceas that if only practiced would allegedly solve the root problem. Among the most common alleged panaceas of the last generation one can find: “teacher empowerment,” “school based management,” “parental choice,” “constructivist teaching and learning,” “teachers’ accountability,” “school effectiveness,” “universal standards,” equipping all students with PCs and laptops or connecting them to broadband Internet, or (one of the most recent “battle cries”) enhancing “mobile learning.” I could dedicate the entire section to this list of educational reforms, which reflect many diverse and often contradictory perspectives and ideologies, focus on numerous aspects of the school or educational systems, and have different resolutions for their plight, and still not come close to exhausting it.

In counterdistinction, the view presented and defended in detail in the first part of this book is too realistic to allow such optimism or belief in quick or even slow fixes, not if those take place within prevailing modern education systems. It is impossible to deduce from it an overall “if only” solution. Rather it calls on the sailors and officers to wake up and, for starters, realize and admit to themselves, to each other, and to their passengers that our education ship is aimlessly drifting in uncharted, stormy, postmodern water which is totally different than the modern water it was designed and built to navigate in.

It also calls for a realization that in order to navigate effectively through this amassing postmodern storm, we need to immediately abandon our current, futile, obsession with mindless changes which are not based on recognition of the radically new nature of reality and do not address the core problems, yet waste endless time and resources.

Finally, it calls for us to (a) design and execute a macro-level, integrative mapping of the stormy water and winds and the powers they exert on the ship; (b) clearly formulate basic goals for education which stem from the Humanistic tradition basic to postmodern democracies; and (c) based on the previous two tasks, form a strategic thinking process to determine how we can optimally reach the desired Humanistic goals in the postmodern situation.

THE BOOK’S STRUCTURE

The main argument delineated in the book’s three parts is presented in the following order: The first chapter of the book and of Part One shows that the rapid transition from the modern to the postmodern era has rendered the modern definitions of contemporary education systems anachronistic and anomalous. The modern definitions of the five basic parameters that characterize every system: goals, content, organizational structure, conception of and attitude towards target audience and its mobilization, and modus operandi or, in this case, didactics, are rapidly and intensively undermined today.

Chapters Two through Five focus on the first four of the five basic parameters, and describe the collapse of their modern definition in more detail. The fifth
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parameter, didactics, is often discussed throughout this part of the book and therefore no special chapter has been dedicated to it.

Examination of the postmodern reality and the school systems which operate within it reveals an ominous truth: as effects of the postmodern era encroach further into every aspect of Western society, the gap between modern education systems and the reality within which they must operate widens. The significance of the activities, for both students and teachers, within these systems, has virtually vanished, the functionality thereof is seriously impaired, and the products of these crippled systems are becoming an actual threat to liberal democratic values. The first part therefore calls for an overall, mindful, systematic process of redesigning the human educational endeavor in order to adjust it to the needs of postmodern Liberal Democracies.

Part Two of this book is predicated on the assumption that the aforementioned need for strategic, macro-level, educational rethinking and for a reinvention of education to better suit the needs of postmodern democracies is recognized. This part offers a redrawn map of the postmodern storms and one possible new design for the ship of education based on it, as well as desired goals for it in light of the Humanistic values basic to postmodern Liberal Democracies. This design is aimed to harness the new postmodern powers to the implementation of the desired educational goals.

In other words, this part provides a detailed and substantiated path for implementation of the required systematic thought process called for by the first part of this book. It is but one example for such implementation. It is obviously the one I believe must be employed as it offers the most necessary constitutional elements: the definition of the values based on Humanistic tradition as the guiding North Star of education in postmodern democratic societies and the understanding of the postmodern situation within which framework these values must be optimally implemented.

Part Two therefore suggests an alternative educational paradigm which I believe to be both desirable and attainable in the context of a postmodern democracy. Chapters Six through Nine discuss the five basic system parameters: goals, content, organizational structure, target audience, and its mobilization. In these chapters I argue that postmodern education should adopt three core complementary goals derived from, and supportive of, the perpetuation of a liberal democratic worldview: individual autonomy, morality, and dialogical belonging. These chapters also extensively explain how these goals can be implemented in the postmodern era.

In delineating the preferred, still Humanistic yet postmodern oriented, system, I underscore three guidelines necessary in any system which aspires to educate in postmodern democracies, which contemporary modern education systems fail to meet. (a) The system must contribute to the sustainability and vitality of Liberal Democracy. (b) The system’s activities must be meaningful to young people and adults within the system. (c) The educational system must be compatible with postmodern processes and capable of functioning well within the social and economic contexts of a postmodern reality.
Part Three of the book emphasizes the urgency of launching this huge, demanding project of educational reinvention and of pointing out the first steps necessary to operationalize this process in a manner compatible with contemporary modern systems. This part contains the final chapters of this volume, and thus the clarion call to address the challenges presented by this book immediately, to put them on top of tomorrow morning’s agenda. It underscores the urgency of mindfully implementing Humanistic, postmodern education and charts a course for postmodern Liberal Democracies to take from here on. Following this course should ideally lead new (and to some extent old) educational communities to design and implement the badly needed Humanistic, postmodern education system which I entitled in this book “Autonomy Oriented Education.”

In Annex One I describe in further detail the myriad of approaches and discourses with which I have had an ongoing daily dialogue for the past twenty years about the acute problems plaguing the very foundation of contemporary education systems and concepts analyzed in this book. Readers who wish to know “where I come from” can find in that chapter a systematic depiction of these approaches and the way my views emerged out of the long ongoing “conversations” I had with them.

The book can and should be read on two different levels: its first foundational level leads to the above appeal for democratic education systems to respond to the postmodern tsunami-size changes in a macro-level, strategic, fashion. Such a response should consist of a rethinking of all the basic educational questions from scratch which would hopefully result in a reinvention of education. The second level, which stems from the first, consists of a systematic, substantiated, attempt to implement this strategic thought in the direction I find the most adequate both normatively and descriptively. However, the first level’s call for a rethinking of education may very well lead to the drawing of different blueprints for a wholly new education system which nonetheless still fits the need of postmodern democracies. Thus even readers who take issue with the second level of my argument, or any of its parts, and reject my particular plan for redesigning education, should still be ethically and socially committed to materializing the thinking process the first level of my argument demands. Such readers are more than welcome to see the second level of my argument or those of its parts they disagree with as a methodological demonstration of the feasibility of the very demanding task of reinventing education.

In contrast to the all-too-familiar “educational lamentations” in existence today, this book does not offer a specific solution to a specific problem or even set of problems. It rather calls on all involved in education to step back and look at the bigger picture and the huge predicament the ship of education is in so they can formulate a better, more useful, solution to it than their futile attempts to reattach the ship’s hull boards as the powerful postmodern winds blow them away one by one. To use a Hindu metaphor, it is a call to tear away the Maya Veil that allows educators and decision makers to think that the obsessive re-pinning of the ever-loosening boards is going to solve anything and force them to realize that it is a major cause for the problem’s exacerbation. The constant attempt to fix the symptoms
is actually preventing us from having a chance to even see the need for much more extensive, macro-level, strategic thinking about the root causes of the postmodern disease and about the effects of its incessant tsunami-sized attacks on the way things used to be.

The second generation of the postmodern era is making its first steps these very days. The speed and intensity of the changes this era brings about are accelerating and intensifying with each passing day as is its revolutionary impact on every aspect of our lives. The early beginning of the postmodern era can be traced back to the 1960s and since then, especially during the last two decades, it has unrecognizably changed almost every dimension of the human condition. Some of the most obvious and powerful of the tsunami-like waves of revolutions which forcefully carry the postmodern changes forward are briefly indicated below (I elaborate on all of them and few other, connected, postmodern revolutions in Chapter One):

• A series of ground-breaking, ICT-based realities (PC-based, multimedia and CD-Rom-based, Internet-based, WWW-based, mobile terminal-based) that have engulfed us one after the other from the early 1980s onward, changing again and again the way we work, communicate, think, buy, and even flirt; and of course rendering the book based culture that dominated the West since Gutenberg fade quickly away.

• Economic and political globalization trends which changed everything we knew about economy several times since the 1980s. These changes have led, among other things, to permanent amplification of the intensity and speed of technological innovation and economic competition. As a consequence, several rounds of organizational upheaval occurred, creating thinner, more dynamic, outsourcing-oriented economic organizations all over the world. Virtually all economic organizations have by now integrated the new organizational order into their daily operations. These series of revolutions practically obliterated all previously accepted structures in the labor market and in career management and created instead a much more fluid, permanently changing, labor market wherein “tenure” or even “career” (in the sense of it being the linear structure of one’s professional development) and in some contexts even “work” no longer exist.

• A cultural relativist revolution which led to a breakdown of the belief systems and ideologies which guided human beings throughout history and were more often than not based on objectivistic foundations.

• A disintegration of all “natural,” unconditional, social belonging frameworks human beings have ever known: community, the extended family, the nuclear family, the workplace, neighborhoods, and so on.


• Practically inconceivable (until but a decade or two) technological innovations in the medical and biological spheres. As a result of these advances we are rapidly approaching a period in which medical science can easily “repair,”
change or replace any human organ or part thereof, as well as predetermine the characteristics of potential human beings. Since we all surf the endless heavens of the digital reality, consume and produce within the global economy, function as employees or employers in the fluid labor market, and are citizens of the postmodern relativistic culture and amorphous societies, the above changes have radically changed all aspects of our lives. They have already done so a few times over and in many different ways. One possible way to bring home to the readers the intensity of these upheavals is to point to the irony of the human situation we find ourselves in.

The sinister irony of the human situation in our time stems from an impossible (or psychologically unbearable) combination of exponential growth in the range of freedom and choice available to most individuals in the postmodern world, as a result of the above and other postmodern revolutions and a complete disintegration of all ethical and social systems which supported our ancestors who had a much more limited range of choices.

This new human situation begat a rapid spread of depression and anxiety all over the Western world, in amounts never before seen, as individuals became less and less able to shoulder the awful burden of the cruel irony mentioned above.

Each of the aforementioned revolutions affects the very core of human existence, the “laws of nature,” so to speak, that our parents and their parents before them took for granted. Doubtlessly we are in the midst of the most radical, intensive, and rapid change the human situation ever underwent. In the following chapters I systematically elaborate the extent and nature of these changes and their effects on everything we ever knew and were accustomed to.

These tremendous, ongoing and ever accelerating, interconnected revolutions cannot be summarized by any one clear map. There has been, and may yet be, an infinite number of partial attempts to create such a map or meta-picture of the accelerating cultural, economic, technological, social, political, psychological, and ecological tsunami waves, which change, over and over again, everything we know. Such attempts referred to the postmodern reality as “the end of history,” “the coming of the last man,” the era of “clash of civilizations,” “the flat world,” “fluid modernity,” “post-Fordist society,” “postcapitalistic society,” “technopoly,” and so on and so forth.

Still, I will venture in a sinful attempt to make such large-scale generalizations for the sake of making two points: Most thinkers dealing with the subject believe our time to be a turning point; many consider it the most significant one in human history, one after which “nothing will be the same anymore.” Furthermore, even when emphasizing different aspects or using different perspectives, it is easy to see many similarities between the different descriptions of the postmodern changes. In the following chapters I shall point out three such basic structures that cut across all levels of the human condition in postmodernity: a lack of linearity, of stability, and of continuity.

In spite of the widespread agreement among thinkers, representing a variety of disciplines and perspectives, about the factual aspects of the situation, their normative evaluation thereof could not be more different and therefore is subject to
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constant debate: While some thinkers bemoan postmodernity as the era of the last man, lament our enslavement to technology and the economic powers dominating it, the disintegration of our “selves,” and the loss of the West’s belief in its own credo, others celebrate it as the era of permanent playfulness, full liberation from the heavy social or psychological structures (including that of “the self”). They perceive it as an era of unimaginable breadth of human ingenuity and of the ultimate victory of Western beliefs in Liberal Democracy and liberal economy.

Such thinkers may not deny the heavy toll, mentioned above, this wonderful new world exerts but they argue either that it is to be shouldered solely by us, the “generation of wilderness,” while a new brand of human beings can already be spotted growing in our kindergartens, a humans which do not require the stability, linearity, and continuity which were lost to us. Or, that such a price, for whoever pays it, is worth paying given the huge profit Western democracies stand to gain from postmodernity.

POSTMODERNITY AND THE UNAVERSEABLE FAILURE OF MODERN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Fortunately we do not need to decide between the many intellectual opinions mentioned above. What matters to us is that all involved agree that we have passed a crucial turning point, probably the most significant one in human history.

We can now approach the subject at hand: the essential, inherent, inadequacy of the education systems prevalent in postmodern democracies. Contemporary education systems were designed and formed during the peak of the Second Industrial Revolution, on the basis of traditional Platonic curricular foundations, known throughout history as the “liberal (i.e., purely theoretical) curriculum.” This curriculum was originally designed for an individual free of the burden of making a living, and was of course adjusted to suit the emerging needs of industrial societies. There is no way, and in this book I shall provide ample explanation and proof to this claim, for a modern-Platonic education system to successfully function in the postmodern reality. The gap between the structures and conceptions by which Western education systems function and the chaotic and incomprehensible reality in which it must operate is subsequently perpetually widening at an incredible speed.

This gap renders the education system non-functional from both a social and an organizational perspective. Socially speaking, the current education systems no longer serve society or its current economic and cultural needs as it opposes everything presupposed by them. Organizationally, given the above situation, the current systems can no longer operate smoothly or even fake smooth operation. An unbiased “Martian gaze” cannot but see the current systems as a lunatic or surrealistic reality hanging on to what cannot but be described as obsolete, strange, and extremely costly rituals that may or may not have been meaningful in previous eras, for incomprehensible reasons.

Members of the educational community are in fact expected to function in an impossible and intolerable situation characterized, among other things, by:
• Teachers who are charged with an authoritative role and expected to “keep the class in check” although the social culture and school organizational culture within which they operate are not able to provide even the most minimal backing for that authority, in counterdistinction with their modern and traditional predecessors who generously supported it;

• A study of the disciplinary subject-matters which have very little, if any, meaning for either teachers or students, because curricula are often at odds with students’ practical or psychological needs and contrary to the dictates of dominant relativistic culture they encounter outside the classroom, wherein utilitarian values do not ascribe any importance to theoretical study for its own sake These curricula are also increasingly irrelevant to a growing portion of the changing labor market;

• A learning environment saturated with incessant change of approaches and methods, wherein teachers and students are constantly required to readjust themselves to accommodate the steady stream of “updated” didactic views and methodologies as the good old stable methods of the modern (and obviously traditional) past have lost any grip they may have had on the system.

• Schools inundated with scores of “projects,” “interventions,” “processes of change,” “reforms,” and “restructurings” which in many cases do not relate to each other and are frequently patently contradictory, all of which exact from the schools an enormous toll in wasted energy, attention, time, and money, while the end product often amounts to no more than “much ado about nothing”;

• Schools and teachers who must contend with conflicting demands and contradictory, shifting, and confused desires of multiple target audiences: the state, parents, the community, young people, and educational experts—since the “good old” educational goals of the past are no longer able to serve as a compass.

Such impossible circumstances are neither natural to the educational context nor necessary. This was not the circumstance in which education systems of the past, not even the recent past, had to function. These are all symptoms of a profoundly dysfunctional system which seeks to feign meaningful operation despite the growing chasm between it and the reality around it. They create organizational confusion which imposes tremendous mental stress on all those “caught in the system.” Administrators, teachers, pupils, and parents all find it hard to comprehend what has transpired, the significance of the chasm, the great speed at which it is widening, or its cognitive and organizational implications.

Many (actually most) postmodern democracies are aware of the rise in disciplinary problems, violence and drug and alcohol abuse among young people. They are also aware of the drop—at best stagnation—of levels of scholastic achievement. Parent and student dissatisfaction is ever growing; teacher burnout is accelerating beyond control, and most importantly the contradicting reforms that keep sweeping the system all start with festive declarations and huge spending and disintegrate
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into oblivion within but a few short years, leaving the system, at best, unharmed, but at worst even more mangled than it was before.

These are all symptoms of an essentially dysfunctional system, which is completely at odds with the external reality it is supposed to serve and therefore to large extent acts in a vacuum.

In this situation it is our duty, if we care about young people and the future of our societies and ourselves, to mobilize all our intellectual, professional, and financial resources to try to utilize what little influence we may have on the course of history. Instead of allowing our educational systems to drift away in the postmodern storms, we must do our best to navigate through the storm at any moment in time. In order to navigate these stormy waters, we must do our best to understand:

• What kind of impact has postmodernity had on Western education so far?
• Why?
• What kind of future impact can we predict it will still have? (Understand the postmodern storms, winds, and turbulences.)

Most importantly, we must answer the following normative or ideological questions:

• What direction do we want Western societies to take in the (say) next two decades?
• In light of the above direction, what goals should we set for desired education systems (goals that should guide our navigating efforts)?
• How can we best help education systems move in this direction?
• Can we utilize the postmodern storm to navigate in that direction?
• How can we utilize the postmodern storm to navigate in that direction?

INNOVATION FIT ONLY FOR THE PAST

As things are, no Western educational system or international forum has yet to address the above questions systematically. Instead, international organizations (for example the OECD which runs the PISA: Program for International Student Assessment, which surveys scholastic achievement using world applied standardized tests every few years) are busy grading national systems according to students’ achievements in the most “respectable” disciplines (math and sciences, of course) as if those few centuries-old standards still have the same validity they did two thousand years ago.

National systems celebrate these and similar findings as ancient tribes used to celebrate the awakening of nature after a long winter sleep (in case they are graded high in the exams), or practice atonement rituals and asking ancestor spirits for forgiveness (in the much more frequent case of low national grades). Every four years when these grades are published (in most nations who perceive themselves as graded “too low”) the ritual of accusations, mea culpa admissions, calls and plans for “urgent investigations,” “reforms,” and obviously commitment to huge investments is celebrated again; PISA is a major international education festival, but there are smaller scale international ones as well as national festivals that note various kinds of success according to an irrelevant grading system in a dysfunctional
EDUCATION IN A STORMY WORLD

learning process of a curriculum that has long lost its cultural meaning. As a result of such testimonies to the failures of Western education systems, ideas of “change,” “reform,” and “innovation” have been adopted into the educational discourse over the last four decades. These concepts are actually the core of educational discourse in the last four decades. These rituals are repeated every year (national test results) or every four years (international results) as well as whenever “new” information about falling grades, rising violence, addiction, or teacher burnout is published.

Naturally the superficial changes included in the relevant discourse do not penetrate deep enough; they do not touch the foundation of the modern paradigm which stands at the base of the prevailing educational system and of its unavoidable failure. Many of the “reforms” implemented are inconsistent with one another in a manner that to a large extent cancels them out altogether. The few which manage to “escape” that fate are swept away by the current, all powerful, makeup of the system and the vested interests it relies upon (or at least what many educational stakeholders believe to be their vested interests). Often, as in the case of PISA and similar international evaluations, the criteria for judging the system are also sources for determination of its performance as failed. At the end of the day, “the more it changes the more it remains the same” (a school change saying coined by John Goodlad three decades ago) describes this discourse of changes which brings about no change quite well. To paraphrase Shakespeare, it is much talk about nothing.

The comparison with tribal rituals, which I made above, seems to be obvious and inescapable. Let me elaborate on it further so the absurdity of the situation is eminently clear to the reader. Think of a tribe which was for some reason left alone in a remote rainforest (that is, if the growing hunger brought on by postmodern economies left any such forests intact). Once the rainforest is demolished, and the inhabitants therein, who were never “tainted by civilization,” are forced to integrate within nearby cities, most of what they know and do will be irrelevant to the postmodern urban situation they all of a sudden find themselves in. The only difference between this fable and the standing of education systems in postmodern reality current situation is that while the chasm between the tribesmen and their neighbors was gradually created over thousands of years, the huge gap between Western societies and their educational systems began to form not so long ago at all, in the 1970s.

It is clear, given the urban conditions they face, that the tribespeople’s life routine will be irrevocable disturbed. If they try to hunt for deer or pigs on the highway, they will bump against cars, which as a rule are not vulnerable to their arrows. Even if they are lucky enough to hunt a “sleeping” (i.e., parking) one, they will not gain much sustenance from their “kill.” They will not be able to dig in the ground, now covered in rock-hard asphalt, for water. There will in fact be very little exposed ground to be found anywhere in the cement jungle wherein they now reside, and what little they may find will probably be polluted and poisonous to them. Their sexual norms and ways of rearing their children will quickly land them in a jail cell for violations of the Western rules about polygamy, child abuse, and pedophilia.
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They may struggle for a while, ignoring an external reality they could not possibly conceive in the past (the “denial phase”). Once they realize that something beyond their grasp no longer allows them to carry on their old, familiar ways of life, they will become depressed and apathetic (the mourning phase). Then they will make desperate attempts to adapt. They will try to create new rituals, designed to appeal to the spirit of the “new animals” (cars) to allow themselves to get caught or they will fashion new prayers and dances to convince the spirits of their ancestors to supply them with food and water. (This “acceptance and adaptation phase” is still designed in light of their old paradigm.) Being cultural light years away from any of the civilizations around them and having no way to make sense of what is going on in the postmodern world, their attempts to adjust, which are out of any touch with reality, will fail completely and they will inevitably, gradually, perish.

That is, unless some anthropologically oriented philanthropist donates enough funds to form reservations for them, in which their needs will be catered to and any external influence will be strictly forbidden.

This is what, to large extent, happened to the modern school in the postmodern era. The generous philanthropist in their case is the state and local authorities. Using laws and social arrangements, the higher authorities have been protecting education systems, preempting any interference between them and the incomprehensible menacing reality that appeared unexpectedly at their doorstep. Law and social customs not only guarantee education systems a monopoly (either as public or private institutions, they have been the almost sole legitimate source of supply for “education”), they also make “the consumption of their services” mandatory. They usually also cater to all the systems’ financial needs without them ever having to show any real contribution to society (current student grading standards, even in our standards-stricken era, have nothing to do with such a contribution). Protected by an enforced monopoly and fully financed, education systems continue to carry out their old surrealistic rituals regardless of the world around them.

But the borders between schools and external reality are not hermetically sealed and the state-instituted protection afforded to the education system is becoming more and more difficult to maintain. What makes things difficult in the age of schools is the fact that those who have to function within the tribal system (“children,” “students,” and many of the “teachers”) enter the reservation in the morning and return to their homes in the outside civilization every afternoon. Most of the younger members of this tribe, and many of the older ones (or teachers), abandon the “homo modernicus” façade they must put on for the sake of the tribe the minute they leave the school gates and return to their much more adequate to our era “homo postmodernicus” behavior.

So even if the endless generosity of the millionaire continues to safeguard the sanctity of the surrealistic rituals indefinitely, schools will not be able to remain aloof and ignore their surrounding environment for much longer. As a result of the constant friction between the tribal rituals protected by a state-sanctioned monopoly and the surrounding reality, carried inside in the hearts and minds of many of the young tribe members and teachers, the system is plagued by a host of gradually
noisier grating sounds, as its operation is slowly but surely advancing toward a complete halt.

The rising levels of tectonic civilization clashes lead in our case, as was the case with the tribe’s people, to immense, chaotic, unmindful, change processes that have yet to have any coherent, sustainable, and transferable impact on the system. The old civilization is losing its grip on the little territory left for it every day and does not stand the slightest chance to hold on in lieu of the engulfing opposed civilization. Despite this inevitability, nothing meaningful seems to be changing. The endless change processes that take place in schools today are pseudo changes. Their main goal seems to alleviate the pain caused by the cognitive dissonances which necessarily arise from this anomalous situation. They make sure that these dissonances and the discomfort they cause never actually lead to any meaningful changes and allow schools to continue marketing themselves to society and to their own employees and students as “innovative,” “pioneering,” and “advanced.”

EDUCATIONAL CHANGE: AN EXPENSIVE WAY TO ALLEVIATE THE PAINS OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCES

The mindless processes of “change,” mentioned in the previous section, surrounding the system at this time are dangerous for a number of reasons. First, they are dangerous because they are economically and energetically draining. While being mindlessly implemented they are accompanied by colossal, inexcusable squandering of resources.

Secondly, from a social and educational standpoint, the booming industry of “school change” or “reform” is both short-sighted and overly technocratic; short-sighted since these attempts at “innovation” stem from a very partial understanding of the postmodern civilization it is trying to adapt to and the role of education therein; technocratic, since these attempts are nothing more then a passive adaptation of postmodernity’s external “symptoms” (which are often automatically equated with “progress” and “advancement” like digital technology, privatization, or decentralization) without passing any ethical judgment on the various characteristics thereof. As such, these adaptations are nowhere near the pro-active changes required in order to tackle the enormity of the problem we now face. They are not consciously formed in light of an ethical or ideological view and do not consider the huge advantages vs. awesome dangers adapting to this new civilization entails given this view. Being short-sighted and technocratic as they are they are doomed to fail.

Thirdly and in addition to the above negative consequences, the poorly-designed products of the useless attempts to “reform the system” have created in the last forty years a dangerously insane system, obsessively addicted to voodoo therapies and catch phrases: “reforms,” “restructurings,” “interventions”; bottom up, top down, organizational, curricular, didactic, holistic; or focused on specific problems like decreasing level of literacy, increasing levels of violence, and so forth and so on. These change processes just keep repeating and mutually destroying themselves and each other, always promising hope for “salvation.” This hope already has its
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own nickname in educational literature: perennial expectation for a “panacea” that miraculously solves all the problems once and for all.

It has also led to the development of a separate discourse which we can refer to as meta-level lamentation discourse on the “predictable failure of educational reform” (to quote the name of a book by S. Sarason, a leading expert of educational change in recent decades, who has realistically analyzed the end result of his and others’ permanent attempts to change the system) which is still “stuck deep” in the old modern paradigm and usually only leads to another suggestion for a new (or often old) panacea.

This reforms-oriented obsession has become another tier of the deeply rooted problem, aggravating the crisis, which is already acute enough, further and further still.

Fourth, since these voodoo remedies do not really better the situation, but rather just add to the mess it is currently in, they create a norm of “double talk” and hypocrisy. This is probably the highest of this long list of prices and costs stemming from the change-oriented obsession. In the last generation, teachers and administrators have learnt to speak the postmodern language of the outside world, but since the school’s essentially modern structure prevents them from really implementing postmodern oriented changes, and since they have figured out by now that tomorrow there will be another (often opposite) change, they empty the language of all its meaning by using postmodern “in,” “reforms-oriented” language to describe the “good old” modern routines they are all too familiar with.

The damages caused by this reality are enormous. First and foremost, it creates an inherent organizational failing, as it prevents the system from reaching any mode of functioning stability and thus hinders any possibility to actually contribute to society. But the really frightening problems which ensue from this reality are the psychological and social ones. In many Western societies today young people are raised in an absurd, surrealistic environment which is dominated by “double talk” and hypocrisy. They absorb several hidden yet extremely powerful messages from that environment: that life is absurd or devoid of meaning, that language is empty and essentially deluding. This reality massacres both senses (the existential and the semantic) of the inner drive for meaning which is basic to all that is good in human beings.

BACK TOWARDS THE FUTURE

The above argument I made about “double talk” may sound a little abstract. To clarify it, let me briefly analyze one representative example: an advertisement published at the end of the previous century by a leading teacher training college in Israel. This is but one, arbitrarily picked, example out of an enormous array of educational discourses based on unconscious or subconscious “double talk” employed by the involved stakeholders:

The ad title read: “A Guiding Light for Eighty-five Years.” Beneath it was a picture of a lovely little boy sitting in class with an open book, eagerly raising his hand. The caption read: “Teaching is one of the most important factors shaping future generation,” and then, using conventional advertising logic stated that “Only
at College X, with its eighty-five years of experience and advanced and innovative educational approach, will you be able to acquire this profession at the highest level.”

The college’s future-oriented outlook and the need for change and innovation were cited at least twice within the ad. The college claimed to “shape future generation” using a “progressive and innovative educational approach.” But the graphics accompanying the promising text depicted the total opposite. The overall impression is similar to that of a 1908 ad by a 220-year-old horse-drawn-carriage manufacturer (after the advent of the motor vehicle), sporting a driver patting his team of horses claiming to be “tomorrow’s vehicle with the speed and comfort of yesteryear.”

The methods employed by the current education system to impart knowledge, epitomized by the image of a child with an open textbook and raised hand, are just as antiquated as in the telecommunication and computer age as a horse-drawn-carriage is in the age of Formula One racing cars.

The essential dissonance between the world of education and the “real world” is reflected in the advertisement in several other ways.

First of all, the advertisement equates “education” with “going to school,” yet, an ever increasing percentage of young people in the Western world no longer “go” to school at all, but rather study at home as part of a growing home-schooling movement.

Secondly, if we assume for the sake of the argument that school in the modern sense of the term will nevertheless continue to play a major part in Western education, the advertisement assumes that “school” is a specific physical location, a “classroom,” situated in a specific edifice: “the school building,” removed from “life” outside. But much like other organizational structures, the importance of the school building or location as a whole is challenged today by ICT capabilities whose impact is evident by the emergence of virtual and semi-virtual organizations in all areas of human activity, other than the realm of education, that is. There is no reason to assume that the definition of school ten or twenty years from now will include a specific location.

Cloistering the learning process as an isolated activity within a “school,” or in other words in a given location significantly removed from the adult world and real life, is no longer sustainable. It was possible and meaningful when knowledge and patterns of life were relatively static and preserved over time. In such an environment it made sense for the individual to first “prepare for life” and then “embark on life” equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills acquired during the preparatory period. But when living in a world where you must continuously study because yesterday’s knowledge is no longer relevant today, a distinction between “learning” and “life,” between “getting ready” and “the real thing,” between schooling as something independent of one’s daily existence and the individual’s work, social life, and leisure time, becomes pointless.

Third, the ad presupposes that learning is based on book-learning, while in fact in Western societies books, at least the three-dimensional “autarchic” objects we have called by this name for the last five hundred years, are rapidly losing their
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dominant stature as the primary medium for transmitting information to alternative media, mainly to ever-changing kaleidoscopic e-texts on the Internet.

Fourth, the ad is predicated on the existence of a hierarchical organizational structure based on rigid dichotomies. In other words, it assumes that there are those who decide and those who act upon decisions, those who ask questions and those who raise their hands and answer, while the identity of questioners and answerers remains constant. This kind of rigid hierarchical structure is practically obsolete in a world where there exist “learning organizations” in almost every realm other than that of education.

Fifth, the ad automatically assigns the role of raising a hand to children, and assumes that the questions will always be answered by adults. In “real life,” even if the custom of raising a hand to receive the floor is preserved in some circumstances, one can expect some role reversals, which will increase with time, where adults and children alike both raise the questions and provide answers.

Lastly, the ad title proudly proclaims the college to be “a guiding light,” showing the way forward to new generations of educators. Truth be told, I am not at all convinced that teachers, the college educators, or anyone else in the education system for that matter, indeed know “the way.” What is much worse: I am afraid that very few people in postmodern education systems have systematically attempted to study the processes that have led postmodern education systems to lose their way or the means by which an alternative may be found.

Up until two or three decades ago there was a way, which was complex yet clear-cut. Its main goal was, as it has been for over the last two and a half millennia of Western culture, to teach students how to lead a Good Life, a life which reflected a transcendental value system that required the individual to relinquish his or her ego in order to serve predefined “sublime values” of one kind or another. Such values could be religious, rationalistic, socialist, national, “universal” liberal values, or a combination of one or more of the above. In modern reality these “sublime values” have for the most part been based on modern ideologies, including Scientism, the belief that modern science could solve all human problems and lead us to progress, its offshoots (socialism and liberalism), or competitors (mainly nationalism), each based on a clear-cut perception of what would help create a desirable human being. The second goal of education, which underlined sublime purposes, was latent but no less important: training or socializing students for work on the production line by copying the factory’s rigid hierarchical organizational structure and its basic norms, rigid obedience and precision accompanied by a sense of alienation.

Modern schools achieved the above objectives with remarkable success. In fact, they still do. The problem is that the first category of goals no longer applies to Western culture the way it did for the past two and a half millennia. As for the second category, the norms of the workplace and the labor market have changed to a large extent once manned production lines and rigid organizations designed to control the assembly line workers disappeared. Thus to speak of “the way” as though it is clear to the leaders of the above college is misleading to say the least.
In conclusion, the advertisement is a good indication of the depth of the malady: the ad proclaims the college to be able to “educate future generations” using “innovative methods” based on a clear-cut “way” in light of which college staff will “guide” tomorrow’s teachers, while in fact it relies on an anachronistic approach to education and does not show even a hint of consciousness of the immense challenge they must face in order to do so. Sadly, if such confusion reigns in teacher training, what can one honestly expect of teachers once the reality of the classroom hits them at last?

The above advertisement was indeed chosen at random, but it is representative of the mindset prevalent among many of today’s teacher training institutions. We can find any number of additional examples, rich with “promising” slogans, saturated with all the right buzz words claiming to be “future oriented,” “innovative,” “constructivist,” “student oriented,” and “problem based,” slogans which unconsciously cover up old conceptual and practical patterns and mask a growing sense of impotence.

This is of course to be expected when the foundations of core institutions begin to crumble; human beings tend to hold on to the pillars of the old and the familiar as the only visible source of stability. But standing firm on what is fast becoming dysfunctional and immaterial to prevailing reality only increases the danger which threatens not only the sustainability of the education system but also the health of societies who will not be able to remain democratic and enlightened when their core socializing institution fails to function or worse, functions as an effective source for ethically and developmentally negative education.

FORWARD TOWARDS THE FUTURE

While the previous section clarified how most educators and champions of educational change retreat while believing themselves to be moving forward, this section portrays the steps that should be taken in order to make actual progress.

Educators and society at large do not have the luxury of choosing between a meaningful and functional modern system and the postmodern one. Rather, today, they face two very different options: One is to irrationally cling to the current hybrid system, an essentially modern system, hectically busy with “change processes” which contradict each other or themselves and are painted with postmodern and innovation-oriented colors. Such a system will grow more and more absurd, economically wasteful, and psychologically and socially detrimental, as it conveys the unavoidable message that life is absurd and vacuous.

The second option requires that we get to the root of the problem, acknowledge the magnitude of the change necessary to tackle it, and address it in a mindful, macro-strategic, and ethically oriented manner. A new, efficient system must be forged, one which is relevant to the postmodern reality and relies on postmodern processes to educate towards the Good Life as defined in light of basic Humanistic values.
Clearly there is only one relevant option here. This option consists of admitting the need to rethink and redesign education from scratch, to stop taking the two-and-a-half-millennia-old Platonic tradition and structures or the two hundred-year-old modern schooling systems basic to western culture (i.e., the disciplinary curriculum) for granted.

The way things stand at the moment, replacing the well trodden educational path with an entirely new one seems redundant and wasteful to most educators and relevant decision makers. I hope that making all concerned realize the extremely heavy toll paid in pounds, euros, and dollars and much more importantly, in the decreasing chances young people have to develop as psychologically healthy individuals, is an effective way to enhance recognition of the urgent need for a rethinking and reinventing of education. In other words, Western democracies must realize, and do so very soon, the importance of them successfully dealing with the multiplying internal and external threats they face, or the consequences of their ignoring the situation may be very dire indeed. To educe such an understanding one must dedicate a lot of time and resources:

- to analyzing the deep cultural, social, and economical roots of the current education crisis,
- to analyzing the profoundly ingrained processes which ensue from these roots, that have systematically led to the failure of one reform effort after the next during the last fifty years,
- to developing a horizon broad enough to enable us to see as many aspects of the whole picture as possible. Such a perspective should include recognizing that failing scholarly achievements are only one symptom of the same root problem, as are rising levels of violence or addiction among youth, rising levels of teachers’ burnout, the systemic addiction to pseudo educational changes, and the spread of “double talk” in the system. The root problem is of course the rising levels of alienation which are caused by the system’s absurdity and the rising gap between the modern system and the postmodern world around it.

But in order to develop such wide horizons, profound understanding, and sharp systematic analysis, we must abandon the postmodernistic cynicism, technocratic indifference, and lack of faith in strategic change processes led by reason which characterizes most political decisions makers.

Paradoxically, this total lack of faith in mindful, radical, change exists in a time when human being are affected, more than ever before in human history, by a long series of radical revolutions some of which, mindfully planned and rigorously fought for, radically changed history and human life.

Among these revolutions we can count the “inconceivable” modern ones (scientific, technological, social, medical), implemented throughout the two last centuries. These previously inconceivable revolutions, intentionally and systematically planned and propagated by the founding fathers of the scientific revolution and enlightenment, beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing until at least the eighteenth, erased pre-modern social and psychological structures which dominated human thought since practically the dawn of history such as authoritative societies,
slavery, and total subjection of property or disenfranchised individuals, of women, of children, of sexual minorities, of national or ethnical minorities. With the coming of age of postmodernity, once the rate and extent of these revolutions exponentially accelerated, what one day seemed unrealizable fiction became but a trivial fact of life the very next: deciphering the human genome, conquering space, performing complex operations from a distance, distance learning, home-schooling, erasing all the parameters which previously unequivocally separated between genders and age groups, social legitimization of transgenders and hermaphrodites, and so on.

There is no logical reason to assume that while all the above revolutions were possible (some of which based on thorough, systematic, long term analyses, visions, and strategies), rethinking and redesigning education is not. It is true that today’s politicians, decision makers, and most educators may not have the necessary courage, broad enough horizons, and other capabilities needed to implement such an intentional revolution. But the same was the case for those civil servants and politicians who tried to protect the divine rights of kings, the practice of slavery, infringement of the right of people of color, disenfranchisement of women and property-less men, and rejection and inequality of homosexuals and transgender. In all the aforementioned cases the primary claims were that such a step is inconceivable, would be “unnatural,” and would shake the foundations of human social existence. If there is anything we can learn from our own history it is that what today’s cowardice and narrow-mindedness might present as impossible is what tomorrow shows to be necessary and the day after may turn into a fact of life.

This book is written with both the hope that Western education in postmodernity will enjoy a fate similar to that of the above mentioned changes and the belief in the ability to increase the chances for rethinking and reinventing education to take place by:

• Presenting the reader with a broad analysis of the postmodern cultural crisis. This crisis inevitably creates the profound educational crisis that sustains the aforementioned need for the rethinking and redesigning of education.
• Presenting the reader with an outline for a possible and, I believe, desirable educational system based on three hundred years of Humanistic thought and its adaptation to the new needs and constraints of the postmodern reality.
• Arguing that the default scenario, wherein we passively drift in the postmodern storm, permanently and pointlessly faking “reforms” with no compass to direct those reforms in any productive direction, is too psychologically and socially dangerous for us to allow it to go on any longer.

SUMMARY

The stakes are far greater than education in and of itself. The current diffident efforts not only leave the educational ship drifting without direction but also expose democratic societies to the danger of being shattered to pieces on the rocks of a purely technocratic approach to education, favoring drifting with the current over the more difficult yet imperative navigation through the storm. When allowing captains with tunnel vision to use very partial and erroneous maps, democratic
societies run the risk of being beached on the shores of social breakdown by strong currents that they have left themselves no way to foresee.

The justification for the most fundamental structures of the most extensive and expensive public system in postmodern Western democracies is foundering. To mindfully tackle this apocalyptic event, we must critically examine the Holy Grail, the innermost sanctum of the paradigm which exclusively dominated Western education for the past two and a half millennia. That this paradigm survived the trials and tribulations of time for as long as it did cannot in itself be a justification to maintain its dominance in the present. The dominance of practices such as burning “witches” and other “heretics,” slavery and the subjugation of people of color, women, Jews, and homosexuals was just as obvious for many centuries; some even date back to the dawn of civilization. However no one today will argue that they are therefore justifiable simply by their past prevalence. These social structures were “unchallenged realities,” they had enjoyed an absolute hold on individuals’ minds, as strong as that of the laws of nature, until they were subject to thorough examination which inevitably led to their demise. Today almost all of them are just as unquestionably rejected by at least most if not all postmodern-day individuals.

In the same way, we now need to make the first steps in the (probably long) process of freeing our minds from this absolute mental and social grip the modern way of thinking has on our systems of education; we must “de-school society” and our minds, as Ivan Illich called it few decades ago. In this Introduction, the first chapter of the book, and its third part (Chapters Ten and Eleven), I paint my argument and the practical implications thereof with broad strokes of the proverbial brush and present the reader with a general outline of my thinking. But should the reader wish to understand the substantive validity of my arguments more deeply he or she must delve into the main chapters of this book as well.

Even if some or even most of my arguments are found, upon examination, to be invalid, the simple fact is that there are good *prima facie* reasons to question the desirability of the basic suppositions of the prevailing educational paradigm and the educational structure and *modus operandi* it inevitably creates—structures and *modus operandi* almost all our youngsters are compelled to adhere by during their constitutive years. If only for that reason they should be thoroughly examined and alternatives to them should seriously be considered. We owe it to our children. We owe it to our society. We owe it to ourselves.
PART ONE

A CRITIQUE OF MODERN EDUCATION
CHAPTER ONE

THE CRISIS OF MODERN EDUCATION
IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

INTRODUCTION

The postmodern era is rapidly rendering Modern Western education systems obsolete. Although the decline of the modern era and the rise of the postmodern era began a mere three or four decades ago, this amazingly short, yet most dynamic, era in human history has revolutionized every aspect of our lives. The postmodern revolutions, while diverse in their nature, are characterized by common patterns which set the postmodern era radically apart from the modern and traditional periods that preceded it.

This change caused a radical decline in relevance and functionality of modern education systems. The basic organizational and didactic parameters of Western education were formed in the image of the modern era, while more profoundly modeled to abide by a twenty-five-hundred-year-old Platonic curricular structure. These definitions, designed to serve the needs of a modern society, have become meaningless, and hence dysfunctional, in the wake of the postmodern revolutions. The chasm between the systems’ basic modern-Platonic parameters and the reality in which they must function, as well as the nature of the society they must serve, has turned the entire system into an absurd, dysfunctional, anomaly.

Current Western education systems are still viewed as a “natural” and exclusive educational choice for an overwhelming majority of citizens in Western societies. As claimed above, these systems are an adaptation of the theoretical curriculum outlined by Plato, customized to fit the needs of an industrial, modern society, predominantly based on modern scientific practices. Plato’s Utopian education system was based on theoretical learning of the fundamental scientific disciplines of his time. He perceived knowledge of truths, or the pursuit thereof, as reflected in these disciplines, to be the core of the Good Life. This term was used in his, and later Western, philosophy to denote the best life a human being can and should have, or the life that best reflects and expresses human beings’ unique essence, Rationality, and hence guarantees the highest level of (what is today referred to as) well being. Accordingly, Plato perceived education to be a process which allows students to achieve the highest privilege: being introduced to the Good Life. His curriculum was later developed and adapted by generations of classical thinkers and educators, by Christian theologians in the Middle Ages and later by Renaissance educators. The Modern Era gave it its last extensive adaptation, fitting it to the needs of universal public education serving science-based, industrial modern nation-states societies (as discussed in Chapters Two and Three).
Postmodernity, characterized by relativistic weltanschauung and an unstable and hectic lifestyle, represents a new period, in fact an entire new Western civilization. These changes have pushed the prevailing modern curriculum beyond its expiration date. To address the problems which arise from the anomaly of a modern-Platonic system functioning in an anti-Platonic postmodern world, we must take into consideration the unprecedented scope of the problem. Educational communities and postmodern liberal democratic societies must recognize that a systematic, extensive quest is in order. **In a nutshell we are called upon to reinvent education from scratch.**

This quest should go far beyond the incessant waves of “reform,” “change process,” and “reconstruction process” that have been plaguing all Western education systems over the last four decades. All such halfway measures serve only as an alibi which aggravates the problem and prevents the desperately needed complete, fundamental, **reinvention** of the education process.

Plato, the “founding father” of Western education, aspired to supply his fellow Athenian citizens with a rational worldview and an educational process which could provide them with security, harmony, existential meaningfulness, and ethical norms. These attributes could no longer be meaningfully ascertained by Athens’ traditional mythical, religious, and tribal social structures, which were in a state of collapse. Plato’s curriculum, based on learning theoretical disciplines which (allegedly) reflected the truths about the physical world and desired human life, had a much longer “shelf life” than he could ever have envisioned: its many variants served Western civilization and its education for two and half millennia.

Our lives today are characterized by a cultural and socioeconomic crisis similar to that which weighed down Plato’s Athens. Due to the “Death of God” and the “End of Ideology,” we can no longer afford to go on assuming that the previous social or cultural structures are sources of stability, meaning or ethical-existential guidance. The underpinning of these values has collapsed. As a result, the foundations of the educational processes connected with it have collapsed as well. Thus we find ourselves needing to recreate Plato’s imaginative and courageous endeavor. We must replace the education systems’ modern-Platonic model with a totally different alternative tailored to the wholly new circumstances of the postmodern era, whilst, it is important to emphasize, maintaining and serving the basic Humanistic values that comprise the core of Liberal Democracies (for as long as we wish to hold on to these values and sociopolitical structures).

In this chapter, I take the first few steps towards clarifying the above statements. The chapter is comprised of three sections: the first section defines the term “postmodernity” and characterizes the era identified by this name. The discussion in this section depicts the revolutions that have brought about the emergence of postmodernity at all levels of human existence and the elements these levels all have in common. Finally, this section illustrates the abyss separating modern and, certainly, traditional society from the postmodern era.

Following the description of the chasm separating the first two societies from their successor, the second section of the chapter portrays the enormous gap between the essentially modern version of the Platonic conception of education characterizing
Western education systems and the postmodern reality. This reality is already well established just outside the classroom door and renders everything behind those doors meaningless and obsolete.

Finally, the third section outlines the two strategies which can substantiate my claims. I then corroborate these claims using the first, relatively simple, strategy and introduce the methodology that will serve to validate my claims in light of the second, far more demanding, strategy to be discussed in the next four chapters of Part One of this book.

THE RISE OF POSTMODERNITY

What is Postmodernity?

The first harbingers of a third stage in the history of Western civilization, known as both “postmodernity” and “the postmodern era,” began appearing during the late 1950s and the 60s. This third stage in human history followed two previous eras: the agricultural-traditional and the industrial-modern. Signs that new times are upon us have been increasing since the 1970s in every possible aspect of the human condition, and in the prevailing socioeconomic, political, cultural, and psychological realities. We are now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, already deeply immersed in the second generation of this third stage of Western civilization.

Other descriptive terms used to typify contemporary times from various perspectives include “post-capitalist society,” “post-Fordist society,” “the age of unreason,” “the flattening of the world,” the “shrinking of space-time,” “the end of history,” or the era defined by a “clash of civilizations.” No matter what perspective is used to analyze postmodernity, whatever term is used to “baptize” it and however it is characterized, many commentators agree that an entirely new reality has emerged in the last forty years, unlike any previous stage in human history.

Among the many concepts that are used to describe this new era in Western culture, I found three early coinages especially influential and successful in expressing the essence of the changes on three main levels: “post-industrial society,” “third wave society,” and “postmodern society.” They differ from one another in their scope, frame of reference, and foci.

“Post-industrial society” focuses on the economic dimension, particularly on the changes in the production patterns and labor markets of the Western world since the 1950s. Changes in these aspects of human economic life have greatly intensified in the three decades that have passed since the publication, in 1973, of Bell’s book in which the term was coined. Daniel Bell, and many others who followed him, use this term to single out the changes that have resulted from the takeover of automation and computerization, as well as the emergence of the services branch as a leading sector and chief employer of labor in today’s economy. Just as the Industrial Revolution replaced agriculture as the predominant economic factor, services are now establishing hegemony where Industry once ruled. These changes had dramatic effects on the labor market and the nature of work, as well as on the constellation of socioeconomic power. These are all denoted by the term in question.
The “third wave” reflects a wider outlook. For Alvin Toffler, who coined the term, and many others who follow in his footsteps, it relates not only to the realm of economics and employment, but also to modifications in dominant patterns of social and organizational structures deriving from the “Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Revolution” and other technological revolutions affecting our times. One of the dominant features expressed by this concept is the demise of hierarchical, centralist, and synchronic organizations which require that all concerned with their activities be present at the same time and in the same place (I later refer to this requirement as “lococentricism”).

These rigid modern organizations, designed to produce standard products for mass consumption (“mass production”), have been replaced in the last four decades by flexible organizational structures oriented towards specific market segments, or even catering to individual needs and tastes (“mass customization”). This blindingly fast shift has affected all aspects of human existence. Lately, Thomas Friedman has referred to some aspects of these phenomena as “the flattening of the world.”

The term “Postmodern Society,” as used here, is the widest in scope. Stemming from post-1960s discourse on architecture and art, its meaning was later expanded to encompass all the aforementioned aspects, while emphasizing the worldviews, cultural and conceptual structures of our times. In its common usages it expresses the shift from an objectivistic-monolithic perception of reality and epistemology to a relativistic-pluralistic one. In this volume the term “postmodern” is employed in a more general, less focused, perspective as a “catch-all” phrase that seeks to encapsulate in one concise term the essence of our age. It refers to all the revolutions characterizing it: economic, sociological, psychological, conceptual, and cultural, as well as their combined impact on all aspects of human existence.

**Founding Revolutions of Postmodernity**

The contemporary thinker Neville Wakefield describes the postmodern human experience in these words:

“In the place of a world ordered according to monolithic truths, linear grids and representational stability, we are faced with a set of unstable and volatile equations that correspond to a collapsed or imploded representational space. Previously solid references have been replaced by disorientating flux, stable subject positions by schizophrenic wanderings, steadfast relationships by the pragmatism and contingency of coalitions, calculated risks by terror, known dangers by the invisible reign of the unknown.”

During the previous century, Nietzsche, who clearly predicted the main epistemic, cultural, and social element of the postmodern condition, described its essence, on these levels, as a world devoid of any set of stable coordinates. In the blunt but eloquent language characteristic of his writings he wrote:
“Where is God gone?” he called out. “I mean to tell you! We have killed him, you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us?”14

The transient, fluid, “non-stability” expressed in these two citations reflects a series of momentous revolutions spanning all the core spheres of current human life and activity. For the sake of our presentation here, I shall break down, somewhat artificially, the emergence of the postmodern era in Western civilization into a (partial and somewhat arbitrary) list of revolutions, each of which caused an upheaval (or rather series of upheavals) in an important sphere of human life:

- In the Technological sphere, the “Digital Revolution” of the last few decades is constantly changing our lives. This revolution consists of a series of accelerated waves of ICT or digital innovations and discoveries which have completely altered the way we communicate, work, buy, sell, create friendships, mate, choose and design our lifestyles. “Digitization” refers in this respect not only to the technological aspects of this revolution but also to its fragmenting-hyperlinking impact on all levels of human life. We can name, among many, upheavals caused by the invention of the fax, the PC, the VCR, the laptop, multimedia and CD ROMs, the Internet, the World Wide Web and hyperlinking, Broad Band Internet and mobile wireless Internet terminals. This long series of changes led us quickly to the biggest of all ICT transformations known so far, “ubiquitous computing,” which may have seemed like science fiction yesterday, but is quickly becoming a trivial fact of our lives today.

  In this last wave of change, wired (or rather wireless) connections link together all objects, including human subjects (with the help of wearable and/or micro computers implanted on their person). All objects and human subjects communicate through these links, using every possible media outlet, creating a reality in which any type of information is transmitted from anywhere to anyplace on the globe at anytime. This in turn might very well lead, in five or ten years, to new apexes, still believed to be nothing more than science fiction nowadays, which Kuertzweil refers to as “the age of intelligent machines,”15 a time in which computers will become smarter them us. According to Kuertzweil, only a short leap separates that point in time from one in which what is now perceived as a purely surrealistic reality becomes very real indeed; an “age of spiritual machines,” in which computers might turn quantity to quality and develop an independent consciousness.16

- In the sphere of Medical & Biological Research, the “Babylon Tower Revolution” has taken hold. The name I chose for this revolution reflects the fact that this is the first time in human history (if we believe the story of the
Tower of Babylon to be but a myth) that human audacity, or hubris (I leave it for the reader to choose), allows us to invade what was, up until now, regarded as an exclusively divine domain. Therein God enjoyed an obvious relative advantage over human beings: creation of life. It consists of an almost inconceivable series of developments and discoveries, some of which appeared practically science fictional until the very day they were announced. Among these we can count decoding the human genome, a potential ability to produce various organs from live stem cells (halted for now only by ethical restraint, which will probably be broken quite soon), a new kind of artificial fertilization, and the combination of telemedicine and nano-medicine with biological and digital technologies which allows us to perform complete internal operations using miniscule fibers or swallowable pills.

Thanks to these waves of medical innovations we are quickly approaching a period in which medicine will have no problem “repairing,” changing or replacing any part of the human body, including entire organs or parts of them; we will be able to prevent potential problems altogether by dictating specific human characteristics and manipulating the genes of potential or living human beings. It is mind-blowing to imagine the eternal psychological, ethical, and social repercussions of these capabilities on everything we have known about “man” or “the individual,” including the most basic definitions of these terms.

This is especially true when we combine recent medical developments with the new developments in chemical psychiatric treatment, which already today enable us to change meaningfully the character of an individual using the extremely effective “new generations” psychiatric drugs developed over the last three decades. Two examples, and not necessarily the most meaningful, of this are: (1) Viagra, which until recently was used solely to treat erectile dysfunction but has now been found to encourage feelings of love and create within its user a need for intimacy; and (2) the significant progress made in the development of a “forgetfulness pill” which will allow individuals to completely erase unwanted memories from their brain (or, in less positive scenarios, this pill can be used by ill-intentioned people to erase the memory of an unaware individual).

Once our internal and external organs can be replaced, repaired and even pre-designed, once our most intimate and personal desires and emotions can be easily regulated by medication, once our memories can be manipulated by a pill and can even be, in the not too distant future, rewritten using Internet based memory loaders (“designer memories” is only one of many possible names for this), what will be left of the relative stability and continuity we now identify as “an individual,” a “person,” an “agent”?

- In the Economic sphere, over the last two generations we have witnessed the “Flattening of the World Revolution” (to borrow a term Thomas Friedman recently coined). It stems, first and foremost, from the technological developments and the effects thereof mentioned above. These created a “new economy” in which huge sums of money or information can be digitally transferred from one end of the globe to another, changing the nature of
investment and the manner in which stock exchanges function, as well as affecting many kinds of labor that can now be digitally outsourced to any place on the globe. Economic globalization processes, combined with the digital revolution and the global takeover of neo-liberalism and the open markets economy, have also dramatically enhanced the transferability of materials, merchandise, human beings, and physical labor (“immigration”). Likewise, these processes led to a permanent acceleration in the intensity and speed of competition, which in turn created a dramatic change in all possible spheres of the organizational world, the postmodern labor market and hence the postmodern human situation.

- In the Labor Market we are facing a “Loss of Career Revolution.” This consists of the floundering of the original Latin meaning of the term “career”—a track. This stems from the propagation of a fragmentary, “jumpy,” and hectic professional life which no longer fits the metaphor of a linear and continuous track. This radical change is a result of the fierce economic competition that has led to a series of transformations in the organizational structures of all economic organizations. From large international conglomerates to small family companies, businesses have been forced to become thinner and more dynamic, to outsource many of their “in house” jobs, and hence rely on a very small core of permanent employees. They have also been forced to replace many of the long term employees whose positions were not outsourced, relevant professionals whose contractual engagements with the company were either short (from a few months to a year) or intermediate term (say two years).

In this reality, the “accepted” structures of the labor market and the professional career could no longer exist. More specifically, these changes include, among others:

- The disappearance of tenure, accompanied by frequent changes in one’s location and the nature of employment.
- The creation of permanently dynamic individual “careers” and professional life in which radical changes in one’s profession are frequent, or in which the individual is involved in several unrelated occupations at the same time. These last two points are mainly responsible for removing from the term “career” its traditional and literal senses.
- The emergence of “new professions,” which rely on practical knowledge and personality characteristics (initiative, charisma, communication skills, flexibility, the capacity to adapt and so forth), are constantly being created. These professions compete against the old “academic” professions, which rely on the acquisition of formal knowledge and a diploma testifying to that effect, for status and respectability.
- An acceleration of the development of all professions (old and new) which requires intensive, life long learning in order to stay in one place.
- Yet another revolution relevant to the sphere of the Labor Market is the “End of Work Revolution.” To some extent this is a “sister revolution” to the aforementioned one, but it differs in the immediate extension of its effects.
far beyond the labor market. Its origins are twofold: on the one hand, the near doubling of human life expectancy in the last century which accelerated in the last few generations (a dramatic revolution in itself), and on the other the growing efficiency and digitization of production and services. Consequently, the proportion of time dedicated to work in Westerners’ lives has dramatically decreased. At the apex of the modern era many individuals started working at the age of six or seven. These individuals worked twelve hours a day, six days a week, and death (at the age of forty-five to sixty) or severe incapacitation were the only causes of retirement. In contrast, in today’s Western societies, one does not fully join the work force before the age of twenty-two or twenty-three, and one enjoys twenty to thirty years of high quality life after retirement. The work day is (at least in most mid-level jobs) nine hours long, and the work week is five, or often four, days long. This change inevitably has an enormous impact on all spheres of life. To phrase it concisely: for the first time in human history, around one billion people in Western societies (and soon at least two million more in Asia and Latin America) must adjust to a lifestyle that is not exclusively work oriented, while our religious and ethical systems, as well as our social structures, legislation, and mentality, are still fully harnessed to the enhancement and glorification of work ethics.

• In the spheres of Gender Definition and Social Roles we see a revolution we can name the “Collapse of All Social or Biological Distinction.” This revolution consists of the floundering of “veteran” (i.e., dominant in traditional societies, as well as in modern ones) dividers such as “legitimate family” vs. “living in sin”; “men” vs. “women”; “old” vs. “young”; “children” vs. “adults”; “normal sexual tendencies” vs. “unnatural or abnormal ones.” Lately, even “truths” accepted since “God created Adam and Eve,” such as simple biological distinctions including the existence of only two dichotomous genders, have been challenged in more then one way. For example a hermaphrodite lifestyle is slowly being legitimized (i.e., people with both sex organs are allowed to live their lives as they are without forcing them to choose a gender and undergo surgery to remove the additional organ). Women who choose “men-like” lifestyles (or rather those which used to be associated with “men” in the good old days), and vice versa, are no longer considered anything but normal and sex change operations are legitimate in a growing number of communities. All these changes combined amount to a disintegration of the dichotomous “biblical” distinction between “man” and “woman” and its replacement by an endless myriad of possible combinations of sexes and genders which cannot be clearly defined. This is only one, if not the most “shocking” (at least for whoever grew up in the “old ‘modern’ world”), result of the blurring of all social roles and dichotomies.

• In the sphere of Belonging or Supporting Social Structures, we have witnessed a revolution which resulted in the “Transformation of Society into a Mass of Strangers.” This revolution stems from the disintegration of all
unconditional social belonging frameworks that human beings have ever known.

The religious community lost its relevance to most modern individuals already during the modern age. “The death of God,” or in other words, the rapid secularization of Western society, led to the floundering of an unconditional commitment to a specific religious community which until a century or two ago almost all Westerners perceived as a rock solid belonging framework. In the last few generations other, mainly modern, pillars of belonging crumbled as well. The “end of ideology” has been rapidly expanding, dismantling, one by one, all the “grand visions” which shaped the modern era such as rationalism, “Scientism,” socialism, liberalism, and nationalism. When those fell, all ideology-based social frameworks such as political youth movements, or local party and labor union branches, as well as any cultural clubs attached to them, followed suit. These frameworks were extremely important to societies in ex-communist countries, as well as, until the 1960s and 70s, to countries such as Italy, France, and the UK, which were characterized by strong labor unions and an influential socialistic tradition.

For most Westerners, the local urban neighborhood has also disappeared. In the “far away past” (in many cases two or even four decades ago) urban neighborhoods, in the social sense of the term, were enhanced by urban areas which consisted of two or three story buildings facing each other, with windows that could be opened, open balconies and common courtyards, all of which encouraged communication between neighbors. These urban areas have been giving way, in Western societies, to rows of anonymity-encouraging, “stand alone” skyscrapers, or “condominiums,” which have no balconies or windows that one can actually open (which is not a problem now that the buildings are “fully air-conditioned”). It seems that the last nail in the coffin of the “local neighborhood” was hammered by suburban hypermarkets, malls, and Internet based shopping, which replaced the local grocery store which for many functioned as its bastion.

As a consequence of the above processes, Western societies have become masses of strangers, characterized by large numbers of individuals who have no geographical or mental watering hole. They have nowhere to call “home,” no stable social framework to which they can identify themselves as belonging. More recently, with the “disappearance of place” and of stable work, or tenure, “the workplace” has ceased to function as the stabilizing social framework it was for so many people in the modern era until but a generation ago.

One by one all belonging, and hence security-enhancing, social structures have been picked off and demolished by the modern, and then, much more brutally, by the postmodern, reality. Following the religious community, the ideological cell, the local neighborhood and the “workplace” we are now coming to the inner most sanctum of modern belonging, the nuclear family.

The nuclear family is in itself but a faded relic of the extended, much more stable, family of pre-modern times. Until recently, the nuclear family functioned as the bastion of socio-psychological support for Western individuals in an
otherwise harsh outside world (or so at least it was perceived). However, even this very basic social structure can no longer provide its members with feelings of social stability and security. For many, belonging to a nuclear family is no longer a default scenario, and the number of individuals who live alone or who have an “unofficial relationship” (a term which is quickly losing its meaning given the fact that the “official relationship” is losing its status as the natural default) is steadily growing. Among those who chose to construct a basic belonging unit in the form of a nuclear family, many fail to sustain it as the rate of divorce is rapidly on the rise (50% or even 60% in some Western societies).

As a result of these processes of change, the nuclear family is no longer the island of stability and tranquility it used to be (or was at the very least perceived as being), rather it has been reduced to just another conditional and transitory contractual belonging framework which can easily be replaced by another. This change in the nuclear family’s standing in society has been strengthened by the full legitimization of what was perceived until but a generation ago as “alternative families,” such as single parent families, single gender families, and so on. The legitimacy of any, or all, of these various choices is increasing, as is the legitimacy of experiencing more than one alternative and changing one’s mind as often as one’s fashion.

This floundering of the known social frameworks which supplied most individuals in modern Western societies with security certainly has its advantages: it provides the individual with a much larger degree of freedom and range of extended self-expression. However, it also exacts an awesome toll: a loss of the islands of stability, continuity and security in individuals’ lives.

• In the sphere of Belonging to National or Cultural Entities we have to face a “Conceptual Globalization Revolution.” This revolution is a continuation of the previous one, and relates to the largest belonging entities: cultures, nations, or ethnic groups. The transformation caused by the above revolution stems from waves of economic and political change, together with the technological, media, and digital revolutions that have globalized more than just the world economy. It has changed everything we knew about time and place, obliterating the role of “place” in even the most basic human interchanges, and altering the meaning of time. Along with these changes, perceptions of the “same time” or “same place,” two very basic coordinates of any human activity, have been completely altered. Consequently, growing numbers of individuals no longer perceive themselves as belonging to the national, ethnic, or cultural “entities” in which they physically dwell (to the extent that such still exist) and whose time zone they share. They either lose altogether the concept of “belonging” in this larger sense, or often compensate for its loss with “many small” kaleidoscopic, unstable belongings to various interest-related, professional, or virtual groups.

• In the same above sphere, we also find the “Glocalization Revolution.” This revolution is a byproduct of the previous one. It is, in fact, a reaction to the globalization which co-exists with it, and involves the attempts of individuals and ethnic or national groups to hold on to their common cultural roots in the
face of the menacing, ever-increasing, globalization storms (the tsunami waves of change do not all work in the same direction). Individuals all over the globe are trying to return to old traditions, to revive old extinct languages and old national and ethnic identities. This trend has led to a rise of intra and inter-cultural tensions and conflict which are sometimes exacerbated to the point of all-out war.

- In the sphere of Public Security, the revolutionary waves of change which are sweeping away all that is known about the human condition in the Western world are accompanied by the development of what Toffler dubbed the “Third Wave War.” In other words, a new “genre” of world terror has developed, one which possesses unconventional weapons and mobilizes all the miraculous advancements of the digital communication and media age, as well as chemical and biological developments, for the good of its cause. This in itself is a power that can create radical historical shifts through only one or two relatively small-scale activities.

- In the Ecological sphere we cannot avoid the “Global Warming and Pollution Revolution.” This revolution is a direct result of the intensive, globally accelerating, technological “advancement” of the last few generations. It includes the now well-documented global warming which in turn causes the polar icebergs to melt and increases the frequency and intensity of tsunami waves, typhoons, and many other types of devastating storms (real, not metaphoric, ones) which damage large areas of the globe. If the storms continue to plague us even at the current rate, not to mention an increase of it, these devastating ecological processes will most likely change all our lives and uproot hundreds of millions of people from their home environments all over the globe. This in turn is bound to bring about new waves of geopolitical upheavals.

- In the Cultural-Conceptual sphere we must refer to the “Postmodernistic Revolution.” It consists of a series of epistemic, ethical, and cultural revolutions most identified with the postmodern era. It is important to distinguish (here and throughout the book) between “Postmodernity” as the name of our era, and “Postmodernism,” the title usually given to this set of worldviews. The adjective “postmodernistic” stems from Postmodernism and refers to an ideological or conceptual tendency. While the book in its entirety is related to postmodernity, this paragraph is dedicated to the postmodernistic revolution, one of its major characteristics on the cultural level. This revolution may be less clear to the general public (although discussed ad nauseam in intellectual circles for almost two generations now) and hence should enjoy a somewhat longer elaboration.

  This revolution has largely been based on a shift from an objectivistic worldview in the epistemic, scientific, ethical, and aesthetical spheres to relativistic views. The relativist perspective denies humans the ability to achieve knowledge based on access to objective reality, and even questions the meaningfulness and usefulness of concepts such as “truth” and “objective reality.” This viewpoint pervades more then just intellectual and academic discourse. Most of the
Western secular middle classes and professional circles today no longer harbor faith in a single “solid” or absolute foundation for human knowledge, or in an “objective set of values” or “aesthetical criteria.” Many of them have lost not only the belief in the possibility of such objective foundations, but also their desirability. In place thereof, beliefs in the arbitrary, the transient, and the partial nature of any “knowledge,” value, or aesthetical standards have become dominant. In contrast, traditional and modern societies rested their founding philosophy on a firm belief in the possibility and desirability of social harmony and stability in this world, and aspirations for an even more stable and more harmonious world in the “world to come,” or in some harmonious ideal future society in the case of modern societies.

There is no denying that the dynamic industrialization and democratization processes characterizing modern society toppled the social order and religious ideals that typify traditional societies, and revolutionized the life of most individuals within rather short spans of time. However, the modern revolution replaced traditional concepts and structures with different, yet still stabilizing, concepts which allowed for the emergence of a new social order and new social structures based, in some places, on Humanistic democratic concepts, and in others on socialistic or nationalistic ideologies, or a combination of all of these. These new modern structures were based on a belief in the realization of the human potential through science and rationality leading to progress. This idea was clearly a modern one. The modern ideal of “progress” was an offspring of the religious belief in the “world to come” and was as vital to modernity as “salvation” was to traditional societies. Both were perceived to reflect the belief in the possibility of a categorical and harmonious solution to all human problems. The modern belief in progress through reason and science was no less strong and no less conceived to be universally valid than the religious belief in salvation through faith, prayers, or religious/mystical purification was in earlier times. The epitome of these modern expectations is expressed in the Marxist utopia, which aspired to bring about a social reality wherein all contradictions will be resolved.

In short, like traditional society, modernity was based on a belief in an objective reality, accessible to human knowledge. Like its predecessor, modernity relied on allegedly universal social and psychological coordinates, which reflected this belief, and on ideals of aspiration to reach “the end of history,” to use Hegel’s well known concept, recently re-used by Fukuyama, referring to the utopian future of universal and eternal peace, harmony, and individual self-realization.

The postmodern experience, on the other hand, is the antithesis to all that has preceded it. The relativistic views dominant in it often accept and even relish the loss of harmony and stability in this world, and of any aspirations for harmony in a future world.

A key concept for understanding the postmodern experience is the concept of “game.” Some prominent postmodernist thinkers compared all human activity to a series of games, each defining itself and disconnected from the others, as well as from any external “reality,” “justification,” or “foundation.” All of these con-
cepts are believed to be passé and meaningless by thinkers heralding extreme versions of relativistic postmodernist themes and their many followers in the arts, media, advertising industry, and the general public that is (usually) unconsciously influenced by them.

The basic view that this concept conveys is the perception of human life as a series of activities that neither reflect an external reality nor lead to objectives external to the activities themselves. Within this view, no one game can be perceived to be objectively preferable to another, because no objective standards or values exist to allow for a meaningful comparison. The only outcome of involvement in such arbitrary games (i.e., living) perceived to have some meaning (a term which is actually out of place in postmodernistic discourse) in this context is *jouissance*,21 which stands in dramatic contrast to traditional societies’ pursuit of “salvation” and the modern pursuit of “progress.”22

Relativism, of itself, is not a new phenomenon in Western cultural history. However, in the past, relativism was the sole province of small minority groups who occupied the apex or margins of the social pyramid, insular groupings that lived “beyond” the social limitations applicable to the rest of society. Moreover, even in societies which embraced relativism, the practical expression of egoism and hedonism, natural psychological offsprings of relativism, were limited by the need of most people to struggle to maintain their physical existence.23

Our times are the first in human history in which relativism, audio-visually intensified by the media, the Internet, and the powerful “all-pervading” marketing and advertising industries which make our society tick, has penetrated every household. Relativism has become a legitimate and manifest mindset, championed by a growing middle class who, enjoying unprecedented political freedom and economic power, can afford to actualize the values stemming from this worldview. Life patterns and lifestyles that in the past were the privilege of a handful of individuals whose behavior was hidden from view, for example the debauchery of higher echelons of the church during the Renaissance, have today, to one degree or another, become legitimate and even serve as ideals (to the extent that this term still has some meaning) that the majority strives to realize.24

With this perspective in mind, the difference between traditional and modern societies can be compared to the change between two dialects of the same language, while the difference between modernity and postmodernity is more akin to a “complete switch” from one language to a totally foreign tongue, not even a member of the same linguistic family.25

Moreover, while the European shift from traditional epistemic and cultural patterns to modern ones was a gradual one, which stretched over a period of at least four hundred years between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, the shift from modernity to postmodernity in today’s Western world happened within a mere three to four decades. Generally, it is agreed that the onset of the postmodern world can be dated to the 1960s and 1970s. Since then, this rapid transformation has dramatically changed our world.26

- In the sphere of *Dominant Conceptions of Consumption and the Self* (the relationship between these two seemingly unconnected foci will be clarified
in the following paragraphs), we see a revolution which consists of the “Propagation of Infinitely Changing Choice” in all levels of human life. This is a second level revolution which stems from the combination of most of the above revolutions. It involves the exponential growth in the range of freedom and choice available to most individuals in the post industrialized world. One way to illustrate this point, on quite a trivial level, is by pointing to the radical transitions that the postmodern and economically developed world underwent within but three or four generations. We moved from “drugstores” or grocery shops which offer a variety of fifty to eighty products and a choice of one or two brands at most, to the supermarkets which offer many hundreds of products, several brands for each type of product. These later became hypermarkets which have on display thousands of products and in the last decade or so we find ourselves surfing the infinite “heavens” of the virtual market, which offers practically infinite, or at least a humanly un-exhaustive, number of products of any possible kind, all of which can be found in hundreds or thousands of brands and versions. These changes have eroded everything we knew about the continuity or identity of the self.

These seemingly “naïve” changes, when combined with a few others, each revolutionary in its own right, have led to the erosion of everything we knew about the self. I am referring to the rise in the standard of living which occurred over but one generation, the intensification of competition and the development of “miraculous” technology which created more personal freedom than human beings ever enjoyed before, eroding almost any limiting norm. This state of affairs created a world in which everything is open for choice. However, the nature and level of choice we have one day changes dramatically by the next. In this world everything, including our range of choice, is changeable and in fact changing, in shape, size, and quality.

Here too we can start with quite a trivial example. Every time we visit, either actually or virtually, our super- or hypermarket, or shop online, we are tempted with new logos, packages, and types of, for instance, cheese, on display on the shelves, while old ones disappear from one day to the next. However, we do not have to go far to reach examples which touch the core of the meaning of “being human”: permanently renewing existential or “identity changing products,” including revolutionary body and face changes (“face lift” will soon become passé, why lift it when we can change it altogether?), as well as sex change operations, and an ever increasing level of legitimization for “alternative” lifestyles (these are, after all, products designed especially for such life choices on the “existential hypermarket”).

We are flooded daily with choices which affect the deepest foundations of human life: our most intimate relationships, our profession, our gender, our physiognomy or face, our emotional patterns and character. It is a world in which “everyone can perpetually invent and reinvent themselves” in every possible sense of the word, or so at least we are all promised (and the more affluent among us can certainly realize this).
• In the Psychiatric sphere we see an “Invasion of Meaninglessness Revolution.” This is a third level revolution, which is to large extent enhanced by the previous “Propagation of Infinitely Changing Choice Revolution.” This revolution consists of “the progress paradox” (to quote the title of a recent book on the subject):27 the richer, freer, and more powerful we become the more miserable we seem to be. As a result, depression and anxiety have become the most widely spread epidemics in the last two decades, accompanied by ever new psychiatric drugs consumed in exponential quantities. Anxiety and depression necessarily grow out of living in total uncertainty, with no guiding compass in the form of a stable set of values or social or familiar frameworks. It is even more unbearable when the extent of choice we have is infinite and the very nature of this infinity changes on a daily basis. This combination expresses what Hegel called the irony of history. We were not “destined” to carry such an ever growing burden of choice, certainly not while all the ethical or social frameworks, which at their best supported a much more limited extent of choice, crumble underneath our feet.

Here ends the list of revolutions and upheavals that have affected us in the last few decades. It is certainly not an exhaustive or exclusive list. Other lists can, and have, “cut” the ontology of the human situation differently. But it suffices, I believe, to convey this main message: each of the above revolutions suffices, in and of itself, to change the practicalities of human life, and the meaning of “being human.” The impact is millions of times more awesome when they come together, in great tsunami-like waves, sometimes attacking us from many directions (or on various dimensions of life) at the same time, or following one another as each new wave has more horrendous effects than its predecessor. The chaotic interconnections between them empower many of them exponentially and their impact on the human situation is immeasurable. Let us remember that all this has sprung to life during but the last three decades (the beginning may have been a little earlier, but most of it could be ignored for the first decade or two). We are, therefore, in the midst of the most radical, insensitive, and rapid change the human situation ever underwent.

Meta-Structures Common to Postmodern Phenomena

Examination of the causal relations between the aforementioned revolutions is an extremely complex, if not impossible, undertaking. There is a tendency among various thinkers to be swayed by a form of professional bias, viewing processes in their own field as the “first cause” of the postmodern revolution. Thus, for example, economists would tend to regard the acceleration of capitalism that has been permanently modifying basic patterns of production as the primary catalyst. Communications scholars cite new communication patterns stemming from the ICT revolution as the wellspring of the postmodern age. Organization and management professionals see changes in the typical organizational structures as the fountain
of change. Philosophers, literary critics, and art critics will argue that the relativistic revolution known as “postmodernism” is at the root of all other changes.

There is no “natural winner” in this debate. The advent of postmodernity engrosses endless series of relationships and dynamic effects in a chaotic system. Luckily, a precise definition of causal relationships is not relevant to the understanding of the new era, of the ever-widening chasm between it and the old, modern, era, and the impact thereof on the modern Western education systems. All that is important is that we acknowledge the following fundamental facts:

- The postmodern revolutions represent a fundamental, comprehensive change of the most deep-seated patterns of human existence, some of which were thousands of years old, in every possible sphere.
- This comprehensive change consists of several meta-structures recurring on all levels and in all aspects of human existence. These meta-structures consist of:
  - Dramatic erosion of the levels of uniformity, linearity, and stability and harmony as compared to the parallel levels of these attributes characterizing the human situation in the modern, not to speak about the traditional, eras.
  - More importantly—the disappearance of the belief in the possibility of such characteristics of human activity; and—
  - Most importantly, the disappearance of the ardent aspiration to attain these three attributes (I refer to stability and harmony as two aspects of one attribute).

In the following sections I will refer to the floundering of the three meta-structures. This erosion of pre-modern structures is coupled with a lack of the primarily modern aspiration or belief in our ability to reach a harmonious “steady state.” I will also demonstrate and establish the aforementioned points with a brief overview of five different planes of human activity: the labor market, the mindset dominant in Western culture, and the social, psychological, and technological levels.

The Labor Market. When one compares the career structure of the average worker at the peak of the modern age, say during the 1950s, with current occupational structures, the differences are patently clear. Modern careers followed a uniform pattern of linear progress: studies or professional training, low level commencement of work, and gradual advancement to more complex and responsible tasks, based on experience. This was a linear stage-by-stage path in which one progressively accrued experience, status and remuneration within a stable career environment in the same profession or line of work, often in the same place of employment, until retirement.

For the postmodern professional, on the other hand, “non-uniformity,” “non-stability,” and “non-linearity” are the rules of the game. Non-uniformity means that today’s professional faces an array of patterns for “career” (the inverted commas reflect the fact, mentioned already above, that due to the postmodern changes the term has lost its essentially linear original sense) development that co-exist side by side. Parallel to the declining traditional career path that is still possible in a rather large number of organizations, schools for example, other work patterns, differing in their degree of “non-stability,” have emerged and gained increasing popularity.
Today’s career paths are extremely “jumpy” or “non-linear.” Individuals change their fields of endeavor, at times to totally unrelated professions, several times during their lifetime. Others combine intense periods of employment with extended periods of unemployment, during which they pursue other interests, or follow two, three, or four different professional paths with different emphases at the same time. Most of the new postmodern occupational modes are inherently unstable in the sense that one cannot expect to stay in the same place or, in many cases, not even in the same occupation, for more than a few years. In many cases experience has ceased to be an asset one can rely on and has become a burden. Nowadays, succumbing to inertia, and hence to past experience and linearity, almost necessarily spells occupational and economic suicide.

More than the frameworks “on the ground,” it is the effect on the prevalent beliefs and aspirations of individuals that is significant in this respect. Thus it should be emphasized that following this de facto hectic structure, most professionals (certainly the youngest among them) lost even the cognition of other possible developmental paths and take the prevailing “jumpy,” extremely fragmentary one as the only one possible and desirable, the one at which they must excel in order to “make it.” This stands in direct contradiction to the aspirations of their parents and grandparents. For them, stability in one workplace for a long period of time, usually their entire working life, which offered slow linear development, was the natural expectation; in many cases it was also the de facto situation. Most individuals in their fifties or forties among us still remember their parents demanding, and their teachers warning, that they should “study so you have a stable position and are able to support your family.” Today, none of the assumptions basic to this credo hold anymore, certainly not the one which claims that long periods of study promise stability, or long term economic security.

The Dominant Mindset. The non-uniformity, non-linearity, and non-stability or harmony, is rapidly turning into a “holy (and dominant) trinity” of the postmodern mindset or the postmodern conceptual-cultural sphere. Modernity, much like the earlier traditional society, was characterized by a reign of various ideologies and worldviews which professed to explain all of reality (uniformity) with universal and eternal explanations (stability), aspiring to encompass, in a unifying and harmonious way, all physical and spiritual phenomena. More important is the promise of a totally harmonious future: salvation in the world to come (in traditional societies) or progress in the expected end-of-history (in modern societies), a period characterized by Hegel and Marx, among many others, as one in which “all conflicts will end,” and by Kant as a period of “permanent peace” and affluence. Modernism justified these by a systematic, rational approach which developed its arguments methodically stage-by-stage (linearity). These attributes clearly characterized modernity, from the views of Bacon, Descartes, and Newton through those of Kant, Hegel, Comte, and Marx, up to the more skeptical, phenomenological, and positivistic approaches of twentieth-century philosophers.

Postmodernity, on the other hand, is typified by an opposite position. It relinquishes any pretension for stable-harmonious, uniform, methodical, or linear justifications or explanations, not to speak about expectation or striving for future
stable harmony. These are pejoratively described in the postmodernist jargon as the meta-narratives. From Nietzsche and Wittgenstein (in his later work), through Heidegger and then Foucault, Lyotrad, Derrida, and Barth, to more recent dominant relativistic philosophy, the postmodernist “conventional wisdom” champions segmented, constantly changing language and conceptual games (non-uniformity), lacking any pretensions of access to truth, universality, or eternity (“non-stability” or harmony) as well as the necessary connection between them (non-linearity).30

The Social Sphere. A similar analysis of postmodern life also applies to society, wherein one encounters growing legitimacy for a plethora of lifestyles and different definitions of social roles. A woman can now define her role, not only according to the still largely prevailing traditional and modern patterns of “wife,” “housewife,” and “mother.” She also has a choice between defining herself as a “traditional” liberal-feminist, fighting to gain access to the same rights and resources men enjoy, or, alternatively, as a radical feminist, fighting to enforce (what she takes to be) feminine norms of empathy and connectivity, instead of the predominant male control, on her own life circle or on society as a whole. In reaction to these trends, which have been gaining a lot of influence since the sixties, a “reactionary” “back to basics” trend has emerged in the last two decades, consisting of a growing number of “disillusioned” women (e.g., those tired of trying to fight on three juxt-posing fronts at the same time: the professional front, the parental front, and the sexy/attractive spouse front), who prefer the role that conservative non- or anti-feminists believe in, and, sometimes, advocate a return to “more traditional” roles for women.

These patterns, and their corresponding lifestyles, as well as many others and even combinations thereof, are expressed in contemporary literature, cinema, television, and daily life, reflecting the non-uniformity allowed and even encouraged by societal norms in the postmodern era. One can also easily detect “non-stability” in current prevailing attitudes. For instance, women are no longer expected to remain loyal to any one role or definition throughout their lifetime; it is increas-ingly acceptable for a woman to change direction, opting for a radical change, without having to justify to herself or others the “logic” of such a move, or show any link between her choice and past modes of behavior. Non-linearity is reflected in “arbitrary” explanations for such reinventions of the self as “I needed this,” “I followed my heart,” or “I felt like it,” when opting for new and different patterns.31

As exemplified earlier, legitimization for social divergences and pluralistic definitions of the roles of “men,” “children,” and “the elderly,” as well as “the family,” are as prevalent as the new latitudes extended by society to determining gender identity and defining interpersonal patterns of life.32

The Psychology of the Individual. Another process that expresses the general spirit and structures of postmodernity on the psychological level is the “disintegration of the individual.” The traditional perception of the “self” as a stable entity, identical to itself, and continuously aspiring to harmonious linear expression of its “inner” core (the “true self”) is still dominant, even flourishing and enjoying quite a renaissance amongst new age and Humanistic psychology followers. At the same time, a myriad of contradictory perceptions has become equally dominant in con-
temporary psychological circles, as well as in contemporary films and literature (non-uniformity). And so, theories that perceive the “self” as only a (still largely linear and relatively stable) narrative one tells oneself about oneself, that can and should be changed when inappropriate (the “infiltration” of non-linearity to the scene),33 “co-exist” alongside what can be still be branded conventional psychological theory and common-sense views. Opposing theories and views which perceive the term “self” as referring to an illusion stemming from the reification (i.e., turning into an object) of an arbitrary collection of flashes devoid of any stable essence and lacking any linear developmental continuity flourish side by side. Adherents of this radical postmodernistic view reject any aspiration to harmonious self expression as senseless, illusory, and subjecting the individual to domination by rigid and hence undesirable fiction. These postmodernistic perceptions are not only found in philosophical, psychological, and literary texts or films, but are also becoming the reality of everyday life, side by side with continuingly “resurrected” modern ones.34

The Technological Revolution. The advent of computers, multimedia, the Broad Band-based Internet and various mobile gadgets and mobile terminals lead to a par excellence undermining of linearity, uniformity, and stability in our lives.35 Hypertext is non-linear by definition. So is the random collection of televised clips that make up pop programs, talk shows, and news shows.36 Cable and satellite channels invalidate patterns of uniform viewing in a given community or society, as does the Internet. Until two or three decades ago a few national channels exhausted the range of electronic media possibilities available to most citizens of Western societies. Today, due to the Internet, cable television, and the diffusion of third- and fourth-generation mobile “telephones” (which also function, for some years now, as terminals for overall Internet-based connectivity), everyone, everywhere, has access to an infinite number of communication options and entertainment possibilities, devoid of any unifying framework or uniformity. Habits such as incessant “zapping” between channels and “surfing” back and forth between electronic “market stalls” or other kinds of web sites, blogs, or forums, as well as the new glorified skill of “multitasking,” epitomize the growing “non-stability” in postmodern society.37

In addition to the five levels mentioned above, all other aspects of our lives operate within the same emerging dominant behavioral patterns: spending leisure time, interpersonal communication, relationships (the postmodern alternative to the modern “love,” which side by side with “relationship” still dominates our imagination), consumption, the permanently rising level of divorce, an individual starting a “second” or “third” disconnected “chapter” in their life and accordingly children having two families (in all possible shapes and forms of this term today). All these patterns are painted by the non-linearity, non-uniformity, and “non-stability” brush that resides at the core of the postmodern condition.

The sharp and rapid shift to non-uniform, non-linear, and “non-stable” patterns we are witnessing synchronously in all areas of life are neither anecdotal nor superficial processes. No area remains immune to their impact. No individual can escape their far-reaching effects on all major aspects of one’s life. No institution
can afford to misread their significance or, even worse, ignore the postmodern upheavals altogether.

Yet all Western education systems seem to have a careless, ostrich-like response to postmodernity. It cannot but be characterized as what psychologists diagnose as total denial, or the loss of any sense or reality. This denial is especially grave due to the vital social and developmental responsibility Western education has in our age of dramatically promising and extremely hazardous changes. Banks, telecommunications companies, or medical institutions (to use three randomly chosen, arbitrary, examples) all went through several waves of radical adaptation to the new human condition. At the same time, the captains of education who should have been the first to reflect, mindfully and rigorously, on the ramifications the new human situation has on the educational endeavor have not even come close to a shred of consciousness of their responsibility.

THE FLOODERING OF MODERN EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN POSTMODERNITY

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose38 (“The more it changes, the more it remains the same”)

The Obsessive Addiction to Educational Reforms Syndrome

While most researchers of postmodernity, regardless of their professional perspectives and emphases, will eventually agree with my above characterization of the era, many will disagree with my meta-level typification of postmodernity. The first possible point of disagreement will consist of some observers’ classification of the inherent instability of the postmodern condition as a hectic transitory period preceding the stabilization of a new world order. However most “prophets of postmodernity” would agree that postmodernity is a period in its own right that brings to a close the eras of stable paradigms.39 Another challenge to the classification of postmodernity as essentially different from the preceding Modern era, to which I subscribe, arises from those who see it as accentuation and acceleration of established modern patterns, especially economic ones, and refer to it as “late modernity.”40

These questions of meta-level characterization, while legitimate and interesting, are immaterial to the crux of the problem as far as this volume is concerned. What is important here is to understand the postmodern experience, however it might be defined on the meta-level, and the implications thereof for the educational endeavor and for education systems.

The education system is directly influenced by the postmodern condition, probably more so than any other institution. The simple explanation for that is found in the practical definition of the word “education” as “the shaping of a person in light of a desired model.” Society has always defined the meaning of “desired,” and subsequently determined the goals of education, as well as its target audience (the students), its content, and its organizational structure. In other words, education systems have traditionally been cast to fit the existing consensual, stable,
socio-cultural mold. The “onslaught” of the postmodern storm of our time has destabilized the last version of these molds and has undermined the fundamental parameters of educational endeavors as defined in and by modern society.41

As already stated above, education systems should be expected to show the utmost sensitivity to these radical changes, in terms of both their impact on the prevailing (still modern through and through) definitions of their goals, content, methods, and other basic parameters, and hence on their functionality, and of the need to balance off some of their potentially dangerous derivatives. But the Western education systems have yet to show awareness of either the impact of the postmodern revolutions on the functioning ability of the prevailing parameters thereof, or the potential ethical and social dangers postmodernity may pose to them.

Over the past three decades Western education systems’ objectives have ceased to be self-evident along side all their other fundamental parameters: education’s target audience, content, organizational patterns, and modus operandi. Still, during this most intensive and dynamic period in the history of Western civilization, education systems in the developed world have maintained their “business as usual” mode of operation as if nothing fundamental has changed, as if the Western education systems’ very raison d’être has not been undermined in the least, and as if no new definitions of their social role and mission should be urgently sought after. An endless chain of superficial (and extremely costly in every possible sense) reforms, some recurring every few years, others sharply contradicting earlier or even ongoing reforms in the same systems or schools, are used as band-aids, providing nothing more than escape from the fundamental cognitive dissonance that plagues education systems in the postmodern era, and justification for their lethargic response to the changes in the Western reality. Almost all these reforms have been totally inadequate and failed to meet the needs created by the depth of the crisis.

This need for a radical and holistic fast-paced change is an extraordinary situation, unprecedented in the past “track record” of Western or other education systems and unparalleled by anything to which they previously had to adapt. The closest example would be the rapid adaptation of the diffused modes of education in the traditional agrarian society to the emerging hierarchic and universal public education required by the modern industrial era around the turn of the twentieth century. This was done, as claimed above, by adapting the Platonic curricular model to the mass public education of modernity, whereas in earlier times the model served to educate only the clergy and later the bourgeoisie and sometimes the aristocratic elite. In many countries, the whole transformation took place, at least in terms of laying the foundations (unshaken until today), over two or three decades.42 Still, in the previous case, core principles of the basic Platonic curricular structures remained unchanged. Today, however, we need to re-invent education from scratch, including the basic educational programs (the term “curricular” might not be appropriate for them anymore since it does not necessarily rely on the Platonic foundations of theoretical studies with which it has always been equated in the past twenty-five hundred years).

There is also no precedent to the enormity of the change required on all levels in any other present-day system or organization. The private sector, NGOs, and
public organizations have all been dramatically changed several times over the last few decades. At the same time, the educational system essentially remained intact. In the last three decades, Western education systems have thus become a natural reserve of the traditional and modern eras that have been pushed aside everywhere else by the postmodern forces. Paraphrasing Kuhn’s distinction between “normal” and “anomalous science” of scientific paradigms (the first explaining all known facts, the second incompatible with major “core” facts), Western education systems have become anomalous systems in the sense that they have lost touch with the reality in which they operate.

The anomaly of Western education systems manifests itself in its day-to-day activities. All those involved in education, whether teachers, school principals, parents, students, or scholars and researchers, are keenly aware of the prevailing sense of discontent growing in an overwhelming majority of Western systems, a feeling that educational activities are overshadowed by countless difficulties and that the means to overcome these obstacles have so far eluded everyone.

Difficulties and discontent are reflected in the increase of teachers’ “burnout” and the spread of parental and the general public’s dissatisfaction. These lead to politicians’ repeated promises all over the Western world during at least last three decades to “finally fix” education, ensuring that “no child will be left behind.” These in turn lead to huge reforms which require huge investments yet yield no positive results and cause even graver problems, leaving more children further behind in even worse conditions than before the “reform.” These difficulties are further reflected in the rising resentment, alienation and the subsequent violence, addictions, substance abuse, and suicide incidents among students. It seems that in North America the students’ alienation has recently reached unimaginable expression extremes: a growing number of incidents of one or two students or ex-students who go on a rampage in school and massacre as many of their classmates and teachers as possible, accompanied by a “cult” (which is what it has actually developed into since the well known massacre at Columbine High School) in which thousands of other students celebrate these massacres and admire the perpetrators, regarding them as “heroes,” on web sites and in blogs dedicated to these issues.

Over the past few decades, innumerable documents and books, often expressing frustration and ferment, have been written to point out the failures of various countries’ education systems and their contexts, and to offer a host of solutions. This body of literature and the deep, chronic dissatisfaction it reflects have generated waves of reforms and change processes and served as catalysts for countless projects thought to herald the “right reform.”

These waves of change have often been, and still are, based on either an obtuse definition of the problem or self-contradictory design; on other occasions they simply ran in contradiction to another parallel “change processes” designed to fix the system, thus canceling out each other’s effect. Confusion and conflict have many times rocked entire education systems and consumed enormous amounts of resources. Obviously, the miracle cures, or “panaceas” as they have often been referred to in education, never fulfilled their promise.
A review of the previous attempts at “salvation” of the education systems will show the configuration of the “structure of the disciplines”-oriented curricula in the 1950s and 60s, then the student-oriented, progressive educational approaches of the 1960s and the early 70s. The mid-1970s and 80s were marked by a variety of equality-oriented reforms, including attempts at creating a large “comprehensive” school, and administrative approaches that emphasized the “accountability” of educators and “effectiveness” of individual schools. By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 90s we find programs championing parental choice, decentralization and delegation of authority, “school reconstruction” and “teacher empowerment,” which went hand in hand with often contradicting calls to “go back to basics” and establish “universal standards” (I elaborate on this point below).

During the 1980s and 90s, schools all over the Western world were tempted to go through “holistic changes” focusing on “school-based management” and/or “networking” with other schools in various “coalitions” aimed at “restructuring” and enhancing “holistic reforms.” As far as didactics are concerned, “constructivist” or “active” methods of teaching-learning and “experiential” methods or approaches based on “authentic problems,” “project-based learning,” “portfolio-based learning,” and “alternative evaluation” methods were ardently preached by academic and professional circles. The above didactic concepts have reflected many similar approaches with different small scale emphases, each of which, like all other educational “gospels” of the last two generations, has had its own “gurus,” believers, and circles of followers.

During the very same period, in parallel and quite often together with the above organizational and didactic reforms, all Western education systems were inundated by four tsunami-extent waves of reforms. The expectations accompanying these reforms were even higher than their astronomical costs. I refer here to the four waves of computerization: the first in the early 1980s, the second during the mid-to late-1980s, the third in the mid- to late-1990s, and the fourth, in the last few years, with the widespread advent of the Internet that swept over all education systems in the West. Each wave was more “promising” and more costly than its predecessor. The first focused on the “introduction of computers to schools,” usually meaning special computing laboratories into which the pupils were herded once or twice a week in order to be able “to work individually with computers” in a process (allegedly) customized to individual rhythms, which was supposed to solve all learning problems. In the wake of the failure of this wave, the second, the “introduction of computers to the classroom,” relied on a rationale directly opposed to that of its predecessor and was expected to address all learning problems by (allegedly) integrating ICT with the daily activities of teaching and learning. The third wave introduced CD-ROMs and multimedia to school computers; this again was expected to solve all learning problems by making learning more interactive and attractive. Later this was extended by the fourth wave, the panacea of “connecting every classroom to the Internet” celebrated by almost all Western leaders and ministers of education since President Clinton.

President Clinton seemed to believe or wanted his electorate to believe, as did all other Western leaders, that the Internet would bring about the progress and
“salvation” that education systems had been seeking. He, like almost everybody else in the West, associated computers and the Internet with “progress” and believed progress to be the solution to all human problems, including educational ones, a strong modern atavism in a postmodern era.

After the failure of endless ICT-based projects in the previous two decades, this last wave was expected, like others before it, to remove the obstinate problems “once and for all.” Unfortunately, the huge public expenditure to connect every school, classroom, and student to the Internet, yielded nothing more than a trivial default scenario, one which most children and adults in the West reached without any public funding or sanction. In other words, nothing was achieved. Today, the vast majority of students in the West are connected to the Internet, simply because they live in the digital era and speak its language, just as they were connected to electricity and running water in the modern era. This dramatic process has taken place without any relation to formal education and in spite of schools’ persistent failure to adapt themselves to the digital era. Furthermore, as has now been revealed, this connection in and of itself is irrelevant to the solution to any educational or learning-oriented problems. In fact, computerization has created some horrendous problems of its own. For example, it is difficult to imagine how the Columbine massacre could have created youth cults in a different state of affairs, one in which not “every child is connected to the Internet.”

It seems that baseless, or more accurately although less polite, mindless, optimism does not allow the facts of our reality to have any impact on educational thinking and planning. We are now witnessing what might be a fifth wave, which is nothing more than an improved version of previous attempts. At the basis of this wave lies, for example, the “panacea” of a simple one hundred dollar terminal, wirelessly connecting any student on the globe to the Internet, a “revolution” led by the MIT ICT “guru” Nicholas Negroponte. This goes hand in hand with the widespread myth that small-scale wireless terminals, now becoming so prevalent, will bring about salvation. It is just another symptom of the conditioned inclination to perceive any “new generation” ICT gadget on the market as the key to saving education. Based on recurring past failures and the essential inability of the modern system to function in a postmodern reality, I am going to dare to make an extremely well founded prediction that this wave is doomed, like its predecessors before it, to complete failure in addressing the fundamental weakness of education systems as theoretically analyzed generally in this chapter and more specifically in the next four.

While teachers struggled with ever-changing organizational, didactic, and technological panaceas, often contradicting each other and themselves, they also had to somehow manage, or pretend to be managing, another awesome reformist trend. This set of reforms was clearly ideologically oriented. In the 1980s, in the wake of the above failures, a new battle cry to go “back to basics” began echoing in the halls of education ministries and political discourse. It emanated first from dominant conservative quarters in Britain under Prime Minister Thatcher (1979–90) and in the USA under President Reagan (1981–89). They demanded that all educational institutions meet a scale of “universal standards” (based on quantifi-
able knowledge and achievement-oriented) which contradicted many of the previously mentioned reforms. In many countries these conservative policies are still in force, together with many of contradictory vestiges of the earlier (usually, but not necessarily) more ideologically progressive reforms.

We have enough experience with the “back to basics” conservative gospel and the categorical credo of universal quantifiable standards to argue that there is “nothing new under the sun.” Like all the previous reforms, the conservative reforms failed to live up to their promised outcome. They did however add new problems such as large-scale cheating on national exams, a lack of validity of national tests, and so on.

As if the mass of senseless “fusions” of contradictory reforms the school teachers and students had to deal with was not enough, the general or “holistic” reforms of those troubled decades were accompanied by an endless number of less pretentious, more specific, but certainly not more coherent reforms. Such reforms highlighted, among other things, an extremely large array of “small-scale fixes” to more specific prevalent educational problems, ignoring the fact that while the building is crumbling down there is not much sense in redecorating the living room. To give only few examples from the endless list of such “remedies”: improving methods of literacy or science teaching; correcting students’ “intuitive” understanding of concepts that run counter to scientific ones; integration of female students into math or science courses; inclusion of “ability challenged” pupils into regular classes; development and implementation of an endless series of methods to fight school violence and addiction among young people; introduction of different teacher training methods; the application to schools of evaluation and quality control methods borrowed from general organizational theory and practice (TQM was the most popular for a number of years). The list of such specific reforms goes on enough to fill a whole chapter. But in almost all cases, the endless series of specific reforms attacking schools in most Western societies, together with the more pretentious contradictory ones adopted at great cost to the overall system, did not deliver the goods.

Together with the never ending enthusiasm for new, costlier, reforms that have now become the obvious core of the academic, practical, and political discourse on education, over the past two decades another, higher level, discourse devoted to dissecting the dismal performance of the changes and reforms that swept over the system developed. This meta-level discourse mainly developed in narrow academic circles, attempting to explain away the past failures while throwing cold water on the enthusiasm of the various would-be reformers.

Still the aforementioned failure never bothered the politicians fixing and re-fixing education, or the herds of professionals and administrators following their declarations. All this “hubbub” went on without anyone pausing to reconsider the obsessive addiction Western education systems in the post-1960s period had to “changes,” “reforms,” “restructuring,” “innovation,” and “advanced projects.” It seems that all these hectic, hysterical, restless, and mindless change-oriented activities mainly reflected (and still reflect) the psychological and social need of the
professionals and decision makers involved to deal with their cognitive dissonance and to market themselves and their “endeavors” to society.

This dissonance continues to beset educators, administrators, and decision makers who are aware of the growing functional difficulties and increasing meaninglessness of their work. They are also mostly cognizant of their complete lack of any clear, meaningful, comprehensive alternative, and of the hopelessness of finding a saving grace in the “gospels” of the last two generations that have misleadingly posed as alternative solutions, such as “parental choice,” “school based management,” “national standards,” the forming of “networks” or “coalitions” of schools, “systemic change,” “holistic change,” “teacher empowerment,” “communities of practice,” “constructivist teaching,” or the use of “alternative evaluation methods.” Focusing on “effective schools,” “accountability,” “quality control,” “reflective teaching,” “critical teaching,” and “teaching for understanding”—to mention a few more of those flawed, conflicting “panaceas” designed to address all possible aspects of the schools’ secondary structures and activities yet never deal with the fundamentals that must be radically rethought—has therefore failed to deliver the promised cure. Given the ever more difficult task of having to market an inherently counterproductive system to society as “advanced” and successful, politicians, administrators, and school principals have desperately been “grasping at the straws” of these endless “educational reforms.” However, this “reforms addiction” merely exacerbated the problems that the reforms were designed to solve.

Thus, we have reached the totally absurd situation, which almost everyone seems to believe to be a normal state of affairs, in which entire education systems in the West have increasingly succumbed to the obsessive addiction to educational change syndrome.

This reforms-oriented obsession has turned into a second level of the deep-rooted problem which aggravates the current crisis, a crisis which was acute enough before this. Since these do not really help correct the system, but rather just mess it up further, these voodoo remedies create a norm of “double talk” and hypocrisy. Teachers and administrators have learnt, in the last generation, to use the postmodern jargon and pretend to implement changes imported from the outside world. However, since the schools’ essentially modern structure prevents any actual implementation thereof, and since school workers know that tomorrow there will be another (often opposed) change, they revert to emptying the jargon of any true meaning by using postmodern “in” “reforms-oriented” language to describe the “good old” modern routines with which they are well familiar.

The damages of this reality are enormous. On the organizational level, this behavior prevents the system from reaching any semblance of stable function through which the school can contribute to society. Much more frighteningly, this also has a serious psychological and social impact. Young people are being raised in many Western societies today in surrealist environments which do not make any sense to them and which are dominated by “double talk” and hypocrisy. They absorb several tacit yet extremely powerful messages (usually the hidden message reflects the constitutional foundation of the system’s current educationally significant mode of functioning): that life is absurd or devoid of any meaning or
that language is empty and does not have any clear reference (as postmodernistic thinkers have been wrongly claiming for the last several decades now). Many Western systems nowadays are guilty of this massacre of the inner drive for meaning, a drive basic in both its senses (the existential and the semantic) to anything good in human beings.

The Unrecognized Need to Re-invent Education

The dominant mood in “canonical” literature on education and educational change presupposes (usually tacitly so) the prevailing Platonic-modern underlying infrastructure, upon which most educational activity is based, to be relevant and valid in this day-and-age. According to conventional wisdom, the system is “fine,” there are just “kinks” to be ironed out, one or a few factors at most require mending for the entire machine to function perfectly. The research and publications in these contexts, as well as all the discourse levels or reforms which bewail the failures of education systems, propose sweeping or partial reforms, and conduct post-mortems on the failed series of reform waves just to propose another one. They are all tainted by the same fundamental flaw: they are conducted within the existing, outdated, modern-Platonic paradigm of educational thought and action. Even when sweeping reform prophets use the now outworn terms “paradigm shift” or “second-order changes” almost all of them do so within the prevailing modern paradigm. Any “paradigm” they purport to change is usually a secondary aspect in the overriding, all-powerful modern paradigm, based on the twenty-five-hundred-year-old Platonic paradigm which almost all heralds of school change take to be given and obvious.58

The malady, however, is much wider and deeper in its scope and, as in any case of obsessive addiction, used to cover an escape from fundamental problem(s), it will be fatal if it is not recognized and soon. We are dealing with a lethal level of growing disparity between the most basic assumptions of the existing education paradigm, a paradigm designed and developed mainly in the modern era built on the Platonic curricular foundations, and the postmodern reality that is engulfing it, quickly rendering it irrelevant, a memorial to times long (or rather recently but rapidly) gone. The various waves of reforms, as well as their post-mortem analyses, are like desperate attempts to improve a horse-drawn carriage after the invention of the automobile by replacing horseshoes with wheels to keep pace with the times.

As things stand, members of the educational community are expected to function in an impossible and intolerable situation characterized, among other things, by:
- Teachers who are entrusted with performing an authoritative role, and are expected to “keep the class in check,” while the prevailing social and organizational cultures no longer provide them with even the most minimal backing for that authority, unlike their modern and traditional predecessors who enjoyed very “generous” support from the same structures;
- An ongoing teaching of scientific disciplines-oriented subject matters which no longer have any meaning to either teachers or students. This is the case because curricula are often at odds with students’ (and many teachers’)

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practical or psychological needs, and contrary to the dictates of the dominant relativistic culture which lies “beyond the classroom door,” where utilitarian values do not ascribe any importance to theoretical study for its own sake;

- A learning environment saturated, as a result of the above, with incessant changes of the approaches and methods used within it, in which teachers and students are constantly required to adjust and readjust themselves to a steady stream of “updated” didactic views and methodologies;

- Schools inundated with scores of “projects,” “interventions,” “processes of change,” “reforms,” and “restructurings” that, in many cases, do not relate to each other, and are frequently contradictory of one another. This exacts a tremendous toll in wasted energy, attention, time, and money, while the end product often amounts to no more than “much ado about nothing”;

- Feverish activity bordering on hysteria, in which teachers, administrators, and students are “locked,” always dealing with emergency situations and a constant fear of “non-compliance with requirements,” “standards,” or “non-provision of material”;

- Schools and teachers which are expected to comply with conflicting demands; the contradictory, shifting, and confused desires of many different target audiences: the state, parents, the community, young people, and experts;

- A permanent blurring of the meaning of words, as all too often one can find no clear connection between words and deeds. In fact there is almost no expectation anymore for words to have a clear and stable meaning.

Such impossible circumstances are neither natural to the educational context nor are they necessary. They did not characterize education systems in the past, not even in the recent past (at least not until the end of the 1950s). They are symptomatic of a deeply dysfunctional system which seeks to operate despite the growing schism between school life and life realities, leading to organizational confusion that generates tremendous mental stress among all those “caught up within the system.”

Still, in most cases, administrators, teachers, pupils, and parents alike find it hard to comprehend both the significance of the schism and the great speed at which it is expanding, and its cognitive and organizational implications.

Thus, we must start with a diagnosis which will allow us to locate the real source of the problem, and then determine its scope. Only afterwards can we hope to offer recommendations for appropriate action. The fact is that up until now almost all institutionalized educational communities in the West have been obstinately “looking in the wrong place.”

Rectifying the situation requires recognition of two key points:

- The modern Western education systems are fast becoming anomalous due to the rapid erosion of the functionality, and hence the meaningfulness of the dominant modern-Platonic definitions of the basic parameters still characterizing them in the postmodern era.

- Educational communities (including most “school change” professional communities) are not cognizant, or successfully suppress conscious cognition, of the depth and vastness of the anomaly. They behave as if the system is
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still normal and secondary adjustments to it will suffice to “fix the problem.” Or, to put things in Kuhn’s terms again, the majority of those operating at all levels are still functioning as solvers of secondary “riddles” (or small-scale problems) within the framework of an existing paradigm. Unfortunately, to date there is no serious research seeking to formulate an alternative paradigm in spite of frequent declarations to the contrary.59

The Proverbial School as an Anomalous Organization

Let me now elaborate on and clarify the claims made in the two previous subsections.60 School systems, like any organization, can be characterized using six general parameters:

• **Goals.** This parameter defines the achievements to which the organization aspires, or the value(s) it wishes to produce.

• **Content.** This parameter indicates the types of activities the organization carries out for the sake of producing the above value(s).

• **Organizational Structure.** This parameter characterizes the organization in terms of management structure, decision making processes, and patterns of communication.

• **Target audience.** This parameter defines the “customer base” of the organization, or who the organization perceives itself to be serving.

• **Target Audience’s Mobilization.** This parameter indicates how the organization’s administrators believe they can recruit consumers for its product(s) or service(s).

• **Modus operandi.** This parameter defines the methods employed by the organization to achieve its goals in the framework of the specific definitions of all other parameters.

The parameters are not of equal importance. Each organization possesses core or essential parameters, parameters whose prevailing definitions cannot be conceived of as possible objects of modification by those operating within the organization or those in need of its goods or services. In doing so, the organization would cease to be perceived by them as the “same organization.” All others are secondary parameters, parameters whose definitions can be modified without the organization consequently losing its essence, or conceived to be “changing altogether.” As in many dichotomous distinctions, we are speaking of a continuum in which an organization’s objectives usually constitute an essential parameter and the modus operandi is usually perceived to be a secondary parameter. The rest of the parameters can be assigned various values along the continuum (the value assigned is mostly a culturally dependent factor).

If we follow the above distinction we can differentiate between the two types of problems with which organizations or institutions contend: first-order problems and problems of the second order. First-order problems are those that can successfully be solved by modifying the existing definitions of secondary parameters within the context of unaltered definitions of essential parameters. Usually, altering some
aspect of the modus operandi or some aspects in the organizational structure will solve first-order problems. Second-order problems can only be solved by redefining essential parameters. Here, again, we find a continuum: at one end we have first-order problems par excellence, and at the other, second-order problems par excellence; in between we can find problems in varying degrees of proximity to either category.\textsuperscript{61}

A typical first-order problem can be solved within the existing definition of the essential parameters. Take for example the decrease in the number of products a factory produces resulting from the wear and tear of its equipment. The problem will remain first-order as long as it can be addressed simply by repairing the old malfunctioning machinery, changing some production modes to compensate for the dysfunctioning old machinery or (taking more drastic action but still within prevailing definitions of the essential parameters) completely reorganizing the means of production so as to bypass the old equipment and take advantage of newer lines of production.

A second-order problem requires a second-order solution, or the changing of definitions of the essential parameters of the organization and hence a leap into a new organization, or even a non-organizational context all together. Thus, for example, returning to the factory scenario, a second-order problem will arise if the problem of decreasing production cannot be solved by any first-order solutions along the lines discussed above. Such a state of affairs may be due to declining profitability of its specialized product stemming from external circumstances. In this case, a second-order solution might mean stopping production altogether and importing the end-product instead. If such a move is economically undesirable, then selling the factory and investing the money in the stock market can be considered.

Let us take now a third step and move on to the definitions of “normal” and “anomalous” systems I used above. According to Kuhn’s analysis of scientific revolutions, a crisis will develop in a dominant scientific paradigm, or “normal” science, when a major “anomaly in the fit between theory and nature” develops.\textsuperscript{62} Such a crisis renders the discipline or paradigm in question “anomalous,” eventually leading to the formation of an alternative paradigm.

Kuhn’s concept of “anomalous” vs. “normal” can be used outside the scientific context and seems well suited to typifying organizations: an anomalous organization would be one exhibiting a deviation in compatibility of one or more of the prevailing definitions of the organization’s essential parameters from the reality in which it operates. Such an anomaly leads to situations in which a first-order solution will not suffice. For example, let us say that in the above factory the decrease in production does not stem from defective or antiquated production equipment but from a decrease in demand resulting from much cheaper imports from India or China, or from the fact that the product itself has become obsolete, like typewriters in the era of “word processing.”

In this case the firm has become anomalous, or the chasm between it and the rapidly emerging reality has become too large to be bridged by a first-order solution. A redefinition of (at the very least one) essential parameter, the aim of the
organization or the nature of its business, is required. Moving from production to the import business (in the case of cheaper products in the market) or reinvesting capital into computer production or, in a more extreme case, in the real estate business (in case of an obsolete product) are three radical second-order changes. These processes radically change everything the firm does, not only the aim of the firm but also the nature or content of its activities, its organizational structure and, in the third case, actually abolish the firm.

By contrast, as long as first-order solutions remain effective, the firm could be termed a normal organization, that is, one still in tune with reality. It does not require second-order solutions but is able to solve its problems using relatively modest first-order changes.

Let us now return to the prevailing education systems. This larger application of Kuhn’s definitions enables us to say that present-day education systems are anomalous organizations that suffer from a sharp and widening dissonance between them and the reality within which they operate, not unlike the typewriter manufacturing example given above.

An Unrecognized Anomaly

Educational organizations continue to cling to the modern definitions of their six parameters. These definitions, which have lost all functionality, and therefore all meaning, in the postmodern age, create the increasing disharmony in education systems all over the Western world which Kuhn describes as a disharmony stemming from an “anomalous paradigm.” Yet, despite mounting difficulties in their performance, the organizations’ anomaly goes unrecognized, as it is extremely well hidden by the obsessive addiction to the ever-recurring-change syndrome.

This state of affairs in which the education community is oblivious to its true condition is parallel to the stage in the development and demise of scientific paradigms, a stage Kuhn refers to as the “Crisis” stage. Kuhn’s crisis is typified by:

• The existence of “pronounced professional insecurity” among scientists, stemming from the continuing “failure of normal science to solve its riddles properly.”

• Despite the insecurity, the majority of scientists continue to work within the existing paradigms for lack of a satisfactory alternative: “once it has achieved the status of paradigm, a scientific theory is declared invalid only if an alternate candidate is available to take its place.”

The increasing insecurity and discontent among educators and decision makers since the 1970s stems from the functional difficulties at all levels which I already indicated, as well as from the continuing failure of various reforms to make any meaningful improvements. This phenomenon was best articulated by the development of a whole branch of literature bemoaning the systems’ inexorable decline as described in the above sections, as well as the well documented phenomenon known as “the predictable failure of educational reform,” “tinkering towards utopia,” or the “myths of school self-renewal.” In spite of these signs of impending collapse due to the irrelevance of education systems in the prevailing
realities, the majority of those involved with the systems continue to assume that the existing modern definitions of the fundamental parameters of education are still valid and functioning. The aforementioned syndrome of obsessive addiction to recurring and repeating change processes, largely facilitated by the fact that the system’s clientele is a captive audience (a point elaborated upon below), is probably the main mechanism which has allowed distorted perceptions of reality to prevail for so long.

In some ways, the present situation in education seems to follow the pattern of East European regimes which failed to adjust their essential parameters to the new realities following the postmodern revolutions. The spread of relativism and the consequent “end of ideology” revolution accompanied by the ICT revolution introduced “the wonders of the Western lifestyle” to most living rooms in Eastern Europe. Since the regimes continued to function in this new postmodern reality as they had functioned in the old modern one, their failure to adapt to changing times resulted in their complete and very sudden demise.

It is not easy to criticize educators for a lack of cognizance of the system’s anomaly. First, as Kuhn noted in his examination of how scientific revolutions take place, one does not usually abandon a dominant paradigm as faulty and dysfunctional, as it might be, as long as there is no “safe alternative.” While there are many fragmentary signs of a new mindset,70 a new, integrated, alternative paradigm has yet to crystallize to the point of constituting a viable option to the current one.

Another “attenuating factor” consists of the fact that the current educational paradigm’s loss of meaning and function hit the education system with unprecedented, mind-boggling speed. The process of change that separated a nomadic hunter-gatherer’s existence from a traditional-agricultural society occurred over many hundreds of thousands of years and the shift from a traditional to a modern society that peaked in the second half of the twentieth century took several hundreds of years to complete. Yet, the revolution that gave birth to the first postmodern generation rampaged onto the scene in only two decades (from the end of the 1960s to somewhere in the 80s), and we are now already deep into the second postmodern generation, much “crazier” (from a modern perspective) than the first one! No wonder, then, that Western education systems find themselves lacking any coherent sense of direction without a compass to help them find their way: their prevailing instruments and other navigation aids were designed for a world whose coordinates have all very suddenly disappeared.

In addition to a lack of awareness of the problem at hand, education systems in all Western societies enjoy an at least practically, and in most cases legally, enforced monopoly on the education market. This fact in turn cannot but considerably reduce their incentive to engage in the extremely demanding revolution, even if their captains were aware of it. Such a revolution may in fact be perceived by many of them as a threat to their jobs and way of life. Many parents, educators, principals, administrators, and academics in the field may very well not be able to cope with the new educational reality, just as many bureaucrats of the ancient Marxist regimes could not cope with free market economy, or coach drivers could not adapt to the world of the “horseless carriage” later known as the “automobile.”
In other words, education systems enjoy an exclusiveness, guaranteed and protected by laws and social arrangements, that forces a large part of the population to daily consume its products for twelve or thirteen years. By “forced” I refer not only to the legal enforcement of most of the twelve- or thirteen-year educational process on all individuals belonging to a certain age range, but also to the fact that in many Western countries even the choice of a specific school is still dictated by the public systems. By “monopoly” I refer to the fact that within the above double enforcement in most countries there is practically, and often legally, only one possible model of education, even when I include private schools in the picture. This single model is the Platonic educational process based on the learning of the “truth bearing” scientific disciplines as adapted a century or more ago to the (then) new, modern circumstances.

Thus, on one hand we have this exceptional combination of an enforced monopoly, while on the other enormous cognitive and emotional obstacles, most importantly the high chances that one may be jeopardizing his or her livelihood, stand in the way of anyone who wishes to update the current system and re-invent education to befit postmodern reality. It is possible to understand why in such a situation policy makers, educators, principals, and academics lack any real motivation to respond in an appropriate manner to the crisis at hand. Such a situation therefore guarantees obstinate denial of the true reality and obsession with “escape mechanisms” that can mask the cognitive and emotive dissonances the education system inevitably faces today.

Imagine a company that manufactured carriages during the very first years of the twentieth century, enjoying a three layered enforced monopoly similar to that of the education system in today’s Western society. Not only would the law of the land prohibit any competition from rival companies offering a similar or different method of transportation (canal navigation, for example), but it would also force any citizen in a certain age range to travel with the protected company a certain distance, in very specific paths, dictated by law, each day (such a law may be justified by arguing that touring in nature or visiting other cities contribute to citizens’ health, personality enrichment, and development).

Now imagine that the company’s drivers and administrators hear rumors about the development of “horseless carriages.” They also hear that in other countries the use of this new means of transportation is spreading quickly. Would they have any real motivation to consider adapting to the new way, knowing that some, probably many, of them will not be able to drive the new “carriages”? Why change, if their enforced monopoly can continue forever? To assume there would be such a motive goes against everything we know about human nature. The same principle holds for most policy makers, teachers, and administrators working in the prevailing anachronistic education system.

Nietzsche envisioned postmodernity in terms of its sudden conceptual and cultural impact:
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This tremendous event, is still on the road and is wandering: it has not yet reached the ears of men. Thunder and lightning need time; the light of the stars needs time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. Indeed, due to the above, very peculiar, situation, the postmodern revolution is still beyond the ken of almost all educators, as well as most professionals and academics dealing with education.

One increasingly encounters feelings that “something is wrong,” “it’s not working,” and that “things can’t go on like this much longer.” But in the quest for a solution, educators concentrate on first level changes in their work methods and the systems’ organizational structures, all within the framework of the essential existing parameters. In other words, they seek first-order solutions to second-order problems, rather than daring to “think outside of the box” which is exactly what the prevailing education systems, shocked by this impending second-order calamity, need.

THE ANOMALY HYPOTHESIS AND ITS TWO SUBSTANTIATION STRATEGIES

A hypothetical diagnosis can be substantiated by indirect empirical and/or direct theoretical means. The indirect empirical substantiation strategy consists of looking for predictable corroborations (or refutations) of the hypothesis. That is, the rational individual or scientist first predicts concrete signs that would be expected to emerge if the hypothesis is true. He or she then ventures to discover if such signs are indeed to be found and if they are developing as predicted by the hypothesis. As long as these predictions are corroborated by reality, the hypothesis from which they stemmed can be held as true. Once they are refuted, he or she has to start suspecting the validity of the hypothesis.

The direct theoretical substantiation strategy consists, on the other hand, of a direct theoretical analysis that shows that the discussed hypothesis is a necessary consequence of a valid argument claimed to rely on true premises or, in other words, a “sound argument.”

Going back to the factory example, indirect empirical corroboration of the hypothesis concerning the factory’s emerging anomaly will show that while consumption of its product has been gradually decreasing over (say) the last three years, the overall consumption of the kind of product it is producing has (at least) remained steady and the gap between the past and present level of consumption is filled by cheaper imports of the same product (assuming that the factory is the only producer of this product in the local market).

Direct theoretical substantiation will be achieved through a large-scale macro analysis of the major relevant economic trends leading to the conclusion that a meaningful and probably long-term and sustainable gap has been opened up between the relevant cost of labor and raw materials in certain developing countries and similar costs in the firm’s location (assuming an open global market).

The theoretical analysis relies on accepted macro-economic theories and is formed from assumptions made about past and future macro-economic trends. Although
such an analysis cannot be directly checked, it should not be discarded out of hand, as it does have an enormous explicatory power in showing that the directly observed patterns of market behaviors are not arbitrary, but make sense or stem from a state of affairs that is understandable. Such an understanding can be used for further predictions and mindful, planned, corrective strategic activity. The more detailed and reliable the direct theoretical substantiation and indirect empirical predictions are, and the more we find empirical corroborations for these predictions, the more we have “the right” to stick to the relevant hypothesis, treat it as true, and behave accordingly.

Direct theoretical corroboration of the above “anomaly hypothesis,” a hypothesis concerning the growing anomaly of Western education systems, will include:

- Analyzing suppositions basic to the definitions of essential parameters in prevailing education systems.
- Analyzing ongoing revolutions which characterize the postmodern reality.
- Demonstrating, through detailed comparison, that the prevailing definitions are losing their justification, meaning, and functionality in the context defined by the above revolutions.

This theoretical substantiation of the anomaly hypothesis is complex, mediated by relevant theories and assumptions (that must be well grounded) about the past, present, and the future of many aspects of the human situation. However, at the same time the anomaly hypothesis’ predictions can be, quite easily, evaluated directly and empirically.

What kind of predictions should one draw from the anomaly hypothesis concerning prevailing education systems? In order to answer this question let us start with two “Gedanken experiments.” Imagine a Japanese Noh Theater performing in front of a Japanese audience who are deeply versed in the culture and tradition of the theater and understand, appreciate, and enjoy any gesture made on the stage. Imagine also that some “evil genius” (a concept formulated by Descartes for other kinds of thinking experiments) plays a trick and, unseen by the actors, gradually replaces the Japanese audience in the dark theater hall with Western spectators who have no knowledge of Noh, Japanese culture, or language. What consequences can we predict?

I suppose it is a safe bet to predict that the actors will gradually begin to sense a meaningful change in audience response, from interest and excitement to boredom and alienation. These will be expressed first by the sounds of creaking chairs, yawns, whispering, then rising to the level of insulting yells directed towards the stage. As things grow worse, some spectators might throw soft objects like eggs and tomatoes at the stage, and others will leave.

Now imagine a situation in which the spectators are a captive audience forced to stay in the theater for several hours. It would not take long for higher levels of frustration to develop, resulting in growing levels of violence directed first at the actors and theater. Next, as the levels of frustration and aggression rise, the violent feelings would increase. And finally, if there were no escape from the theater, individuals in the audience might exhibit physical aggression towards the actors and each other; they may even get to a point where they turn the aggression on
themselves. Predictably, some Noh actors would leave the theater, seeing no point in continuing to entertain under such absurd conditions. However, others, forced to stay because of the salary they are paid by the theater, will eventually feel heightened frustration, alienation, fatigue, and various psychosomatic illnesses that will be characterized by experts as “professional burnout.”

Let us now take a third step and imagine that the captive Western audience is compelled to watch not one, but an endless chain of Noh performances during all their working hours for several years. What in the previous example was just a transient phenomenon, has now become a way of life which cannot but create a deeply rooted set of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns. Frustration and aggression become embedded in the spectators’ personalities, leading them to display increasing levels of violence which gradually and steadily lead to a hostile atmosphere that eventually becomes the “natural aspect” of the theater environment.

In response to some primary levels of curiosity, some audience members may have initially attempted to make sense of what they perceive as strange, incomprehensible, repetitive singing and the mechanical, monotonous, and minuscule movements performed on stage. However, this curiosity would eventually dissipate, and, if the audience were asked periodically what is taking place, their ability to answer would dramatically decrease with time as the boredom level rises, until the audience’s very restricted ability to follow the plot in an unknown language vanishes altogether.

Given all these insurmountable problems, the actors, those who choose to stay despite the circumstances, will constantly find themselves under psychological pressure and physical threat from the alienated audience, and in an aggressive atmosphere. They will suffer from increasing levels of “professional burnout,” and will complain, take sick leave, become apathetic, show fatigue, and take solace in criticizing the audience on a permanent basis.

Experts called in to handle this myriad of problems the audience and actors are suffering from are likely to suggest various kinds of small, specific remedies such as, for instance, empowerment workshops, management or accountability methods, and constructive teaching methods, to name but a few of the infinite arsenal of contradicting “wonder drugs” experts like brandishing nowadays.

Tenure-less postmodern academics who can barely hold on to their shaky positions by tediously correcting ten-page papers in well trodden paths (otherwise the papers will not be published) and writing endless proposals for mobilizing “external funding” aimed to please the sources of such funding, necessarily have tunnel vision. They can never see the horizon, and have neither the energy nor the motivation to try to hypothesize about it.

Thus, a youth violence expert will not attempt to deal with addiction (since he or she “lacks the required expertise”) or even dropping math grades (since it is “outside her or his scope”). It will never occur to an expert called to deal with dropping math grades to deal with the problematic history grades at the same time, since “she or he knows nothing about history and the methodology of its teaching,” not to mention teacher burnout (because “these are all together different subjects”) and so on and so forth.
Thus all the remedies suggested by the experts will necessarily be worse than useless. The symptoms will just keep mounting and the damage to the hall, stage, and the even the building itself will require constant and frequent repair. Various programs to fight the alcoholism, drug abuse, and aggression, courtesy of the quickly expanding groups of experts who make their living off “handling” these problems, will have to be constantly established and extended but again, in vain.

As long as the root causes of these syndromes are not attended to, the programs will fail and more “systemic,” and therefore more expensive, reforms will be required. These reforms might include restructuring the theater to lessen the space between the stage and the seating in the hope that this will reduce alienation between the actors and the audience. Or alternatively, more “hard-nosed” experts may suggest distancing the stage from the audience in order to defend the actors, or to hire armed guards to search for weapons, drugs, and/or alcohol, or the installation of metal detectors to find weapons that the audience may be carrying. They may also advocate the administration of “productive punishments” to those caught carrying weapons or use “positive reinforcement” devices for those who do not. All such measures will exacerbate the growing budgetary problems, which in turn lead to further deterioration of the theater’s physical condition and the mental crisis of those caught in it. And so the cycle of causes and effects is accelerated for ever.

Now we move on to our second thought experiment. Let us imagine a Muslim madrasa in a Pakistani provincial town, or an Orthodox Jewish cheder in Brooklyn, or an Amish one-room school in Pennsylvania. Imagine also that these schools are “spirited away” by our hyperactive “evil genius” (trying to replicate his Noh success) to a secular, upper middle-class community in Santa Monica, California. In order to have “real fun” the evil genius would leave intact the curriculum, didactics, books, and other teaching aids typical of religious schools, as well as the basic behavioral norms, building, and even the religious inscriptions on the walls. However, the teachers and the students would be local.

It is not difficult to predict what would happen. Referring to the first example, the Muslim case, the teachers who have miraculously learned the Islamic texts by heart have no idea what they are saying, or why, and the students have even less of an idea about what they are being taught. When the school Muezzin calls the believers to prayers and they are asked to kneel on the carpets, all the students can do is giggle—at least on the first day. But if this routine went on for weeks, months, and years, and if students were legally held captive and the teachers who stay on did so mainly for their paychecks, we would begin to see the same phenomena as in the Noh Theater.

We have finally closed the circle. As far as the indirect empirical substantiation is concerned, I can now draw conclusions from the thought experiments to the prevailing education systems. Human beings, when forced into absurd or meaningless situations for a long time, will always behave the same: feelings of senselessness or absurdity will lead to frustration, which will in turn develop into various forms of aggression, or feelings of anxiety or apathy. Those feelings will eventually be vented out through any escape mechanisms available. Those who perform in front of such an audience, or teach it, become exhausted. Many of them leave, and many of those who stay suffer from what is characterized as “burnout.”
CHAPTER 1

If the anomaly hypothesis is correct, the symptoms charactering the two example audiences captured in a senseless long-term situation will manifest themselves in prevailing education systems all over the postmodern Western world, and they will increase as the anomaly increases. In other words, a Western audience held *ad nauseam* in Noh Theater or secular middle class students caught for many years in a religious school will lead to boredom, alienation, frustration, and aggression being built into their personalities. To return to the subject at hand, postmodern young people, trapped for many years in a modern school, will probably display exactly the same symptoms, since they find themselves in exactly the same kind of situation: long-term captivity in a framework whose language, requirements, and basic structures are meaningless to the captive audience. This is the essence of the anomaly hypothesis (I will further elaborate and substantiate its details in the next four chapters).

Is there any doubt that all the relevant symptoms can be found in abundance around us, and are magnified as the anomaly becomes evermore acute? This, I suppose, is a rhetorical question. Almost all Western societies are grappling to one extent or another with all or some of the following educational problems (most of which were already mentioned above), and increasingly so:

- Growing indications of heightened feelings of alienation among students.
- Rising levels of depression and anxiety among young people.
- An exponential increase in violence among youth. This aggression is directed towards the school, teachers, “friends,” themselves, and other available targets. Most recently school massacres “inspired” by the “Columbine” incident turned into a cult that is rapidly gaining in popularity and admirers, becoming a model for students all over North America and beyond.
- Growing incidence of alcohol abuse among young people.
- Rising levels of substance abuse.
- Rising levels of suicide and suicide attempts among young people.76
- Poor and deteriorating scholastic achievement, as well as levels of literacy and numeracy in many Western countries.77
- Abject failure to achieve overall societal objectives such as social integration and equality.
- Repeated failures of reforms, change processes, and other long- and short-term “fixes” to the problems.
- Increasing budgetary problems.
- Rise in teacher burnout and dropout, exceeding in most instances the burnout levels of extremely demanding and stressful professions like law enforcement, medicine, and the like.78

The last point requires a moment of reflection. The most reasonable explanation for this claim is very meaningful for corroborating the anomaly hypothesis. While law enforcement officers and medical staff know the value of their work for the individuals they serve or for society at large, the educationalists’ hardships are steadily growing, while the meaning or value of the work they do for their students or for society are at best quite vague in their own eyes. They do not have the com-
fort of knowing that they supply other individuals with real values like security, better health or longer life, or anything that comes close to such clarity concerning the “good” they produce. The hardships they endure, as far as their professional self-perception is concerned, are meaningless to one extent or other. Furthermore, in most Western societies they are unrewarded economically and socially, perhaps because those societies do not understand their contribution and cannot exactly clarify what it consists of, except for supplying babysitting services for young kids.

What is meaningful for the indirect empirical corroboration of the anomaly hypothesis in this explanation is the claim that many educators do not see much value or meaning in their work. The anomaly hypothesis explains the burnout and dropout processes not by the general cognitive blindness of educators, but rather by the lack of anything that can be seen. In other words, they do not produce much value, and therefore enjoy no job satisfaction that can compensate for the hardships they undergo. Other’s in demanding positions, such as police officers, doctors, and nurses, whose job remunerations are (in many cases) relatively low, especially compares with the hardship endured, can at least balance those hardships in their minds with the benefit they perceive themselves as creating (for society and others, not just themselves). This is the case, according to the hypothesis, not because education is no longer a valuable human endeavor, but due to the growing gap between the way it was implemented in the past, and is still implemented today, and the actual needs the sudden new reality has created that the system is unable to contain, let alone respond to, these needs. Given these conditions, teaching cannot maintain the meaning it had for all those involved in it in the past, or produce the good it did throughout most Western history up to the last two generations, a good which is urgently needed today.

To return now to the main line of discussion: as far as the direct empirical substantiation strategy of the anomaly hypothesis is concerned, over the past three or four decades of the new postmodern reality, the literature depicting and analyzing its various aspects has provided ample detailed documentation of all phenomena that can emerge from a continuously and increasingly anomalous and hence absurd and dysfunctional system.

The next four chapters of this book are dedicated to corroborating the anomaly hypothesis using the direct theoretical substantiation strategy. Each of these chapters is devoted to one of the basic parameters of any education system—goals, content, organizational structure, and target audience—and theoretically substantiates the claim that the modern definition of the relevant parameters is dysfunctional, anomalous, and meaningless, given the ascendance of the postmodern revolutions. Two other parameters, recruiting the target audience and the modus operandi, are treated within the framework of the four chapters. In other words, these four chapters are dedicated to the thorough explication and substantiation of the four key claims that together comprise the arguments at the base of the theoretical corroboration of the anomaly hypothesis:
• **Educational Goals.** Modern definitions of the goals of education have lost their justifications, and hence their meaning and functionality, in the postmodern era as a result of the engulfing, relativistic revolution which characterizes the era. Western education systems have turned, in the last generation, from systems dedicated to the formation of young peoples’ character, in light of well respected ultimate values, into aimless organizations. Consequently, these organizations have lost their cultural and social *raison d’être*. These organizations cling to technocratic and instrumental means as a defense mechanism, destructive though it may be, and turn them into “goals” where no real goals exist anymore (Chapter Two).

• **Educational Content.** In our relativistic age, the modern curriculum, which consists of basic scientific disciplines, a carry-over from the classical-liberal curriculum which stemmed from Plato’s objectivistic epistemology, has lost its justification and meaning on the cultural level. In this case, as in the previous one, relativism has led to a collapse of the traditional objectivistic philosophical justification of the curriculum and hence to a loss of its meaning and functionality. Given the far-reaching changes in the labor market and the workplace, the modern curriculum has become much less socially and economically justifiable on the practical level as well. Thus, the basis for the school curriculum suppositions, which remained valid on both the philosophical and practical levels of justification over the last twenty-five hundred years, have been dramatically foundering in last three or four postmodern decades (Chapter Three).

• **Organizational Structure.** The modern school’s rigid, stable, hierarchical, and lococentric organizational structure stands in opposition to the flexible, dynamic, flat, virtual or semi-virtual, “crazy” organizational structures developing in the postmodern era. Thus, the school is a floundering, anachronistic relic of yesteryear on the organizational level as well. (Chapter Four).

• **Target audience.** One of the major postmodern processes in the social arena consists of the “disappearance of childhood” or, more accurately, the disappearance of clear and stable differences between “children” and the “adult.” Consequently, suppositions basic to education concerning the nature of its target audience and its mobilization strategies, which ruled education systems over the past twenty-five hundred years, up to and including the modern age, have broken down. No longer is it self-evident to assume that education is a process aimed at enhancing the development of immature, inexperienced “children” towards maturity by mature, knowledgeable, and experienced “adults.” Today, it is not hard to find common situations in which the opposite is just as, if not more, self-evident: young people are initiating adults into a better understating of the world (Chapter Five).
SUMMARY: WHERE AND HOW TO BEGIN

If the education community is to follow the dynamic process that science, and all other developing cultural contexts, follow, an initial stage of generating consciousness of the anomalies is necessary. This stage requires systematic activity of an educational vanguard consisting of groups of thinkers, researchers, and policymakers coming to grips with the root causes of the system’s problems: the unprecedented and growing gap between education and the surrounding postmodern environment. These groups should reach the most expansive possible awareness of the immensity of the crisis, as well the deepest possible appreciation of the fact that a solution cannot stop short of a complete and radical reconsideration of the system’s most basic paradigm.

In the terms I used above, for a second time in Western history, the present education system must be discarded in its entirety (at least during the initial thinking process) and make way for *tabula rasa*-based thinking in a thorough systematic and strategic manner, designed to reinvent education from scratch. The challenge to the vanguard groups’ will be to formulate entirely new concepts of education, leading to entirely new paradigms (different concepts, different paradigms), and to “sell” their solutions to their societies.84 To enhance such a process, the following four chapters comprising Part One of the book survey and analyze the categorical inadequacy of the modern educational paradigm in the postmodern age.

In order to achieve the positive and ambitious goal of inventing education for postmodern Western democracies, such vanguard groups will require solid starting points. To this end, they will have to go back to basics, to the bedrock of the most fundamental philosophical questions concerning the Good Life and the “nature of man,” which tend to be shunned during times of confusion and conceptual earthquakes like ours for fear of the infinite abysses into which they may lead us.85 They will need courage and perseverance to look these questions “in the eye.”86 They will also need some template for thinking about and dealing with these fundamental philosophical questions, and then all layers of educational function stemming from them. A possible systematic preparation of the ground for a desired educational program adequate for the new postmodern situation and guided by desired Humanistic values is the focus of Part Two of the book.

Part Three substantiates the claim that the present aleatory, sporadic, mindless “changes” dominating the realm of educational reforms, which eventually “evaporate” or cancel each other out, must be replaced by entirely new educational paradigm(s) created within a framework of mindful and strategic thinking along the methodological model this book follows. It also shows that, in spite of the fact that we require the most radical possible paradigmatic change, in some cases the move towards this change can be gradual, as long as it is directed by a clear and operational vision of an entirely new paradigm.
CHAPTER TWO

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF EDUCATIONAL GOALS IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

INTRODUCTION

The modern education systems’ goals, the most fundamental parameter characterizing any organization, are foundering in the postmodern era, as a result of the relativistic, postmodernist worldview which is rapidly spreading among the contemporary elite and middle class.

Relativism, considered by many to be the core feature of postmodernity, is the source whence spring other ideological characteristics of the postmodern era, such as pluralism, the loss of transcendental value systems, and their replacement (mostly) by many variations on the egoistic-hedonistic worldview. The modern goals of education (not to mention the traditional ones) were all rooted in objectivistic foundations. Over the past generation relativism has eroded these foundations to the point of disintegration and disappearance.

In this chapter, after characterizing the nature and “flavor” of postmodernist relativism, which lies at the root of the disappearance of the prevailing goals of education (Section 1), I describe the acute and radical nature of this disappearance (Section 2). I then proceed to sketch an outline of the nature of the utopian ideated discourse on the desired goals, in light of this disappearance. This discourse would be systematically conducted as it should have been already, had professionals, educators, and decision makers acknowledged the void left where educational goals once existed. For this sake, I carry out a discussion between seven main prototypical voices which “echo” back and forth in the prevailing cultural “wilderness” without provoking any real response. The discussion delineated in this chapter reflects and concretizes the depth and breadth of the bewildering abyss that replaced “the goals of education” and lurks beyond today’s educational practice, while in Chapter Six (Part Two) it serves as a foundation, an “Archimedean point” that will allow us to launch a positive argument and suggest amended goals for postmodern democratic societies.

DOMINANT VARIATIONS OF POSTMODERN RELATIVISM

The alliance of relativistic views, the dominant epistemology of the postmodern era, is manifested in Western societies in a myriad of variations ranging from the seemingly sophisticated and intellectual academic relativism through the cynicism of politicians and power brokers to the vulgar relativism of the “man in the street.”
The following description of a few of these manifestations is schematic and unavoidably partial.

- The first version of postmodern relativism begins with “postmodernism,” a term often mistakenly identified with the name of the complex and rapidly changing era we live in: “Postmodernity.” Postmodernism is a “highbrow” relativism adopted by various intellectuals and pseudo-intellectuals dominant among Western academics in certain disciplines, mainly the humanities and some of the social sciences. It is usually wrapped up in incomprehensible jargon imported from the post-Second World War, post-structuralist French intellectual elite which in turn were greatly influenced by pre-War German philosophy and social sciences. This jargon mainly expressed the French elite’s (former members of the Marxist salons) disappointment with Marxism and its attempt to proceed with the typically French, narcissistic, game of *epater les bourgeois* (“to shock the middle classes”), despite the absence of the “good old” objectivist socialistic or Marxist foundations.

  In Anglophone and other Western countries, the use of this incomprehensible jargon has in many cases lost the original motivation that led to its formation in the cafes, salons, and lecture halls of *la Rive Gauche* in the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s. It now mainly typifies those who belong to the left-wing intellectual elite and try to carry on the fight for justice and freedom even in a new world in which these words have largely lost their meaning in the wake of the relativistic attack on the objectivistic foundations which accorded them meaning in modernity. The opacity of the original French narcissistic love-making with one’s self using language as a medium helped Western intellectuals hide the impossibility of their quest; once they lost their objectivistic foundations, “freedom” and “justice” also lost their meaning.2

  Outside France (and later on in France as well as the general Western influence rebounded), it also became, since the 1970s, a status symbol for the bourgeois professionals and intellectuals who did not necessarily share the basic motivation of the small group who started it all. The influence of these intellectuals and academics of humanities and social sciences, in both European and Anglophone countries, on the universities and on the media constitutes the lion’s share of legitimization for relativism from the 1970s onward.

- A second, much cruder, version of relativism emanates from market forces and the new liberalism. This version is the language of the people who really turn the wheels of postmodernity. It reduces all the complexity of human life to the financial “bottom line,” because “nothing else really matters.”

- The third version, a byproduct of the logically impossible combination of the above two versions (“impossible” since the first “camp” vehemently attacks the second), is the slick and psychologically sophisticated relativism of the advertising, entertainment, and media industries eager to please their marketing masters and investors by largely borrowing from the linguistic repertoire of the first group.

- The fourth version is found in the bored, apathetic, relativistic indifference of the technocrats who oversee the daily activities of governmental, international
organizations (the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, the OECD, etc.), corporate establishments, and NGOs. These technocrats do not understand the patois of the intellectuals and have no interest in the marketing brand of relativism. They care mostly about submitting their reports or “deliverables” and collecting air miles at the expense of the taxpayers or the corporate account. Their aim is to “neutralize” language to the point where it is as fuzzy and uncontroversial as possible.

- The fifth version is the “vulgar” relativism of the masses that are intermittently influenced by the language of the first group and enslaved by the endless flow of new brands and products fabricated by the second group and marketed by the third. They adhere to the basic maxim of our new relativistic world: “I consume therefore I am.”

- The sixth version is comprised of the cynical relativism of the political class. Politicians are ambitious and aggressive enough to live lives based on lies and distortions, justified by the idiom that “everything depends on one’s perspective,” Alcibiades’ 2,500-year-old dictum that “justice is the interest of the powerful,” or Machiavelli’s cynical advice to his prince. Thus, they glean snatches from the intellectuals’ rhetoric and a partial understanding of the main “truth” of our era, but do not care enough about this “truth” to immerse their intellects in a deeper understanding of what all this vocabulary stands for, beyond the obvious: “I am shown (on television), therefore I am.”

Have I left anybody out? Certainly I have. There are endless variations on postmodernism and countless brands of relativism affecting Western life in postmodernity. However they all boil down to the obstinate, dogmatic belief in the sanctity of disbelief, or to a categorical enslavement to the “holy truth” that “there are no truths,” that everything is “in the eye of the beholder,” that the world is therefore nothing but an endless series of arbitrary social or language games, or rather very large, ever-changing, groups of such games impacting on and reflected in other games. Alternatively we can sum up postmodernism as dictating that we understand anything that seems to us to be knowledge or justice as nothing more than “disinformation” deliberately disseminated by power structures (as crucially claimed by thinkers in the first “camp” and shamelessly admitted by all others in Alcibiades-like joy).

But once the world is perceived through postmodernist eyes as nothing more than virtual reality nothing matters, not even the true value or meaningfulness of one’s own utterances. After all, such utterances are also just a game. As long as one’s partners in the game nod approvingly to what one says and as long as the paycheck, royalties, or dividends keep coming in on time and one can afford the designer jeans, the summer house in the “hottest” location, or the latest Porsche or, (for the masses who fantasize through soap operas, telenovelas or, more “actively,” through virtual Internet games), Fiat or Mitsubishi model, then everything is fine.

Relativism and its psycho-social offspring—egoism, cynicism, and boundless hedonism—are very far from being new to the Western world. However a strange coalition combined of Plato, the Jewish prophets, Jesus, and St. Paul successfully fought it off; not without cost, though, as Europe and its residents were consequently
subject to the rule of Dogmatism for two thousand years. During this long period, relativism and its offspring, though vanquished over and over again, were not obliterated and tacitly persisted, hidden under thick layers of hypocrisy among the aristocracy and Church leaders in the Renaissance, buried in silence among peripheral philosophical sects, or kept behind high castle or prison walls as with individuals like the Marquis de Sade.

In our era, relativism and its offspring are once again raising their heads (many years after its first clear expressions by Alcibiades, his friends, and their teachers, the Sophists). Only this time, they are no longer confined to the “veiled” elite or the periphery of unknown skeptic philosophers, no longer are they hidden in the underworld. Today, for the first time in human and certainly Western history, since Neoplatonism and Christianity overcame the relativism of the Hellenistic period, the relativist lifestyle is becoming the default, accepted by almost any secular individual who is “invigorated and empowered” enough to enjoy a high quality of life, or, in other words, to consume at will. This rampant relativistic mood is rapidly spreading in our “flat world” beyond Western societies, conquering even the most distant corners of the earth.

POSTMODERN RELATIVISM AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE MODERN EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Is there any chance that the crisis-ridden Western education systems can remain unaffected? The answer is obviously negative. In two generations relativism has created a “black hole” of unasked and (seemingly) unanswerable questions about the very foundation of the educational endeavor.

Throughout the history of Western civilization questions referring to the nature of the Good Life and the implication thereof on the goals of education and the right to educate have rarely been asked. This was not because they were hard to answer. The opposite was true. In traditional religious or modern ideological societies, the answers were so obvious that the questions barely ever surfaced. Today too these questions rarely surface, but for very different reasons.

The illuminated mountain on which the answers to these questions once stood (in the faraway modern era now mostly forgotten, which was last celebrated during the self-assured ’50s, the utopian ’60s, and early ’70s) has, in the last two generations, turned into a bleak deserted abyss. This “black hole” is so dark, infinite, and threatening that teachers, principals, parents, decision makers, politicians, and most theoreticians including even the vast majority of philosophers are afraid to look into it. They prefer to look at “small-scale riddles” (to use Kuhn’s term) and technocratic questions like how to integrate more female students into the mathematic and scientific fields, how to improve literacy, how to limit violence, and how to use ICT to better teach eighth grade history. Piecemeal problems at least (allegedly) offer the (false) hope for possible solutions. But nobody asks the basic question: what is the aim of it all? Without first answering this question, tackling piecemeal problems turns into nothing more than an absurd addiction to enacting reforms as
mythical and irrational as ceremonial dancers begging the spirit ancestors to bring
their descendants rain or bestow on them good health or affluence.

Sometimes, especially audacious philosophers do stick to their traditional vocation
and in one way or another face these questions. Troubled non-philosophical
writers may also touch on them from their perspective within the large range of the
socio-political spectrum. But they do not speak to each other, and do not form any
ongoing systematic rational discourse on the subject. Nor do they have any impact
on the general educational discourse or on policy makers, not to mention any daily
practice in the education system itself. They do not make real impact even on the
philosophical discourse, which is still primarily postmodernistic, focusing to a
large extent on issues which interest postmodernistic philosophers alone. For
instance, feminists, multiculturalists, and anti-colonialist philosophers concentrate
their criticism on unjust power structures in education. Their writings have very
little real affect on the general academic discourse, not to mention practitioners’ or
policy makers’ discourses.

More importantly in this context, it simply never occurs to postmodernistic
thinkers engaged in this critical “project” (to use a term they like) that for their
criticism of the unjust distribution of education and its suppressive nature to have
any value there is a need for an educational process, or at least a clear model of
such a desired process, which has meaningful goals to postmodern democratic
societies. Then, and only then, the question of its just formation and distribution can
and should be asked. At present their criticism is directed towards an unjustifiable
and meaningless project, which is doomed to inevitably disintegrate. Their criticism is
therefore similar to a reexamination of the design of the second floor of a building
while its first floor and foundations are not yet on the drawing board. In other
words, not addressing this issue renders the very essence of their criticism flawed.

The few voices which do address the above foundational issue are buried under
the infinite, all-devouring darkness of the “black hole.” Because almost no one
among those who control the education systems or the discourse about them is
willing to admit there is an essential problem, almost no one is prepared to
systematically and analytically respond to the voices of the few who do face it and
the answers they propose.

What makes this current crisis unique is not the mere debate over the meaning
of key concepts in educational thinking. Throughout history, the meaning of the
Good Life, and the right kind of education stemming from it, was debated on both
the theological and philosophical levels. However, the present crisis is much more
acute, because it features a unique combination of three unprecedented elements:

- Numerous contradictory conceptions of the Good Life and education exist
  side by side in all Western societies and among most social sectors (except
  fundamentalists of various sorts). In the past, opposing views primarily
  existed in different societies or sectors or at most in different classes of the
  same society. However, today contradictory points of view frequently exist
  in the same social class or sector, or even within the worldview of a single
  individual, rendering (in the last case) a large portion of Western parents and
  educators “educationally confused” or “disoriented” (which are learning,
thinking, and acting disabilities that for some reason haven’t yet been sanctified in the canonical texts of the discipline of special education).

- As follows from the black hole metaphor, in most cases the “confused” are not “perplexed.” In a generation that celebrates the “loss of truth” and vehemently rejects what little is left of (what is believed to be) “the vanity of rationality” and the “tyranny of systematic thought,” it is OK to be confused, it is OK to transmit confused values or assumptions to one’s children; it is actually unavoidable and “good” because it shows one to be “pluralistic,” “tolerant,” “open-minded,” and “politically correct.”

This phenomenon has no precedent in human or Western history. Even among the last generations of the modern era, individuals were fully immersed in the conception of the Good Life of their society/social sector, be it religious, rationalist, socialist, nationalist, humanist, or liberal (in the “thick” sense of the term) which they mostly took for granted and educated unquestionably in its light.

- Despite the many different perceptions of the Good Life in the past, few thinkers doubted the existence of one true meaning of this concept, truly reflecting what the Good Life should stand for. Obviously, all proponents considered their own conception closest of all to the Truth. However, postmodern relativism, at least in its more extreme versions that have percolated down from intellectual postmodernism to all the other social levels, has laid aside the premise that one conception can in principle be more correct or better than another. Similarly, postmodernism has “deconstructed” the view that one can meaningfully aspire to be able to rationally resolve the acute disagreements between different conceptions. In an era that has forsaken any hope of reaching a consensus about “rationality” or any rational decision making criteria for such fundamental debates, resignation to what is known as “immeasurability” seems to be unavoidable.

Therefore, today’s postmodern reality is the first in history in which education (and especially public education) is unable to act in light of a transcendental or any other coherent value system and thus cannot strive to inculcate it to the “educatees” as education has always done since the dawn of human culture and history.

Today, for the first time in Western history, education systems are unable to act on the basis of any social agreement, not even one perceived to be merely consensual (as opposed to objectively justified). In order to reach a consensus on views considered by their proponents to be arbitrary or subjective or pure social conventions, all potential discussants need to accept a priori “rules of the game” concerning decision criteria. But the dwellers of the epistemological and ethical black hole cannot even reach such a basic, minimal consensus. There is no one, common, fundamental game, no “The Game” anymore. It seems impossible to reach agreement on “the rules.” The concept of a “game” clearly defined by its rules was in itself corroded by extreme postmodernist relativism, not to speak of “ultimate rules” which have power beyond specific games.

In the last generation we have lost the naïveté that allowed all our ancestors to believe in the existence of distinguishable rules that precede and direct or allow the
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formation of “objective” or at least consensually accepted knowledge. In other words, even the “good old” distinction between material statements, statements of factual information about the world, about which there are likely to be endless disagreements, and formal statements or logical or semantic rules that do not contain such information but guide the formation of the previous statements and are universal, was joyfully “found” to be untenable a generation ago. Most postmodernist thinkers boast of, and celebrate this state of affairs as a kind of “total liberation.”

Thus, it seems impossible to talk about “public education,” that is, state-run education, in Western, secular, relativistic, Liberal Democracies, and still relate to the original meaning of the term “education,” to wit, encouraging the development of an individual in light of a model of the Good Life defined as “desirable.”

Moreover, it is the first time in history that the influence of relativism is exponentially intensified by the electronic media’s penetration of every home, engulfing us with wireless gadgetry networked to the cacophonous World Wide Web during all our waking hours. We are still very far from being able to fully assimilate the significance of this radical revolution whose explicit and tacit advertising and glorification of hedonism and consumerism, in all its shapes and forms, is solidly based on the relativistic-egoistic lifestyle.

The breakdown of the definitions of the goals of modern education is a direct result of the dominant relativistic-egoistic-hedonistic 

weltanschauung on at least two levels. The first has to do with the main goal of education as understood throughout history: “acculturation,” or the initiating youths into their own culture. Throughout Western history, including the modern era, education was perceived as a process designed to aid the individual’s upward progress on the (so-called) ladder of human existence to the desired state defined by the individual’s culture, a state which was conceived as essentially different and better from the natural human state. In other words, education was perceived as aiming to elevate individuals beyond the level of seeking to fulfill mere natural, material needs to an exalted spiritual level in the light of a transcendental ideal surpassing the natural and egoistic.

This transcendental ideal could be the worship of God in traditional society, knowledge of the Truth or of progress inspiring “scientific knowledge” in traditional and modern rationalistic societies, a commitment to the struggle for social justice in the modern socialist and Marxist societies, a commitment to the cause of national liberation or resurrection in many emerging modern national societies, or a commitment to one version or another of what was perceived as the set of “universal Humanistic values” or the “rights of man,” etc., in many modern liberal societies, or some combination of these.

The traditional and modern transcendental goals of education cannot be justified in the relativistic context, certainly not in the naïve way they were justified up to a generation or two ago in almost all Western societies. Paradoxically and tragically, we find ourselves in a period when, after an unprecedented development of the body, the soul which it has nourished and protected has been totally lost. In other, less poetic, words, the education systems in the Western world have expanded in
our generation to dimensions undreamt of before, serving a vast range of populations: anyone unfortunate enough to fall between the ages of four and eighteen, compelling them to attend educational institutions for ten to fourteen years. Note that not so long ago a large portion of the population did not receive any formal schooling, and for most of those who did the standard was (only) four gloomy years of “grammar school” from which they graduated to the harsh realities of mines and production lines. Ironically and tragically, the justification of education’s traditional and modern goals and therefore its raison d’être were lost, an unprecedented occurrence in its own right, at exactly this moment of unprecedented expansion of schooling.

This intense process is rendering the education system’s activities totally meaningless for students and teachers alike. This claim explains, at least partially, the many maladies which beset education systems in contemporary Western societies. Over the last few decades there has been an ongoing decrease of literacy levels, a spread of ignorance among students and teachers alike, a decline or obstinate stagnation of scholastic achievement, an increase in violence, a rise in drug and alcohol abuse among students, rising rates of suicide and suicide attempts by young people, and ever-increasing rates of teacher burnout and dropout. Is there a possible psychological or social malaise that is not included in this list of “problems contemporary schools have to face”?

As the disintegration of education’s raison d’être is the deep-rooted cause leading to the aggravation of these phenomena, we cannot and should not therefore go on ignoring the most fundamental questions:

• Is there a need for an educational process in a reality where the distinction between the mundane and the natural on one side and the exalted and the ideal on the other is being eroded?

• If so, what can it aspire to? What can education’s goals be?

In answer to these questions, one can argue that the loss of transcendental values does not necessarily entail a loss of social consensus, and that the aim of education is to serve this consensus even if it does not focus on transcendental values. Moreover, it can be argued that the aim of education today should be the encouragement of the individual’s self-realization, the aim that arises from individualism which is the central value in the reality of postmodern society. In a society which no longer perceives “the worship of God,” “the quest for Truth,” or “the fight for Justice” or for “national liberation,” or even for more extensive fulfillment of the “universal rights of man,” to be self-evident or absolute exalted values, one may reasonably assume that the “worship of the self” can be considered a main educational ideal.

This argumentation leads us toward the second level of the crisis affecting educational goals in postmodernity, relating to education as contributing to the development of the individual rather than to acculturation. The radical relativism permeating many levels of society in the postmodern era prevents us from accepting even the validity of “individualism” as the leading educational value for two complementary reasons:

• One cannot claim that there is a consensus within Western societies, even on the value of individualism. Thus, for example, both feminists (at least many
of them) and communitarians (most of them) are vehemently attacking this value. The former view it as a male value that ignores the basic human need for close intimate relationships with other people, and the latter as a value that dismisses the fundamental human need for social identification and communal commitment. Both view the value of individualism as contrary to human nature, causing personal alienation, social disintegration, and misery.

- Even those who accept the educational and social importance of individualism do not agree on its operative psychological and educational meaning and implications:

- Does “encouragement of personal self-realization” mean helping the individual to achieve academic excellence in order to attain acceptance by a prestigious institute of higher learning, and thereby, according to the conventional approach to education, obtain the guarantee of a high standard of living in adulthood?

- Or

- Should this expression be understood to imply a demand to help individuals to express their own authentic values in life, even though these might not coincide with high scholastic achievements as the disciples of open, progressive, and democratic education contend?

- Or, alternatively,

- Does the operational meaning of “encouraging personal self-realization” perhaps require us to help free the individual of the false, alienating attitudes that modern capitalistic society, and even more so postmodern neo-liberalism and capitalism, have covertly internalized in the individual, attitudes which are a necessary condition for self-realization, as Radicals and neo-Marxists, very dominant in postmodern educational discourse, contend?

At the base of the three educational views mentioned above we find three different and contradictory perceptions of the Good Life, human development, learning, and democratic society: the conventional achievement-oriented view, usually relying on neo-liberalism, the “open” or “progressive” education model, and the radical Marxist concept. Both latter educational approaches are usually critical of the socioeconomic views of neo-liberalism.

These three views naturally lead to contradictory conceptions of “individual self-realization.” All three perspectives (and several others not mentioned here to avoid further complexity) are currently accepted by philosophers, parents, students, and professionals, although the first has gained the widest credence among the general population. Similar perplexity and ambiguity exist today regarding every other individualistic concept proposed to characterize a desirable educational goal, such as “autonomy,” “rationality,” “self regulation,” “self direction,” “independence,” “entrepreneurship,” “leadership” (very “in” lately), “authenticity,” “self realization,” “empowerment,” and I could go on and on. Actually, as words stop being carved in stone and become “fluid” (to quote a term coined by Z. Bauman) we witness two complementary processes—each term can (and often does) have an infinite number of meanings (i.e., is rendered meaningless); and there is a linguistic inflation: the fuzzy linguistic territory is flooded with new or renewed terms, as if to cover its
extending hollowness with the buzzing noise of the increasingly “sophisticated” discourse based on “the brave new (postmodern) language.”

Given the disappearance of the classic transcendental goals of education and the ambiguity and confusion surrounding the definitions of possible alternatives, and what seems to many to be the inability to rely on any solid rational foundation in order to come to terms with these problems, a number of previously, almost untouched, questions, should come to the fore:

• Does the concept of “public education” still convey a viable alternative in postmodern Liberal Democracies? In other words, is there any validity to a systematic, mindful attempt, on behalf of democratic societies, to shape the next generation in the light of a specific desirable model of the Good Life?

• If not, what is the alternative?

• Is it total renunciation of the postmodern democratic public education pretension to educate, leaving education (as many teachers and “educators” in their practice actually do) to “whoever is responsible” and limiting the role of public education to (allegedly) “value-free teaching”? Given the disintegration of the nuclear family, and more largely of any social or communal framework, isn’t the only realistic alternative in this vacuous reality education by the unholy alliance between the Internet, console games, and television or, in other words, market forces and advertising?

• Isn’t this alternative too dangerous, particularly given the “disintegration of society”?

• If the above is too dangerous, in the light of which values, among the above or other values, can we educate?

The problem is largely aggravated by what most recent liberal thinkers consider to be the “value neutrality” liberal states should be committed to. The state’s obligation is not to rely on any “conception of the Good Life” in relating to its citizens, but to supply them with a framework in which they can choose and realize any conception of the Good Life they decide.19

It seems that if the liberal state is to remain neutral between different conceptions of what “Good” is, it should stick to a formal policy framework in the distribution of all “goods” that can be considered as pre-conditions for choice and implementation of its citizens world-views, education included. But if there are only social or contextual languages or “games” and no “super game,” or formal neutral decision making procedures, there seems to be no foundation for the liberal state to rely on.20

At present there are no clear answers to these questions, certainly no answers that enjoy a broad consensus. Furthermore, while there are individual voices that have been trying to come to terms with these questions, there is no systematic ongoing discussion focused on such issues which relates specifically to education.21 By “systematic discussion” I mean a discussion in which the individual thinkers are committed to rationally relate to each other’s answers, and in which issues solved (even by reaching agreement to the disagree) are not endlessly repeated, and hence there is conceptual development or progress acknowledged by the various participants.
As I have emphasized above, this is an unprecedented situation in the history of Western education. In the place of the foundational, clear, and coherent perceptions of the Good Life that have guided (for better and worse) Western societies throughout history, there is now nothing but a silent “black hole.” The confusion accompanying this silence is taken by many to be a normal and even desirable state of affairs. It is also accompanied by an obstinate attempt to look the other way and deal with technical, technocratic, secondary questions concerning educational practice, practice which has lost its very goals and raison d’être.

SEVEN RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION:
OUTLINE OF A UTOPIAN DISCOURSE

In the following pages I will try to, somewhat artificially, reconstruct one version of the lacking discussion out of several meaningful individual voices that have been raised in “the wilderness.” In light of this reconstruction within the discussion, the attempts to tackle the crisis in the last generation may initially be divided into four main conceptualized “camps”:

- Those who accept without reservations postmodern reality, including its characteristic relativism, as desirable and claim that in this day and age the state-governed education system has neither the right nor the ability to educate, and must therefore completely renounce its pretension to do so.

- Those who accept postmodern reality with its characteristic relativism as given and, to some limited extent, also desirable, and claim that the education system must educate towards autonomy so that young people will be able to mindfully choose their own values and implement them in the new, devoid of absolute values, world.

- Those who accept postmodern reality, including relativism, as given and, to some extent, as desirable, and therefore claim that our relativistic starting point prevents resolution of the debate about the aim or goals of education by some generic or universally accepted answer and maintain that it must be left open to ongoing social and political negotiation and debate.

- Those who reject the postmodern condition and sometimes also the relativism therein, characterizing it as a state of human decadence. These thinkers believe that it is mandatory for schools to educate according to a value system that conforms to a socio-cultural standpoint opposed to the attitudes dominant in modernity. They usually present themselves as either relating and aspiring to return to an earlier ideal society, a social existence which has been (allegedly) suppressed by opposing postmodernist values that have (allegedly) usurped the students’ minds (the “conservatives”), or to a future utopian society in which desired justice and freedom-oriented values will be implemented (the “Radicals”).

In the present-day chaotic reality, one would hardly expect the above “camps” to speak with one voice (after all, although they sometimes attack one or more of the other voices, they hardly speak to each other directly). Furthermore, these “camps” are of course fictitious and were “grouped” here purely for the sake of making the
discussion below possible. In fact, it is much noisier and more confusing “out there” as each “camp” and sub-camp speaks in many vacillating voices, and each of them shouts its position in an endlessly echoing nothingness.

For the sake of this discussion I will do my best to perform the impossible and present these camps and their sub-camps as coherent in themselves and as participating in a rational discussion in which the borderlines and the common denominators are clear. Awareness of the opposing conceptions’ multiplicity and their mutual criticism, while forming some order in and among them (even if as a “noble lie” or as “using a ladder” to be discarded later, as Wittgenstein would have said), is vital for comprehending the depth and severity of the lack of consensus over the goals of public education in a postmodern democratic society and for trying to make sense of it all. Thus, henceforth, I will attempt to map a seemingly clear terrain, ignoring all the fluctuations and fuzziness that would otherwise render such presentation impossible.

In the following presentation, I not only present each view or sub-view, but also immediately follow it up with the main criticisms of opposing views that seek to undermine it. Although lengthening and somewhat “overburdening” the discussion, I do this in order to emphasize the extent and intensity of the conflicts and disagreements.

I would like to make one last general introductory remark of epistemic importance to which I will not be able to refer in detail below: the above description of the four categories of views tacitly relies on a general distinction between the three epistemic starting points that largely impact the response of educational thinkers on the current crisis:

• Radical or postmodernist relativism denies the possibility of commensurability or meaningful discussion among holders of opposing views, or even reliance on reason for the formation of a justified educational view. These views are usually held by thinkers in the first camp.

• Moderate relativism, consisting of either cultural relativism or skepticism, assumes the possibility of a meaningful rational dialogue even between holders of opposed views or reliance on formal (i.e., procedural or “devoid of content”) rationality as a supporting pillar of the response to the crisis. Beyond this assumption, epistemologically speaking, there is an oceanic difference between cultural relativists and skeptics.

• Rationalism is the view shared by those who believe in our ability to rely on reason in order to know material truths. This epistemic view can serve as the foundation of conservative views on education in the fourth camp of postmodern “rejectionists,” although conservatives can also be cultural relativists.
Also, the epistemic situation “out there” is complex and rarely logically tidy. I cannot go into further detail here. Still, I hope I have said enough to enable me to refer to the epistemic issues below en passant.

The Technocratic Response, or: Surrender of the Aspiration to Educate

The View. What I refer to here as “the technocratic response” to the disappearance of education’s goals is prevalent among teaching staff, parents, and many administrators and policy makers who accept the postmodern situation, as well as the postmodernist relativism dominant in it, as given but do not regard it as a problem. Indeed, the technocrats believe relativism to be desirable and maintain that in this situation, there is no point in pretending to educate. The majority of technocrats actually apply their approach to everyday life, without naming or systematically formulating it.

One can distinguish between two categories of technocrats. Let us call them, for the sake of this discussion, “the pedagogy oriented” and “the functionalists.” Those belonging to the first category perceive teaching of the formal, explicit curriculum as the main educational goal of school, while their counterparts do not. According to the functionalists, teaching and learning serve only as cover activities to the true functions of schooling: socializing students to the norms of society by the “tacit curriculum” (see below).

According to the pedagogy-oriented technocrats’ view, ideologically mobilized state education is no longer possible and cannot be justified since it is divorced from daily practice and cannot be reconstructed in the relativist and non-ideological reality in which we live. It is no longer possible, because the majority of today’s students come from a social reality dominated by relativistic, individualistic attitudes and diverting them towards an alternative epistemology or value system is unlikely. Moreover, as many of the teachers live in this reality, it is difficult to assume that they have the pathos required for an alternative value educational process. According to this view, ideologically mobilized state education cannot be justified, even if it was possible, because the democratic state is committed to value and ideological neutrality in its activities and decision making, and must avoid giving arbitrary preference to any one worldview over another. Thus, any preferment of a specific concept in education, or in any other sphere in a relativist-democratic society, will be arbitrary and therefore unjustifiable.

The pedagogy-oriented technocrats can be roughly divided into two groups according to the degree of extremism of the conclusions they draw from the arguments above. Most of the technocratic view’s supporters hold the relatively moderate claim that the goal of present-day education is to teach, as opposed to “to educate,” that is, to pass on to students those (allegedly) ideologically neutral basic skills and fields of knowledge perceived to be essential for “efficient functioning” in the reality in which they will live.
The less moderate adherents add to that the education system’s obligation to avoid, as much as possible, imposing on students knowledge any specific subject matter and to present them instead with varied options from which they may be able to choose freely. According to this view, if relying heavily on a specific system of values for the purpose of education cannot be justified in a relativistic democratic society, then by the same token formulating a curriculum based on a specific value system cannot be justified. Another expression of this position is the argument that formulating a curriculum cannot be neutral; it is an intrinsically educational act and, as there is no justification for imposing education, there is also none for imposing the curriculum therein.28

The more extreme technocrats of this group went a step further, and came to the conclusion that the education system in its present form cannot be justified. They contend that if education’s entire objective is to instill basic skills and enable students to choose between the various fields of interest, ideologies, ways of life, and knowledge, then in many cases in our open, computerized reality, this objective does not justify the degree of imposition on which it is based. Thus, they hold that many students will acquire skills and achieve greater success in their choice without the mediation of an education system. They might maintain that only a greatly diminished format of the education system can be justified: teaching basic skills, enabling and encouraging choice in students whose environmental conditions or level of cognitive development do not allow such choices to be made naturally.29

The other main category of the technocratic position, the functionalistic approach, is much less idealistic, and, as will be clarified in a moment, is more likely to protect the system from the preceding conclusion. The functionalists (to borrow this term from larger sociological spheres) see the system as charged with the maintenance of social functions that have no connection with education or teaching (in the sense of enhancing intellectual or cognitive development) and hence with the formal or explicit curriculum. These social functions are “channeling” students towards social roles on the basis of scholastic achievement. Some of them refer to “the tacit curriculum,” i.e., school organizational structure reflecting the norms of future occupational roles, through which students internalize school norms which are identical to the norms of society and the economy.30 Thus, while perhaps acknowledging the epistemic difficulties in justifying any curriculum or pedagogical orientation, they will dismiss this side of the educational endeavor as secondary and immaterial and justify the existing or similar system by its functional contributions to society and economy.

Critiques of Technocracy. The argument against the pedagogy-oriented versions of the technocratic view boils down to one point: even if we wanted to, avoiding education is impossible. The choice of educational view is a forced option.31 The true distinction is not between ideologically mobilized education and ethically neutral education, but between education that is conscious, active, and directed versus passive or unconscious education. The latter form of education exists when the public system gives up any active attempt to educate toward a set of predefined ideals and thus necessarily allows young people and their
“educators” to be influenced by the values reflected in and guided by the “forces in the field” that engulf them.

Today these forces reside almost exclusively in the electronic media and the Internet sponsored by the huge advertising industry, serving, in turn, the market forces dominated by the desire to maximize profit. Thus, the state education system “avoiding education,” in any of the above technocratic versions, is tantamount to according sole legitimacy to MTV, television soap operas and talk shows, the Internet and its related “chat and blog culture,” and various other forms of advertising surrounding us. “Educational neutrality,” so the counterargument goes, is tantamount to turning young people into captive audiences of the two ultimate values dominating all foregoing spheres: making money and having fun. It forces them to be prisoners in the cave of greed and the endless search for bodily pleasures simply by denying them experience with any alternative worldview.32

The formal demand for value neutrality in public education is impossible and senseless on purely logical grounds and therefore the state has no choice but to make a conscious decision regarding the desirable educational goals. Only those who wholeheartedly accept the influence of the “forces in the field” as the sole desirable source of educational impact can call for avoiding any active or intended education in light of a predefined set of values by the public system.

Critics of the pedagogy-oriented technocratic view will of course reject the latter possibility and argue that it is undesirable to assume that young people will grow into individuals with a chance for well-being if they are exposed solely to the prevailing market-oriented influences and the two ultimate values dominating them, without the correctional intervention of the public education system opening them up to alternative, healthier, worldviews and lifestyles.

The critics can defend their views from three alternative positions. The first, although it does not essentially criticize the postmodern social reality, does however argue that the Good Life demands a degree of autonomy and mindfulness within its framework. According to this view, these two attributes are unlikely to develop “naturally” given the exclusive and adverse impact of the media and advertising on most young peoples’ lives; therefore, they must be actively and intentionally educated in light of the desired values of their conception of the Good Life.

The second possible position would also accept the postmodern reality and argue that young people should be educated towards what is perceived to be the Good Life by relevant public groups in this reality. In contrast to the first position, the second position does not a priori define the concept of the Good Life, not even as based on the individual’s autonomy and mindful decision making; rather, this view leaves the definition open to constant negotiation among the relevant social groups or parties, namely, the parents, the broader community, and the state or the professionals who represent it.

The third, most radical, view perceives postmodern reality, partly or in its entirety, as corrupt. From this standpoint, the role of education is to protect the student from a corrupting reality by critically exposing the said reality’s evils and then presenting the student with a desirable alternative. Thus, this radical view presents the desired ideal as originating from the “correct” concept of the Good
Life and the nature of society and culture required for its achievement. This critique calls for young people to be educated under the aegis of the desired values. These “desired values” are defined differently by different adherents to this view and will be presented in detail below.

As will become clear later on in this book, the three critiques are the alternative dominant voices “out there.” Each of the next three sub-sections is dedicated to clarifying one of them. Until now I have mentioned only the criticism that can be mounted against the pedagogically oriented technocratic view. However, this criticism also refers, indirectly, to the functionalist version of the technocratic view. Dismissing the pedagogical value of formal education, so the counter-argument will go, and focusing only on its socializing functions as described above, would justify education only if and when one adheres to the norms of the postmodern, neo-liberal, market-oriented society completely. Having said that, the criticism made against the first group of technocrats applies here as well.

The Liberal Response, or: Education towards Autonomy

The View. Once we have forsaken the technocratic response, education towards autonomy turns out to be the next favorable alternative. Education towards autonomy ranks high in the current educational discourse, at least on the declarative level in the sense that it “decorates” many official policy papers in Western countries, as far as the many declarations concerning the desirability of “the autonomous” or “the independent” (or “self-regulated,” “self-directed,” “engaged,” “reflective,” etc.) “learner” or “individual” are concerned.

Many understandings of the idea of “the autonomous individual” emerged during the history of Western philosophy, some of which contradict one or more of the others. In spite of the popularity of this educational value on the declarative level, there are very few attempts to understand the possible meanings of this term within the postmodern educational context or to adopt the most desirable one, according to a presumed value system. There have been even fewer attempts to actually implement the oh-so-popular goal of “education for autonomy.”

Three of these understandings seem to represent central models of “the autonomous individual” and “education towards autonomy” which are appropriate for our era: one which reflects the rationalistic perspective of autonomy, a second that displays an emotivistic view of autonomy, and a third model represents a combined, rationalistic-emotivistic understanding.

The three models share a common assumption: autonomous individuals are those who “determine the laws that guide their lives by themselves,” which is the literal meaning of the word “autonomous.” The differences between these models are encapsulated in their answers to two basic questions:

- Where does the individual’s autonomy “reside”? Or, in other words, what component in the person’s personality is reflected by self-determined laws?
- How are these laws determined?
As I show below, the differences between the respective answers create significant contradictions between the three concepts of educating towards autonomy and the educational programs resulting from them.

The rationalistic model originates with the Kantian concept. In the educational thinking of the last two generations, it is found in the work of Robert Dearden and Gerald Dworkin among others. In this model autonomy is “a resident” of a person’s rationality. A law determined by an autonomous person must therefore be accepted in accordance with rational considerations. “Rationality” is perceived in this context to be procedural, a formal system of rules that do not obligate the individual to adopt any position on descriptive or normative issues. (This view relies on the epistemology I referred to above as the “skeptical” and can be referred to also as “critical rationalism.”)

The educational program born out of this model focuses on the development of rational thinking. In principle, one can think of many alternative ways of developing rationality, but the philosophers who have dealt with this subject have generally recommended the teaching of the usual scientific disciplines that generally comprise the Western school curriculum. These were considered to be (allegedly) developing human intelligence, or rather, human intelligence and rationality were considered to consist of, or be equal to, the modes of thinking developed by these disciplines.

Rationality-based autonomy has been extremely influential in Western philosophy since Kant, and has dominated educational philosophy up to the last generation. In the last generation an alternative model, more inclined to emotivism, or to giving far more space to the individual’s desires and feelings, has replaced rationality to some extent.

The emotivistic model perceives emotions to be the “location” of the autonomous agency or individuality. Thus, this model views an autonomous individual as one in whom no internal or external barriers prevent the expression of emotions. Reason in this model is only (to quote Hume) the “slave of the passions,” the faculty in charge of choosing the best plans for achieving goals set by emotions.

A romantic version of this model has developed since the eighteenth century. In this view, emotions are believed to express the aspiration of the self toward the—often elusive—calling. It was “triggered” largely by the impact of Rousseau (mainly due to secondary books like his *Confessions* and *Les rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire*). This is the model of autonomy that could most easily be attributed to the common and extremely influential image of Lord Byron, for example, or to the hero of Schiller’s *The Robbers*.

The rationalistic-emotivistic model may be divided into two versions, the first represented by John White in the last two generations and the second by Eamonn Callan. White’s is the more systematic of the two; in fact, his is the most systematic concept of educating towards autonomy of our time.

In White’s view the goal of education has always been to help the individual accomplish the Good Life. But in the current relativistic reality, one concept of “the Good Life” cannot be justified as being better than another. Accordingly, the choice of a concrete meaning for “the Good Life” must be left in the hands of the
individual and the term Good Life be defined today as “what each individual, after due consideration, determines is the Good Life for him or her self.” In other words, education today cannot inculcate the individual with any one true concept of the Good Life. However, it can and should help one to develop as an autonomous person who is exposed to choices and knowledge of relevant information, so that these factors will help facilitate a definition of what the Good Life is for him or her.

According to White, individuals strive towards maximal fulfillment of their desires; hence, in this model autonomy “resides” in the individual’s desires. The “self-determined law” as formed by the autonomous agent is one which aims to bring about maximal fulfillment of desires. Still, the process of determining the law is rational; it rests on reflective recognition of the relevant desires on the one hand, and upon ascertaining the best way to fulfill these desires in a given reality on the other.

This model is to a meaningful extent, although not altogether (as will be clarified in a moment), opposed to the rationalistic one. While in the rationalistic model, rational activity in itself is making the individual autonomous, in this model (and the next) rational activity is only a means to realizing aspirations (the values or “deeper,” longer term, desires motivating the individual) while maximizing the fulfillment of these aspirations is what renders the individual autonomous. According to this (and the next) model, individuals will be autonomous only to the extent that they succeed in recognizing their basic aspirations and are free to do their best towards realizing them.

White holds that education is necessary because the majority of people are unlikely to acquire the requisite cognitive abilities, attitudes, and knowledge for making an informed choice about the Good Life by themselves. From White’s standpoint this is particularly true with regard to the knowledge required for autonomous choice. This knowledge includes consciousness of different ways of life and worldviews, and of various categories of activity central to human life, such as work, social involvement, and fields of interest.

White suggests that every society tends to direct the individual towards the dominant worldviews and occupations within it, while a correct choice, based on mindful consideration, requires the recognition of as many alternatives as possible. Education’s role is to provide the needed tools for making an informed, mindful choice, and to supply as broad as possible a range of “outside-the-box” knowledge which will enable life choices. White stresses that therefore educating towards autonomy should amount to a process of desocialization, a process which will free individuals from the absolute, naïve belief in their society’s values or accepted ways of life. This goal should be realized by employing a very broad educational program designed to familiarize the educatee with as many alternatives as possible in all the central spheres of human life, extended way beyond the limited alternatives which the current curriculum of theoretical learning is characterized by.

White’s thinking is predicated on our current inability to give objective and universal meaning to the concept of the Good Life. Eamonn Callan depicts a different version of the view supporting educating towards autonomy. Callan bases his philosophy on our inability to give meaning to the concept of the “Ultimate
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Goal” or “summum bonum” (literal translation: “the highest good”). In fact, both concepts commingle, as the Good Life was perceived in the past as leading to the Ultimate Goal of a person’s life.

Classic rationalist philosophy perceives a life that has not led to the Ultimate Goal to be absurd and meaningless, as each action in it leads only to the next rung of the ladder with no final purpose. In this classical view, the Ultimate Goal of human life necessarily amounted to a fulfillment of a personality characteristic that is unique and essential to human beings: the attainment of knowledge. The goal of knowledge was perceived as the recognition of the Truth. Therefore, in traditional rationalist philosophy, the Ultimate Goal in life is the quest for, and the knowledge of, the Truth. As the aim of education is to help the individual to achieve the Ultimate Goal (or “supreme good”—“summum bonum”), traditional rationalist philosophy viewed the quest for, and knowledge of, the Truth as the goals of education.

Callan is aware that in the present, relativistic, generation we are unable to hold on to the claim that knowledge of the Truth is the Ultimate Goal of human life, and thus the aim of education. However, he accepts the basic argument of the classic rationalist view, to wit, a life lived without a supreme purpose, or purposes, is absurd and meaningless. In other words, Callan claims that if individuals have no activities they want to perform for their own sake and everything they do is only a means for achieving other ends, then they do not live a good life. This requires education to lead individuals towards the Ultimate Goal(s) in life, that is, to those activities that will be performed for their own sake and that the main reason for engaging in them is the mere performance thereof. As such, they do not serve as a means to enhance other goals or values or “prepare the ground” for other activities. Because today we are unable to support the idea of there being a single universal Ultimate Goal, the closest alternative Callan proposes is educating young people to pursue their interests.

In Callan’s definition, an interest is an activity a person performs for its own sake. Up to this point, the definition is similar to the definition of the Ultimate Goal. Still, it sharply opposes the traditional concept as Callan claims that any activity can be an interest as long as the following conditions are met:

- The individual is involved in it for its own sake.
- The involvement is made out of choice and awareness of the concessions required by that choice.
- The activity must include some kind of development of the individual involved in it.

Thus, Callan defines “an autonomous person” as one capable of seeking, locating, and developing interests. Like White, he claims that this process should be guided by the aspirations of an individual driven forward in search of maximal fulfillment. According to Callan, just as the goal of education in the past was to help the individual identify with the knowledge of the Truth, the Ultimate Goal of life, its present goal should be to help every individual to develop as an autonomous person, a person capable of identifying and developing his or her interests.
It must be stressed that Callan’s goal (as opposed to White’s) is not to enable individuals to get to know or experience as many fields of interest as possible. Nor is it to enable them, at the end of their education, to know the interest in which they will be involved throughout life. Rather, the goal is to inculcate people with the concept and value of a “commitment to interests,” with an understanding of their importance for a satisfying life, and with the knowledge, commitments, and abilities required for seeking, identifying, and developing their interest(s).

From Callan’s standpoint, education, intended to maximize the above goal, is vitally important if everyone is to attain the Good Life. Because of the competitive-hedonistic worldview in which young people live today, a view directed towards external and measurable achievements on the one hand and superficial gratification of desires on the other, the chances that many youths will grasp the importance of interests to their lives and develop them on their own are not great. Callan’s concept of education aspires to help overcome the impact of the temptations of immediate gratification and the dominant superficial, hedonistic, and materialistic worldview, thus opening up the possibility of achieving well-being based on search for, and long-term realization of, interests.

This process, Callan says, requires educators to help students develop the needed abilities for seeking, identifying, and realizing fields of interest. For the process of the search for interests to progress, educators should instill a sense of reflection, consideration, and the implementation thereof in the educatees. The educational process should therefore include introduction of a meta-process aimed at helping young people understand the vitality of interests to achieving a satisfying life and acquiring the abilities, commitments, and knowledge necessary to achieve this end.

In his 1988 book Callan relied primarily on relevant philosophical literature. It is important to note at this point that later, rich psychological research focusing on interests and connected concepts (e.g., “intrinsic motivation”) and their correlation with well-being and autonomy was developed confirming empirically all of Callan claims.

When comparing these last two versions of the emotivistic-rationalistic model, I find they have much in common. They share the views that:

- The autonomous person independently chooses a personal way in life.
- The aim of education should be to empower and assist individuals to develop their autonomy.
- Autonomy depends first and foremost on the degree to which the processes of choice are directed towards and are successful in fulfilling the person’s true basic aspirations.
- Education should concentrate on developing all the abilities and attributes necessary for choosing a course of life optimal for self-fulfillment.
- Education should serve to help the individual achieve the Good Life even in the postmodern reality.

Both models view the Good Life as grounded in consciously choosing one’s most desired way of life, and both perceive the desired way of life as that which will most induce fulfillment of basic desires. Furthermore, an assumption common to
both models is that most young people will have difficulty choosing their desired way of life without the aid of some educational process, hence their view that education should strive to enhance young peoples’ ability to develop as autonomous individuals. Lastly, in both views the aim of educating towards autonomy is perceived as neutral from a value standpoint, that is, it is perceived as not reflecting a preference for any particular conception of the Good by the liberal democratic state, thereby warranting its adoption by any such state.

However, there are also meaningful contradictions between these two educational models, which can be summed up in three central spheres:

- Each model is based on a different concept of “knowing reality.” White emphasizes “learning about” while Callan stresses “experiencing.”
- Each model reflects a different concept of choice. White’s concept originates from the classic rational model of choice from within the largest possible number of weighted alternatives, and thus demands a broad curriculum that encompasses as many alternatives as possible. Callan’s concept of choice is modeled on trial and error, wherein one chooses the first option that seems reasonable, tries it out, and only if it fails, moves on to the next possibility. Accordingly, he does not call for a comprehensive program but rather for a process of “experiments in living,” a process of search by elimination which one works through until an interest one is satisfied with is found.
- Each model relates to a different range of choice. In White’s view the autonomous person, independently and after due consideration, chooses his or her way in various spheres of life: worldview, lifestyle, work, interpersonal relations, and fields of interest. White seems to suppose that all of these spheres have equal weight in the autonomous “life-plan.” In contrast, Callan relates to interests as having a central and preferred place in what makes up the life of the autonomous person.

Critiques of Education towards Autonomy. Each of the three models described above can be criticized in light of the basic assumptions of the others. This “internal” critique will not be dealt with here as the differences between the three models of education for autonomy have been presented extensively enough to enable the reader to get a good picture of what this “criticism within the family” might amount to. Rather, I describe the “external” and “generic” critiques of the general aim of education towards autonomy, namely, a critique that may be raised against all the three models.

The first point of contention with Autonomy Oriented Education (AOE) arises from the previously discussed technocratic perspective. The technocrats would argue that all this talk of “educating for autonomy” is nothing more than “hot air” about an unrealistically high-browed ideal. The role of education, so the technocrats might claim, is to prepare young people for “real” reality. This, in turn, so the technocrats would continue, should be done either by making young people acquire relevant factual knowledge and skills allowing them to successfully compete in the labor market and in organizations they work with (the pedagogy-oriented
technocrats), or by “programming” them to internalize the norms necessary for functioning in the postmodern labor market and organizations (the functionalists among the technocrats). Educating them to be autonomous (mainly in the emotivistic and emotivistic-rationalistic senses), so the technocratic argument will conclude, might very well enhance their development as autonomous individuals, but at the same time probably render them unemployable and therefore create nothing more than frustrated individuals.

The second source of probable criticism of the ideal of education for autonomy is the perspective hereinafter referred to as the concept of conscious social reproduction. According to this view, the value of personal autonomy is certainly a legitimate value in a postmodern democratic society, but it does not enjoy a priori priority over other possible values that might also be considered desirable and legitimate in this context, such as, for instance, the development of a specific national or religious identity. Therefore, favoring this value over others in education in a democratic state is tantamount to giving unfair, un-democratic preference to only one “desired” value over other possible “desirables.”

The third area of contention with the ideal of education for autonomy may come from the direction of the category of views I hereinafter refer to as education towards desirable social values: a set of views all together opposing the aspiration for neutrality characterizing the previous views. These views perceive the social reality existing in postmodern Western societies as negative and dangerous. According to them, education towards autonomy contents itself with providing tools to help the individual find a way in this reality. It thus conveys to the student a confirmation of said reality, or to put more critically: it prevents the student from aspiring to overcome it. It is certainly not dedicated to exposing its corrupt foundations and introducing students to alternative social realities as more desirable. Thus, according to this generic critique, the autonomy oriented educational process is fundamentally as corrupt as the reality into which it tacitly but necessarily and forcefully initiates the students. Clearly, each of the sub-categories of this last critique portrays the dangers and the desirable alternatives differently. I describe them here briefly and expand on them in the subsection on “Education towards Socially Oriented Values.”

The first sub-group of the third category of critiques of the model of education towards autonomy reflects the concept hereafter referred to as education towards the transcendental. Education towards autonomy, according to this more specific critique, emphasizes personal choice and self-realization as ultimate values, especially in White’s and Callan’s versions, which basically stress the fulfillment of desires. Thus, it seems to reinforce the relativistic and hedonistic trends dominant in postmodern society, trends which strip human beings of their essence. This critique relies on the assumption that the essence of humanity is the aspiration for transcendence, that is, the eternal aspiration to go beyond any existing situation and transform it into a better one. This transformation is only possible in light of a clear and absolute set of values that distinguishes between good and bad, inferior and exalted. Relativism does not allow for these distinctions and so is necessarily condemned by this view as divesting human beings of their nature and dignity.
Therefore, so the critics would contend, the view of education towards autonomy reinforces the dangerous trends of postmodernity, contributes to (to use the Nietzschean pathos and terminology) the “beastialization of man,” and should therefore be disqualified outright.

The second sub-group of the third category of critiques consists of neo-Marxist thinking and reflects the concept hereinafter referred to as critical pedagogy. Though the neo-Marxists would probably acknowledge that education towards autonomy might have positive value, they would hasten to add that, in a postmodern reality built on capitalistic foundations, this education is meaningless because the chances that the autonomous individual can be truly fulfilled under the capitalistic yoke are extremely slim. Thus, the Neo-Marxists believe that the existing reality does not allow for the existence of true education towards autonomy. Unless the reality is radically changed along neo-Marxist lines, education towards autonomy is at best meaningless and at worst dangerous, since it tacitly justifies the prevailing reality.

The supporters of this view would maintain that what is needed, first and foremost, is a critical pedagogy that will help expose the mechanisms of economic, social, and cultural cognitive subjugation exerted on the population by the dominant capitalist forces turning the wheels of postmodern reality. Only when individuals are consciously liberated from subjugation by these mechanisms will they have a chance to be able to think and act autonomously. These critics would probably also add that education pretending to reinforce individual autonomy without expounding the dominant power structures and liberating the students’ consciousness from suppression by them is in fact serving the mechanism of deceit and suppression the existing power structures put in place.

The third sub-group in the third category of critiques reflects the concept hereafter referred to as social relativism based on the belief that education towards autonomy places too much emphasis on individuality, and thus widens the present social schism, weakens the shared platform of society, and endangers society’s very existence.

The fourth sub-group in the third category of critiques mirrors the concept of communitarian relativism. The critique emanating from this sub-group is predicated on the belief that education towards autonomy is erroneous in its assumptions regarding human life. Supporters of education towards autonomy, so these critics would hold, view the individual as “living in a vacuum,” as if his or her identity is exclusively shaped by personal choices.

These critics would continue that the truth is quite the opposite: the individual’s identity, in fact, mirrors “social embeddedness” and the individual’s choices cannot but reflect values deriving from this embeddedness in a very specific socio-cultural context. Thus, they would conclude, education towards autonomy, which is based solely on alleged “independent personal choice,” necessarily misleads individuals with regard to the nature of their personal identities and encourages alienation of individuals from the natural sources of their identity, thus contributing to the misery of individuals and the disintegration of society. Both of these phenomena are characteristics of postmodernity.
Here ends our journey through the most probable critiques which the most influential views that oppose “education for autonomy” view might mount. I do not know to what extent it is possible to have a rational discourse leading to a decision between the view of education towards autonomy and the above-mentioned critiques and the sub-concepts they entail. In any case, there has not been, to date, any attempt to create and lead such a discussion, certainly not in the profound, rational, sense of the term. This sense requires systematic, ongoing, developing discourse in which each view relies on sound argumentation and is treated with respect by substantiated counterarguments. Consequently, the discussion created would have been one in which each voice is either refuted and rejected, or improved or accepted as an important brick in the slow, systematic construction of a body of knowledge.

What we have instead are many opposed and lonely monologues made within an infinite, cacophonous chaos. Often such voices are couched in political demagogy, concealing thin arguments, the response to which by other lonely voices is sporadic at best. It is heard in a different corner of this arbitrary and noisy reality, and is quickly lost in the ongoing cacophony, just as the original voice was, and so on and so forth. What we have “out there” is “eternal repetition of disconnected voices quickly lost in the horribly strident, undefined background noise,” sounding like atonal music.

This being the case, individuals involved with the system as educators, decision makers, administrators, and parents simply act intuitively, responding “on the spot” to various pressures on a basis of a “view,” reflecting at least some of the opposed positions discussed above and again later below.

The Republican Response, or: Conscious Social Reproduction

The View. Like the two previous views of the desired goals of education (the technocratic view and education towards autonomy), conscious social reproduction is based upon acceptance of the relativism characterizing postmodern reality both as a given and as desirable. Like the education-towards-autonomy view (but in opposition to technocracy), this position also supports the need to educate even in the existing relativistic reality. However, it rejects the possibility of theoretically and universally deciding what should be the aim of education in a relativistic postmodern democratic society. It limits itself to indicating the desired social procedure for setting educational goals for each community. The most prominent proponent of this view is the American philosopher Amy Guttmann, and I will now consider her position.

In contrast to the technocratic position, Guttmann has no doubt that institutionalized public education in a democratic society has the ability and right to strive towards shaping a desirable human being. She claims that the desire to impart values, and to enhance social reproduction in the light of these values, is part and parcel of the concept of the Good Life in every society and cultural group, including democratic society as a whole. However, she recognizes the serious
problems the democratic state faces in the present-day relativist reality when a
decision about the set of values on which education should be based must be made.

Her solution distinguishes between “substantive value” and “procedural value.”
The former provides a concrete response to the questions: What is the Good Life?
What is the desired society which enables the Good Life? The latter responds to the
meta-question: how are the two previous questions to be dealt with in the concrete
communities the democratic society is comprised of? According to Guttmann, the
democratic state cannot give theoretical priority (i.e., abstractly, prior to a concrete
social debate taking place) to one substantive value at the expense of another when
determining the aim(s) of education. Were such a preferment to be given, the group
supporting that value would also gain a priori preferment in the concrete social
game. In a relativistic reality such a preferment could not be rationally justified.
However, the democratic state can and should implement the procedural value of
conscious social reproduction into the discussion concerning the objectives of
education.

Guttmann’s term “conscious social reproduction” describes the procedure that
relativist postmodern democracies, aware of the constraints stemming from the
liberal democratic demand for ethical neutrality, should follow in order to reach the
unavoidable decisions necessary for laying the foundation for any educational
procedure. It refers to the process of preserving society’s cultural continuity
through a rational debate among the members of local communities (at the lowest
level) or of the whole society (at the highest levels) on desirable changes in their
common way of life (i.e., culture). The word “conscious” here means a rational
debate conducted on the basis of democratic principles of tolerance of all positions
and avoidance of discrimination, so as not to prevent any individual or group from
participating in the social debate.

To Guttmann’s thinking, the ultimate goal of a general democratic society, and
thus also the meta-goal of education therein, is conscious social reproduction in
which all the relevant respondents to a pending question are invited to participate
and to attempt to tip the scales in their own favor, given that everyone observes the
rules of democratic rational discourse. This is different from concrete communities,
within which conscious social reproduction might strive to achieve specific,
material (i.e., not procedural) goals, having more to do with the preservation or
enhancement of a specific culture or way of life.

Determining a meta-goal for education is not enough as it is a predominantly
abstract goal. More tangible, meaningful goals are created as a result of many
public debates in local communities of a larger democratic society, who follow
Guttmann’s procedure. The outcomes of these debates are determined according to
the nature of the participants therein and the balance of powers between them.
Thus, for Guttmann the decisive question is: who has the right to participate in the
concrete debates, dedicated to determining the operational goals of education, taking
place in the many concrete communities which comprise the democratic society?
In her answer, Guttmann reviews what she believes to be the three views most
essential to the history of Western educational thinking, perceptions to which one
can return for answers in the sphere of education. Guttmann names those three
thought patterns: the Platonic response, the Lockean response, and the Millian response.

The Platonic response, according to Guttmann, is the basis of what I previously termed above “education towards the transcendental.” For Guttmann, this means that a hypothetical state, relying on an unequivocal cognition of the Good Life is an ideal state, which therefore has an exclusive right, in light of this cognition, to determine the goals of education. The Lockean response, according to Guttmann, transfers the right and responsibility for deciding on education’s goals to the parents, meaning that the state leaves education solely in the parents’ hands, to be determined according to their own personal values. Guttmann’s interpretation of the Millian response dictates that the state must leave the determination of educational goals up to the individuals undergoing the educational process, while the state is limited to laying the necessary educational foundation for such a determination and to a neutral presentation of possible lifestyles. This idea comes close to White’s concept of education towards autonomy.

However, Guttmann maintains that in a democratic-relativistic society no one of these three possible responses can be adopted to the exclusion of the other two, because it is as impossible to choose one over the others as it is to choose between concrete goals of education. Any one position we would adopt, to the exclusion of the others, will amount to contradicting the democratic commitment to a priori non-preferment of any one worldview.

Guttmann believes this is also true of the concept of education for autonomy, perceived by the previous view as having an obvious priority in a Liberal Democracy. As she says, the values of liberty and autonomy are fundamental to a specific perception of the Good Life, and as such are a priori equivalent to values basic to other views, thus ineligible for a priori preferential treatment in the democratic framework.

Guttmann identifies three groups, each representing one of the three concepts, whose participation in concrete democratic debates on the goals of education she considers to be essential. These three groups include: the state, or rather its representatives thereof, who should defend the interests of the general democratic society; second, the parents who reflect their and their community’s worldview on the well-being and desired development of their children; and last, experts who represent commitment to professionally defend the interests of those being educated.

Guttmann holds that in every community context, the operational education goals should be the result of rational democratic debate among representatives of these three. Hence, each community’s goals will reflect a certain balance between the democratic state’s aspiration to socialize educatees into a societal-democratic system of values, the parents’ and local community’s aspiration to preserve their worldview, and the experts’ aspiration to foster in students a critical approach to all views and present them with as many alternatives as possible so as to enable them to choose independently from them. The first aspiration is presented later by Hirsch and Bloom, the second by MacIntyre, and the third was presented above by White.

In conclusion, Guttmann retreats to the meta-level due to what she perceives to be an inability to formulate universally substantive goals for state-governed education in
a postmodern democratic society. Instead of directly identifying the nature of the substantive educational values in a democratic-relativistic society, Guttmann bypasses the question by going one level higher. Here she asks what the nature of the debate on the previous question is and who should be represented in it. To the first part of the question, she replies that the debate must be guided by an objective to maintain conscious social reproduction. To address the second part she suggests mandatory participation of the three groups described above. Clearly, once she has determined the nature of the debate, the identity of the participants, and the interests they will protect, she has also determined patterns that will affect the debate’s outcome. But as interactions and different power relationships emerging from the three aforementioned points of view differ in various community contexts, it remains true to say that Guttmann avoids determining the substantive goals of education.

In the spirit of the times, Guttmann does not present her view as an indisputable truth or an absolute solution for the current educational dilemma. Rather, she posits it as a reasonable way to deal with the situation, one which takes into account all the components of the problem of education in the relativistic reality and is well-suited to the spirit of democratic society.

Critiques of Conscious Social Reproduction. Guttmann’s concept is an interesting attempt to deal with the problematic nature of determining goals for education in a postmodern democratic society. However, from the education towards autonomy perspective described above (which I prefer to a great extent as will be shown in Chapter Six), Guttmann’s approach rests on withdrawal from Liberal Democracy’s most fundamental or defining commitment to develop its citizens’ autonomy. Furthermore, her position sidesteps the debate on the goals of education and substitutes it with one on the meta-question of those who will determine the goals of education. In other words, Guttmann’s assertion that the essence of democracy is embodied in the process of conscious social reproduction apparently reflects a “pluralization” of Rousseau’s (to some extent) and Dewey’s (to larger extent) procedural republican concepts of democracy. In these concepts, democracy is primarily defined as a framework which enables rational and just communal decision making processes, based on the public’s active participation and focused on different aspects of the future of the community.

The followers of the education-towards-autonomy view can argue (rightfully so, in my mind) that when Guttmann’s concept of democracy is accepted, her educational concept becomes understandable and justified. However, in the setting of the liberal concept of democracy, her claim that individual freedom and development of the individual’s autonomy have no special status in a democracy is clearly invalid. Those who adopt the liberal-democratic model obviously ascribe ultimate importance to these values; therefore, in the framework of the liberal-democratic conception, opting out of a debate about the meta-question constitutes an infringement of the most basic democratic credo.

Adherents of the neo-Marxist and technocratic approaches could criticize Guttmann’s concept by arguing that it amounts to nothing more than a de facto
legitimization for unjustifiably imposing the arbitrary educational concepts of cultural elites who control society, or specific communities therein. The supporters of education towards socially oriented values could additionally argue that Guttmann’s approach allows the prevailing corrupt reality and overrides the ideal and the desirable in all matters pertaining to the determination of the goals of education.

Should I repeat here what I emphasized at the end of the previous section? There has never been any attempt made to systematically develop an ongoing, rational discussion about conscious social reproduction and its critiques. It is just another, though academically respected, voice in the cacophonous void in which prevailing Western education systems find themselves.

Let us now proceed to present and examine one final category of views, made up by several voices, education towards socially oriented values, and consider the four very different approaches comprising it.

Education towards Socially Oriented Values

The basic characteristics of this category of views, which distinguish it from the previous three positions, are its trenchant criticism and rejection of the postmodern reality. Generally speaking, despite the wide differences and meaningful contradictions in their views, the common denominator linking the many, varied adherents to this view is what might be called their transcendental aspiration towards a different, better, reality based on values opposed to those dominant in the postmodern era, and hence to educational goals which will replace any set of goals compatible with dominant postmodern values. They largely differ on answers to questions like which of society’s values should be changed, and how the alternatives are to be justified.

They also differ in their epistemic starting points or approaches. The first and second approaches within this view are objectivistic. The first calls for a return to the values of Western rationalist culture as reflected in the basic concepts of eighteenth century American (or any other Enlightenment) society. These values are justified, in this context, as reflecting the exalted truths regarding the Essence or Nature of Man. The second approach within this view calls for education towards the values of a desirable, but as yet nonexistent, society stemming from the social criticism found in the desirable society of neo-Marxist theory.52

The next two approaches, in contrast to the two above, are relativistic, or more accurately, culturally relativistic. Contrary to their predecessors, both are founded on an acceptance of the argument that a specific value system cannot be objectively justified, but neither are they reconciled to the individualism, pluralism, and value chaos which seems to stem from relativism and characterize society and education today. Still, they are blatantly opposed to each other.

The third approach calls for educating towards values which form the basis for today’s general democratic society, as opposed to the values of specific communities. This is, according to the supporters of this position, not because these values are “objectively valid” or “exalted,” but for instrumental reasons: because this kind of

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common education is vital for democratic society’s continued existence, sustainability, and (mainly) economic prosperity.

In contrast, the fourth approach accepts the existing pluralism and calls for educating young people within the parameters of their specific communities. Proponents of this approach do not claim it has greater validity than other possible ones. Rather, the claim is that education towards a clear system of values is vital to the development of human self-identity and that such clear and coherent systems can no longer be found outside specific communities that share, in theory and practice, the same set of values. Hence, adherents of this approach appeal to form ideologically homogenous communities within a pluralistic democratic state and to educate in light of the values that define them.

These four approaches to the view above are now described in more detail below.

The Conservative Response, or: Education towards the Transcendental View

The view I refer to here as “Education towards the transcendental” is in fact an attempt to reconstruct the Platonic project and adapt it to our time. Plato lived in a relativistic society and believed that relativism and its psychological “satellites,” extreme egoism, hedonism, opportunism, and cynicism, eradicate the four cardinal virtues—wisdom, courage, moderation, and morality—which he viewed as essential to the Good Life. Plato therefore advocated that a desirable education should be based on these absolute virtues so that young people would internalize and be fortified by them against the prevailing, inevitable, corruption of society.

This view’s most prominent herald in the last generation was the late American philosopher Allan Bloom. Bloom believed that the relativistic attitude which rules postmodern society, with all its psycho-sociological side effects, causes the erosion of “human essence” among the young people born into our postmodern age, and that fighting this process is the goal of education.

At the basis of Bloom’s view lies the assumption that the essence of humanity is the transcendental aspiration, an aspiration towards a reality that is more exalted than the existing one, and criticism of the existing reality in the light of this aspiration. Bloom maintains that the Humanist curriculum that developed in the Western rationalist tradition nurtured this aspiration. This Humanist tradition was based on a study of “the Great Books,” a study designed to present the students with “visions of greatness” or perfect models of desirable human life and thus to evoke in them the transcendental aspiration.

Bloom further claims that nurturing the human aspiration for transcendence must also be the aim of education today. Moreover, he stresses that action leading to this aim is most crucial today, because the powerful forces of the pop/rock-saturated, relativistic-hedonistic reality are working to neutralize the higher virtues in the minds of young people. These undesirable realities are turning them into “unidimensional” (a key term in Herbert Marcuse’s philosophy that one is often reminded of when reading Bloom’s criticism) creatures in thrall to satisfying their bestial instincts.
On the social level, Bloom claims that the values of traditional rationalism shaped the underlying values of America’s founding fathers, and that the constitution and other basic political instruments based on these values provide the underpinnings for the subsistence and prosperity of American society. In Bloom’s estimation the present disintegration of these values constitutes not only a danger to individuals, but also to the very existence of American (and it is certainly possible to add Western Humanistic) culture.

Just as Plato accused the Sophists of “buttering up” their students and legitimizing all their latest fads instead of trying to educate them in accordance with the desired virtues, Bloom accuses current education systems of largely reflecting, since the 1960s, the relativistic positions basic to postmodern reality. To his thinking, educators tend to prefer curricula that fulfill the educatees’ relativistic-hedonistic-practical expectations instead of aspiring to elevate them beyond the unidimensional reality in which they are (allegedly) imprisoned. Thus, education betrays its original etymological definition: “to lead out.”

Bloom bases his solution on an appeal for a return to the Great Books, which he believes to be Western culture’s inalienable assets that can present students with visions of human greatness and can reestablish the “preeminence of man.” In other words, Bloom proposes basing education on the humanistic disciplines of philosophy, history, and literature, and on the classical texts that meet the criteria of what he refers to as “visions of greatness.”

Critiques of Education towards the Transcendental. This position’s major contribution is its meaningful widening of the horizons of potential discourse about the desired state of postmodern society and education. Its criticism of the postmodern societal and educational realities is enlightening. The alternative it depicts is based on an epistemological view and worldview which, despite having provided the very foundations for Western civilization, are unknown and unimaginable to most individuals today. Such criticism and the alternative position it represents is of great value, even if we do not accept the assumptions and recommendations of the stance out of which it arises, because it provides a perspective that enables us to view the self-evident in a different light.

However, this value is also the source of the view’s weakness, for Bloom bases it on assumptions that contradict the epistemic, existential, and educational views of most Western secular individuals to such an extreme extent that the chances it will be seriously considered are virtually nonexistent. Adherents of the technocratic approach or supporters of educating towards autonomy will probably view Bloom’s educational recommendation as an attempt to return to the fossilized authoritarian teaching methods of the early days of the modern education system in a best case scenario. In a worst case scenario, Bloom’s ideas would be viewed as a suggestion to indoctrinate educatees to accept a specific conservative worldview. Neo-Marxists, supporters of communitarian relativism, and others will argue that it is an essentially suppressive view, serving the interests of certain social elites (white, middle class, male, etc.).
This opposition, in the eyes of those who support the idea of educating towards the transcendental, does not reflect a weakness of the concept itself, but rather reveals again the failings, short-sightedness, and unidimensionality of the critics’ views.

The Neo-Marxist Response, or: Critical Pedagogy

The View. Like the view of educating towards the transcendental, critical pedagogy perceives the existing social reality as distorted and thus distorting the nature of the individuals living in it. But supporters of critical pedagogy perceive the distortion of the existing and the desirable alternatives as very different from those defined by supporters of the previous view. Their position, extensively inspired by neo-Marxism, holds that human beings, by their very nature, aspire to achieve a life of liberty, creativity, and self-expression, while in the capitalist reality they become fossilized and alienated, shackled both economically and mentally to the capitalistic race for profit.

This distortion of human nature is made possible by the “superstructure,” institutional and cultural mechanisms dominant in capitalist society that portray life as free, its goals as just, and itself as based on objective truths, while in fact these are nothing more than ideological structures justifying the existing oppressive situation. The existing education is therefore merely one of the superstructures, possibly the central one, because it initiates and indoctrinates young people to accept this suppressive reality and as such it is the activator, a sine qua non for all other forms of suppression.

In this kind of reality, the ultimate goal of desirable education would be first and foremost to free the individual’s consciousness from its enslavement to the suppressive superstructures, including the education system, its curriculum, and any other primary aspect thereof, by exposing their arbitrary and suppressive nature.

Overall, supporters of this view do not propose a detailed alternative curriculum. Rather, they advocate a “liberating didactic methodology” whose principles comprise a dialogical relationship between teacher and students, a curriculum which addresses the students’ actual problems and aims to present those problems as resulting from the distorted and suppressive social structure they live in, a genealogical analysis of the central social institutions including the official curriculum, designed to reveal their oppressive roots. In other words, they advocate exposing the narrow suppressive interests these institutions serve and the arbitrariness of their basic assumptions and values. Some of them advocate “teaching as a subversive activity,” or, in other words, they call on teachers to ostensibly follow the normal curriculum but to utilize its content to achieve the goals of critical pedagogy.
CHAPTER 2

Critiques of Critical Pedagogy. The criticism that can be raised against this approach is almost identical to that of education towards the transcendental. The advantages and disadvantages of critical pedagogy’s agenda are both rooted in the utopist assumptions thereof, which essentially contradict conventional wisdom. Those who argue against the basic assumptions of this view and thus support one or more of the other views presented here will doubtlessly view critical pedagogy as an attempt at Marxist indoctrination. The likelihood that the various echelons of policy makers will accept this approach is virtually non-existent. Adherents of critical pedagogy will understand this reality as a consequence of existing education superstructure, which caters to the needs of the enslaving elite.

It can be argued that the critical position of critical pedagogy projects great power, because such teaching can shed an entirely new and different light on reality for the students, as long as this perspective can be presented to them critically and together with others which oppose it. Yet from the perspective of critical pedagogy at least, this recommendation is flawed. Adherents of critical pedagogy would claim that such an argument expresses yet another aspect of the suppression of consciousness typical of our educational institutions and worldview, one known as “suppressive tolerance.” The very fact, in their estimation, that a view proposing a total alternative is described as just “another perspective” that should be presented together with others opposing it in order to enrich the student’s world empties it of its revolutionary power and thus contributes to the suppression.56

The Social Instrumentalist Response, or: Aspiration to Enhance Cultural Literacy

The View. In contrast to the two previous views, which are basically objectivistic,57 the view dubbed here “social instrumentalism” emanates from acceptance of the basic relativistic assumptions of postmodern society. But as opposed to the relativistic positions that are mostly individualistic (except for the “conscious social reproduction” view which attempts to balance between individualist and social perspectives), the cultural literacy view infers from its basic cultural, relativistic foundations the need to educate individuals towards a common social language necessary for the social and economic functioning of society. This recommendation derives from the (alleged) need to neutralize the threat to efficient function and continued existence of society (allegedly) arising out of the highly pluralistic and multicultural relativism dominant in postmodernity.

One of this concept’s most noted proponents in the last generation is E.D. Hirsch.58 Hirsch’s view is based on the claim that American society’s continued existence is endangered by the high degree of pluralism and fragmentariness now dominating it. He argues that pluralism and the cultural splits currently characterizing American society are gradually eroding the common cultural-linguistic network flowing from a uniform cultural-educational tradition that in the past functioned as the foundation of that society. In his opinion, this pluralistic process disrupts society in all spheres and endangers its ability to function and its future existence.
Hirsch believes that society, especially a contemporary democratic society, must ensure a minimal level of efficient communication among its members to enable effective economic, societal, and political function. In order to address this need, Hirsch argues that education must strive to integrate all students into a society which shares a common cultural-linguistic roof. The concrete purport of this recommendation is to provide educatees with broad but superficial knowledge of a few thousand concepts which, according to Hirsch, constitute the basic foundations of Western culture together with those exclusive to the American culture. Hirsch proposes such a list and details didactic and curricular “scaffoldings” that are supposed to help teachers teach in its light.

Critiques of Cultural Literacy. Criticism of Hirsch can be leveled from two directions. From the objectivistic direction, namely, Bloom’s view of education towards the transcendental or the doctrine of critical pedagogy, it can be argued that Hirsch accepts the prevailing reality as is and, in fact, he wants education to socialize students into the (alleged) unidimensional or enslaving reality which is quite simply corrupting. Such socialization, according to this critique, betrays the very essence of education. More specific claims of this critique will vary, of course, according to their source: either education for the transcendental or critical pedagogy.

Another obvious critique that can be leveled at Hirsch from both these and other quarters could consist of the claim that even if one accepts Hirsch’s concerns and most of his suppositions, the belief in the ability to socialize anyone to Western (or any other) culture just by the teaching of long lists of concepts is ridiculous and faulty. Western culture (as any other) consists of much more than just concepts; it consists of thinking processes, feeling patterns, and certain values guiding human behavior in all basic spheres. These processes, patterns, and values have roots going back thousands of years. One cannot transmit them just by superficially teaching a list of concepts.

Another argument can be leveled against Hirsch from the pluralistic relativistic view or the multi-cultural direction. This would contend that in principle it is impossible to create a single list of conceptions that fairly represents the main streams of American or any other society without it being necessarily biased toward the worldview or tradition of certain social groups. Thus, Hirsch’s list of concepts would be considered arbitrarily coercive and biased towards Anglophone Western culture, ignoring the numerous communities living in the framework of other cultures (Spanish, Chinese, etc.). This critique would conclude that the attempt to teach only the Anglophone and European cultures that underpin the American reality is actually cultural imperialism employed by the (still) dominant culture against many important minority cultures which, in the relativistic-pluralistic reality, cannot possibly be conceived as inferior.
The Communitarian Response, or: Back to the Polis

The View. The final criticism of Hirsch’s position reflects the basic assumptions of communitarianism. One of the most outspoken proponents of this view in the last generation is Alasdair MacIntyre. In spite of the fact that the analysis and argumentation of these two thinkers take place on different levels (Hirsch on the linguistic, sociological, economic level and MacIntyre’s on the ethical, philosophical, historical level), MacIntyre’s view, like Hirsch’s, stems from acknowledgement of (what he believes to be) the existing cultural-societal split and (in the case of MacIntyre) the impossibility of all-embracing social discourse and co-existence.

Still, MacIntyre’s view distinguishes itself from the previous one on three essential points. First, MacIntyre focuses mainly on the breakdown of ethical discourse in Western culture. Second, in this context, the great danger proceeding from the situation, to MacIntyre’s way of thinking, is the limits of the individual ability to develop a clear and solid identity. Given that the proper formation of a young person’s identity requires the internalization of a clear ethical code, growing up today, in a world of ethical void and chaos, constitutes a real threat to the identity formation of the individual. The third and main difference is comprised of MacIntyre’s belief that in the existing relativistic reality there is no way to establish a uniform conceptual and value system relevant to all members of American society (or most other large Western societies). He concludes that the only possible way to overcome the danger is to establish specific community level institutions in which such uniformity can exist.

MacIntyre supports education provided by the community aimed at endowing its young people with the community’s values and worldview. Concrete examples of MacIntyre’s concept might be education in various religious or culturally based schools, or in the Greek polis whose Aristotelian concept constitutes the central model for MacIntyre’s desirable reality.

Critiques of Communitarianism. Criticism of this view can stem from all the previous views, but let us begin by noting one counterargument that is common to all: arguing that every community must be allowed to educate towards its own values accords legitimacy to educate towards values clearly contradictory to the Humanistic or rationalist values which constitute the core of Western culture. Thus, legitimizing education of this kind can result in (to give some examples frequently used in this context) granting permission to Hindu groups to cremate widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands, or to African groups to practice and educate for female circumcision, or enabling Khomeinistic groups to educate towards blind obedience to an ayatollah. Beyond the fact that the critics perceive these values to be undesirable, MacIntyre’s position is likely to lead to a paradox: pluralism, which stems from Western values of equality, tolerance, and decency, can lay the groundwork for education towards values that clearly run contrary to these basic values and which can eventually lead to the destruction of the original pluralistic values.
In addition to this common counter-claim, the adherents of the pedagogic branch of the technocratic view and of the education-towards-autonomy view would criticize this view as potentially leading to the suppression of the individual’s freedom and autonomy (by legitimizing education in totalitarian communities, for example). Supporters of education towards the transcendental or of the critical pedagogy views would condemn the communitarian view as one which may easily lead to a narrowing of the individual’s horizons, because education limited by a framework of (what they would take to be) superstitions prevents realization of the individual’s human essence. Meanwhile, disciples of conscious social reproduction and of the technocracy would attack this approach as likely to contribute to chaos and to cultural disintegration of democratic society at large.

Here, too, as in all the previous cases, choosing rationally between communitarianism and the attacks on it, as well as between the various attacks, seems to be an endeavor that might exceed the limits of rationality alone, and may have to do with a “leap in the dark” towards one of the systems of belief from which these views stem. Still, no attempt has ever been made to lead a discussion between these views, even if only to agree on what they disagree on and map relevant possibilities.

SUMMARY

Our long journey through representative thinkers and views that have attempted to respond to the acute crisis stemming from the disappearance of the modern goals of public education in postmodern democracies has now ended. All the views discussed here are products of educational thinking in a postmodern democratic society and they all aspire to remain, in different ways and to various degrees, loyal to democratic ideology. During this journey we have avoided views that consciously and blatantly reject or are not grounded in democracy, such as the various fundamentalist or fascist doctrines that have enjoyed rejuvenation during the past generation, in reaction to the ideological void and confusion which haunt the core of democratic thinking.

I would like to think that this journey through the representative views responding to the educational crisis has created a reasonably ideated map of what could have been the discourse, if one in which various thinkers and writers on the subject would be able to locate themselves when developing their responses had actually taken place, allowing various stakeholders the possibility of a (somewhat more) mindful choice.

Although the majority of the views discussed here were developed in academic or intellectual environments, the confusion they display is mirrored in the current disarray which educational decision makers, as well as the public and especially parents who are concerned about their children’s education, seem to be in. Thus, I also hope I succeeded in showing the reader the immensity of the problem and the grave differences that democratic postmodern society has to face in its attempt to rationally deal with this profound crisis and define the overall goals of education in our culturally diverse times.
While in the past, even the recent past, educational goals were clear, at least in certain social frameworks, including that of modern democratic societies, in today’s postmodern democracy these goals have become extremely blurred. Moreover, it seems obvious to many that there is no way to actually face the problem. As a result, (conscious or unconscious) ignorance of the situation seems to be “the best course of action.”

Thus, where once there were clear goals, today the path is lost amid confusion and anxiety and whatever technocratic obsession with detail happens to be in vogue as the expedient escape mechanism. Consider, for example, the fixation on final exams based on “national standards.” Once, not so long ago, completing the final exam meant that the student was now a mature person who was considered to be ready for life as it should be lived in accordance with society’s values leading to the Good Life. “Maturity” or “graduation” meant ability and commitment to live the Good Life. The knowledge these tests (allegedly) attest to was perceived as, at the very least, a necessary and sometimes even sufficient condition for maturity. Today, however, all that remains from the original terms’ rich and very demanding meaning is an indication that a person has successfully obtained a diploma which attests to knowledge of certain subjects which the educatee attained. Whatever terminology is used, this diploma allows acceptance to higher education which is mistakenly (see the discussion on over-education in the next chapter) perceived as a necessary condition for reaching profitable socioeconomic positions. As opposed to the past, none of the subjects one has to “learn” to get this diploma has any positive internal cultural value, certainly not in a society that cherishes only the instrumental aspects of knowledge. The vast majority of these subjects have no bearing on the individual, his or her interests or social needs (as I shall elucidate in the next chapter). These terms, whose literal meaning was still appreciated two or three generations ago, have become vacuous today, an atavistic relic from a chronologically very recent though mentally very distant culture in which knowledge paved the way to the Good Life only through its internal value.

How, then, is it possible to educate in a public system whose foundations have “suddenly” disappeared and whose goals, stemming from a rich cultural heritage, have been replaced by bureaucratic procedures devoid of meaning? In the metaphorical language of this book’s title, how can the ship of education navigate in the stormy postmodern sea if its captain and officers woke up one day with amnesia, and had no recollection of the destination set for them in the past or even a memory of the way by which they ought to lay a course?

The answer is, of course, that in such a situation there is no possibility of educating. If we do not steer the vessel in light of clear goals that reflect the basic values of Liberal Democracy, while systematically harnessing postmodern forces to the fulfillment of these values, the ship of education will be helplessly tossed and turned by the storm until it breaks up and finally sinks.

Is there a way out of this maelstrom? I believe that even in postmodernity the ship of public education can and should have clear operational goals and that it has a good chance to be mindfully and strategically steered towards them. In Chapter Six I shall indicate the desired way of regaining our direction in the tempestuous,
postmodern confusion, and define the course which will bring the ship of education through the postmodern sea following the stars of liberal democratic values. In Chapters Seven through Nine, I shall indicate the educational, curricular, pedagogic, and organizational frameworks deriving from educational goals which are valid for the Liberal Democracies of our times and demonstrate how postmodern forces can be mobilized for their implementation.

Before we can find a way out, we must first understand the enormity of the educational catastrophe in which Western culture has found itself. In order to help the reader gain some understanding of what we are actually going through (only “some” due to the immensity and complexity of the problem), beyond the “loss of attainable goals” dimension of the crisis, I will also add, in the chapters to come, an analysis of the disappearance of the meaningfulness of education’s content (Chapter Three), the disappearance of the functionality of education’s organizational structure (Chapter Four), and the disappearance of education’s target audience (Chapter Five).