

Neil Postman and the thermostatic role of school

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Abstract: This article examines the dialectics between “apocalypics” and “integrated”, starting from a rereading of Neil Postman's *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* and maintaining the relevance of Author's “thermostatic” view of education in front of today rapid technological change. Postman, an advocate for subversive teaching during the 60's, now emphasizes the need for schools to counterbalance the pervasive influence of mass media, particularly of TV. This “thermostatic” role involves conserving tradition when society overemphasizes innovation, and vice versa. The article explores, as well, the implications of Postman's view in the age of artificial intelligence, highlighting the importance of language education, critical thinking, and cultivation of shared narratives to address the challenges posed by the Infosphere.

Keywords: Postman, school education; teaching.

1. Introduction

When, in 1964, *Apocalittici e integrati* (Eco, 1964)¹ was published, the world was enough different than today. But, the reason for considering that book still relevant lies, I would say, mainly in the fact that it describes a condition that, as it seems, repeats itself cyclically, marking a rhythm in which the diastole of innovation and forward momentum is followed by the systole of closure and the inertial force of stasis; a rhythm that seems to characterize our history as homo sapiens since we became homo faber and that becomes more evident the more accelerated the rhythm of change.

Technology constitutes our way of being for better or for worse. Technical innovations have always changed the world and, always, there have been those who have welcomed them with enthusiasm and those who have panicked. The “Scholars of Salamanca”, forced by the “Christopher Columbus” to grasp at straws to survive, seem to be a historical constant. They are those who – as Umberto Eco wrote – «[are committed] to building the foundations of a new science, which consists in supporting the moral and cultural negativity of the discovery of America» (Eco, 1964:338).

2. The “Scholars of Salamanca” and “Christopher Columbus”.

I will address the theme of the dialectics between “Apocalypics” and “Integrated” on the basis of a rereading of a book that is also quite outdated. I am referring to Neil Postman's 1979 volume, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (Postman, 1979). In my opinion, it still has some relevance today and, due to its content, allows me to focus



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¹ There is no complete translation of this book in English, but many parts of it can be found in the collection of essays entitled Eco U., *Apocalypse Postponed* (Eco, 1994).

the discussion squarely on the issue of education. The seesaw between innovation and conservation obviously also marks the historical course of education, where the dialectics between the “Scholars of Salamanca” and the “Christopher Columbus” is made even more complex by the array of subjects, objects, and contexts that interact and influence each other in this field.

To take our first steps, let’s turn our attention to a crucial question: the ends of education. In this perspective, it may be useful to look at the relationship between the educational subsystem and other society subsystems: economy, politics, technology, and communication. With this key to reading, then, “integrated” appear to be who, in education, readily and uncritically accept the proposals coming to the educational system from the outside, from the other subsystems. On the other hand, the “apocalypitics” are those who reject with terror and, therefore, censor the calls coming from the outside, clinging to the fixed points of tradition and the customary certainties.

Contemporary “apocalypitics” include, for instance, those who nostalgically champion the study of Latin, extolling the alleged “uselessness” of the humanities in contrast to the perceived trivial mechanics of the sciences. This group also encompasses opponents of teaching supported by digital technologies, as well as educators who insist on traditional classroom formalities such as students standing when the teacher enters the classroom, and so on.

Now, what are the aims of education for this group of “apocalypitics”? There is an old wine in school education that is not easily replaced. At best, one can every now and again put a new barrel on display. The old wine that our school is incurably intoxicated with is directiveness and the barracks-like environment that derives from it, which is certainly supported by legions of “Scholars of Salamanca”, for whom the main mission of the educational institution remains the task of transmitting static knowledge packaged in accredited manuals and, above all, that of “discipline and punish” (Foucault, 2020).

Among the “integrated” we will find the enthusiasts of all technical innovations supporting assisted learning processes; together with teachers who appreciate fashionable communication: short and sharp messages, many images, summary diagrams, concept maps (without concepts), simplification of discourse in standardized sequences of thought, catchy tones in a propagandistic style. What, instead, are the aims of education for the “integrated”? If we were to ask them this question directly, I suspect they would not know how to answer. Integration, in this case, is equivalent to pandering to goals that come from elsewhere: technocracy, consumerism economy, the Infosphere and its environments (Floridi, 2014).

In conclusion, as far as the aims of education are concerned, for the “Scholars of Salamanca” the matter is already settled and closed with the sacralization of some pillars of tradition, while for the “integrated” the question does not arise at all. And the “Christopher Columbus”? We will certainly not say that the “integrated” are, precisely them, the revolutionary innovators!

Therefore, if they exist, who are the “Christopher Columbus” of education? It seems to me that the bearers of the desiring and revolutionary impetus have always been primarily the young, namely the students. The teaching staff and administrative officers stand, for the most part, on the side of the institutional establishment, guardian of the regime of needs and integration and depository of those powers necessary to always ensure victory. The 1968 revolution – as many have recognized – was not victorious.

What can we say, then, of all those philosophers of education, pedagogues, educators who, throughout history, have courageously questioned tradition and, with their creative thinking and action, have given decisive and sometimes radical innovative impulses to education, from Plato to Don Lorenzo Milani? There is no doubt that these are figures who fully belong to the family of the “Christopher Columbus”. I am talking about all those who have attacked the inertia of conservatism and bureaucratic re-petition, who have seen beyond their time, projecting themselves into the untimeliness of the future imagining scenarios such as Montessori schools, Waldorf schools, Freinet schools, Dewey's laboratory school in Chicago, the Barbiana school, and so on.

Nevertheless, how much of their legacy persists in contemporary educational systems? The centenary of Danilo Dolci's birth in 2024 provides a case in point. While his figure is celebrated, the innovative educational practices he pioneered, such as the Mirto Educational Center, have largely been forgotten. In any case, it must be acknowledged that in the realm of education practices overshadow ideas, and practices tend to resist change. Rooted in shared habits and rituals, they contribute to the formation of social identities and hierarchies. Consequently, contextualized practices provide a fertile environment for the proliferation of conservative attitudes, for the multiplication of the “Scholars of Salamanca”.

3. Neil Postman and the thermostatic view of school.3.1. Scopus publications: an overview

As Eco stated in 1964 that «the universe of mass culture is – whether we acknowledge it or not – our universe» (Eco, 1964:26), so too must we accept, willingly or not, that the *Infosphere* is our universe. Given that this event is irreversible, both the nostalgic dissent of the “apocalyptics” and the uncritical acquiescence of the “integrated” lead to the same result, i. e., education loses control over its own ends. This danger was already denounced by John Dewey in 1929. To quote him:

Education is autonomous and should be free to determine its own ends, its own objectives. To go outside the educational function and to borrow objectives from an external source is to surrender the educational cause. Until educators get the independence and courage to insist that educational aims are to be formed as well as executed within the educative process, they will not come to consciousness of their own function (Dewey, 1929:38).

The challenge launched by Dewey sounds highly significant today, as the educational sphere appears as ever vulnerable to a multitude of external pressures and influences. Dewey is not referring to specific people, like teachers, but to the educational realm in general, which must be distinguished from the political, technical, and economic. In other words, it is a matter of recognizing the educational subsystem as having a specific and distinctive role and function within the broader context of social dynamics and from a historical perspective.

Neil Postman, a leading figure in the American debate on school reform in the second half of the last century, offered a view that appears particularly valuable and worthy of exploration for its potential consequences even today. In the case of this intellectual, the dynamics between revolutionary and innovative impetus and the spirit of conservation followed its course within a single lifetime, as stages of a unique intellectual history. *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, is a stage of a Postman's reflective journey dating back to a conference held at Fordham University in the Bronx in 1971;

an event that Postman marks as the beginning of the exhaustion of the educational reform movement. Indeed, he notes that in the same year *Deschooling Society* by I. Illich was published, in which the author concluded that schools are not reformable and that, therefore, it would be better to close them (Illich, 1971).

Now, it happens that in 1967, only four years before that 1971 Conference, Postman had published a book called *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Postman-Weingartner, 1967). The path that led the author from teaching as a “subversive activity” to teaching as a “conserving activity” perfectly mirrors the changing times. It also shows how well Postman understood these changes as they were happening.

In *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Postman had advocated for a “libertarian” model of schooling based on a series of changes summarized in his 1973 speech, “The Ecology of Learning” (Conference on English Education). Firstly, Postman proposed that schools should be “convivial communities” of learning rather than devices for controlling students through grades and punishments. Secondly, he suggested that schools should eliminate or radically modify assessment practices that lead to competition by abolishing standardized tests that promote rivalry. He also proposed avoiding homogeneous groupings of students which have the effect of reinforcing social and economic inequalities. Finally, he recommended that the K-12 cycle should focus on civic education, prioritizing education for active citizenship.

Eleven years later, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* is the result of a shift in perspective. What happened in society after 1968 was a chain of new events and changes linked to the advancement of mass media. It is precisely this, now, that is the target of Postman's critique and the content of his inquiry. The discourse he carries on is not strictly political, but rather one of epistemology of social practices, and the focus of his research is particularly on television, which in the 1970s and 1980s had acquired so much influence in communication as to present itself, in Postman's eyes, as the “first curriculum”. Faced with the retreat of the school curriculum to a “second curriculum”, Postman invokes, for the school, not a role of “counter-power” as an apocalyptic “scholar of Salamanca”, but rather a “thermostatic” role.

The term is borrowed from cybernetics and is to be considered synonymous with ecology: the ecology of media. In this sense, Postman argues, school education has the task of conserving tradition when the rest of the environment is too biased towards innovation, while it has the task of being innovative when the rest of society tends to fossilize in tradition.

Thus, our author compares the structure of the mass media curriculum with that of the school curriculum, showing how and why, from the point of view of communication, television is victorious over the school. Noting, for example, that both the school curriculum and the television curriculum use coercion, but television does so indirectly through psychological means, focusing on interest. In any case, what matters most is the language used. Insofar as Marshall McLuhan's thesis is true, then, it's not just what's said, but how it's said that really matters (McLuhan-Fiore, 2001). From this point of view, mass media and school are in deep discontinuity: the leap is that between analogical and digital codes. TV uses pictures and sounds, while school uses words. This is a big difference, and it means that TV and schools are teaching us in very different ways.

They require two learning approaches as well that use different parts of our brain: the one engages the right hemisphere, the other the left. Picture, concrete, unique, and not paraphrasable, compared to the word, abstract, conceptual, and translatable: this

is one of the many conflicts between television and school. And it is not true that watching television is a passive experience. What is lost is the ability to make abstractions. This difference between symbols that require conceptualization and reflective thinking and perceptions that evoke emotions has many implications, one of the most important being that the content of the television curriculum is irrefutable and immediately gratifying.

Postman provides an extensive list of other distinctive characteristics of television, each of which has its opposite counterpart in the school curriculum. The television curriculum is attention-centered, non-punitive, affect-centered, present-centered, image-centered, narration-centered; it is moralistic, non-analytical, non-hierarchical, authoritarian and yet contemptuous of authority, continuous in time but isolating in space, discontinuous in content. Prolonged engagement with media utilizing analogical codes, like television, has a significant impact on cognitive and social development, that must be balanced with an “opposite complementarity”, the task to which the school is called. Thus, in this sense, «the best conception of education consists in a thermostatic activity» (Postman, 1979:19).

So, the question is whether such a function can be attributed to the school in every historical circumstance and, above all, whether we can consider it relevant to our times. Let's leave the first question about some philosophy of history and focus on the second. What analogies between our time and the 1970s and 1980s can we trace to legitimize the extension of the “thermostatic view” to the school of today? A first, important, line of continuity we find in what Postman calls the “technical thesis” which he compares to the “utopian thesis”. The “technical thesis” consists in the increasingly widespread and consolidated belief that «it is only through *technique* and *technicalization* that we may find what is real, what is true, and what is valuable» (Postman, 1979:89)². The extreme outcome of this process that has invested our world is represented today by artificial intelligence (AI), whose advancement makes Postman's concerns even more pertinent and still of great value. Thus, his proposals for a school curriculum remain timely; a curriculum in which

all subjects are presented as a stage in humanity's historical development; in which the philosophies of science, of history, of language, and of religion are taught; and in which there is a strong emphasis on classical forms of artistic expression (Postman, 1979:145-46).

4. Educating through language

Postman would come back to the topic of technology in a subsequent work (Postman, 1993) to reiterate, once again, the importance of education to deal with the advancement not only of technology but, above all, of technocracy. This 1993 work opens with a reference to Plato who, in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, had compared the two codes of orality and writing, warning of the risks that the new technique of writing entailed. However, Plato is also present in *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* where his voice comes through the mediation of Eric Havelock. This philologist had shown how the origins of Western thought could be traced back to the deep fracture that occurred when Greek philosophy had attacked the Homeric epic tradition to replace

² Postman defines a *technique* as simply «a standardized method for achieving a purpose» (Postman, 1979:89-90), and *technicalization* as «a method of transforming a technique into an abstract, general, and precise system» (Ivi: 91).

it, for its educational effects, with a new *paideia* expressed in new literary forms and had indicated Plato as the figure who, supported with the Socratic teaching, had shaped the passage from a “mimetic” mind to an “alphabetic” one (Havelock, 1963)³.

Postman believes that language is really important in education. Language education reappears, as a leitmotiv, in each of his major works. It could be said that he tracks and describes a kind of phenomenology, set in the history of the West, of two linguistic archetypes, those that Havelock drew the genealogy of in his *Preface to Plato*: on the one hand, codes based on empathic, immersive and gestaltic participation (the *mimesis* of Homeric orality), in which signifier and signified are little or not at all distinct (iconic language); on the other hand, alphabetic/digital codes that clearly separate signifier and signified. Literacy splits the text from its author; moreover, it distances the persons who communicate and construct abstract hyper-worlds, made up of concepts, symbols, and logical relations; codes that are stratified in meta-languages in which syntax prevails over semantics and completely cancels the pragmatics of communication (Watzlawick-Beavin-Jackson, 1967).

The second type of language includes literacy, which after Plato has dominated the scene of our cultural tradition, but also the binary language of computer science and AI. To the extent that it is true that the type of language that dominates the environment in which we grow up shapes our minds, the greatest danger we face is with the advance of AI. It isn't that an army of cyborgs will take over the world. Instead, the real worry is that we might start thinking more like computers. More realistically, the danger is that the pervasiveness of the digital languages of computer science and the logic of the algorithm will spread more and more in our environment and end up shaping minds that will become increasingly similar to those of computers. It's not that computers will become like us; it's expected that most of us will become more like computers without even realizing it.

Given this current situation, what can the school teach to fulfill its thermostatic role? Faced with this question, Postman, in *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, recommends above all to focus on language education and emphasizes that it is not to learn just grammar and formal correctness. He, rather, means teaching students to be creative with *linguaging* and to understand that language shapes our thoughts, being aware that language is not only a tool for expressing thoughts, but is the incubator of thoughts. Mastery of language is, at the same time, control and effective exercise of thought in the network of communications. In this exercise, great attention should be paid to the ability to ask questions, which should be a major part of language education in order to oppose the tyranny of definitions. Mastery of language, Postman argues, is the ability to consciously use the embedded cognitive moves that language makes possible, such as inference, generalization, hypothesis, and so on. Even the various disciplines should have their linguistic aspects examined and their influence in defining and characterizing the content.

Postman believes that schools should teach students to use language well, especially written language together with the logic of alphabetic writing, but he frames it within the broader vision of *linguaging*, which includes oral communication, not “mimetic” but supported by thinking skills that range from knowing how to ask questions that expand knowledge to knowing how to listen in dialogue with others. To balance the non-elitist, non-selective nature of television and mass media curricula,

³ For further details on this topic, cfr. Cosentino, 2021; Sini 1992.

Postman advocates for an education that sets objectives that can also be adopted as selective standards. Referring to the United States, even without denying the legitimacy and value of local dialects, schools should teach Standard English. This assumption is in line with what Postman thinks about the relationship between public schools and issues related to affective and social education in a multicultural society. Many of the educational tasks that tend to be offloaded onto schools should be left to families, even while respecting differences of ethnic, religious, or customary nature. As government agencies of a democratic state, public schools should maintain a certain distance from issues related to ethics and politics.

5. The end of education

In his latest work, *The End of Education*, Postman (1995) focuses on the need for shared narratives. The disappearance of old narratives throughout the 20th century has paved the way for widespread nihilism, relativism, and narcissism, which fuel the new deities that now reign supreme (Lyotard, 1984). American education has moved away from its founding narratives of democracy and individual rights, replacing them with those of economic utility, preparation for the job market, and faith in technology as a measure of human progress. While there is nothing objectionable about educating young people to be smart consumers or to navigate the job market, these goals, «when are elevated to the status of a metaphysical imperative, we are being told that we have reached the end of our wits—even worse, the limit of our wisdom» (Postman, 1995:35-6). So, what's the solution? Postman believes that schools should help create a shared culture among citizens by teaching stories that bring us together. Quoting the Author:

The idea of public education depends absolutely on the existence of shared narratives and the exclusion of narratives that lead to alienation and divisiveness. What makes public schools public is not so much that the schools have common goals but that the students have common gods. The reason for this is that public education does not serve a public. It creates a public (Postman, 1995:17).

Wanting to avoid joining the family of the “Scholars of Salamanca”, Postman projects himself into the future, grappling with contemporary culture while envisioning counterbalances to implement rebalancing processes in education. The following are five possible narratives called upon to fill the void left after the old narratives have ceased to fulfill their function.

The first, entitled *Spaceship Earth* is emblematically exemplified from a literary and metaphorical standpoint by Steven Spielberg's films *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* What seems promising to Postman, in this case, is the moral commitment this narrative carries with it and the sense of responsibility it develops towards our planet and ourselves as “flight attendants of the Earth”. It is a story that creates bonds and highlights the interdependence of people and the value of cooperation, renders racism irrelevant, and exalts solidarity.

The second narrative is entitled *The Fallen Angel*, a religious metaphor to show us how mistakes can actually help us to learn new things, and how the process of error correction has a key function in the advancement of knowledge, as showed by scientific research. Against pride and dogmatism, the science to which Postman refers is one that recognizes the fallibility of its knowledge and views its progress as small steps

towards the truth, but never as the Truth. According to this view, the school's commitment should be to heal the desire for absolute knowledge.

The third narrative, called *The American Experiment*, starts from the seeing that «Children enter school as a question mark and leave as a period». Against the dangers of both indifference and psychopathic nationalism, the history of America should be proposed, viewed and studied as a recurrent and seductive question mark; its Constitution should be read as a hypothesis and an open project, not a catechism. Against the backdrop of such a scenario, what stands out clearly is the challenge of democracy: can a nation form, preserve, and innovate itself based on endless dialogue and argumentation? Driven by a continuous shared search for answers to questions such as “What is freedom?”, “What is a human being?”, “What do we mean by democracy?”.

The fourth narrative addresses the *Law of Diversity*. It deals with the theme of multiculturalism, the narrative of which constitutes a rich repertoire for education. The challenge is to reconcile visions based on ethnic difference that induce isolation and provincialism with the need to build a shared culture, to promote self-esteem along with the ability to appreciate what is different from oneself, in a constructive and unifying perspective of diversity. Here too, the task is to create a balance between entropic and negentropic forces, knowing that uniformity is the enemy of vitality and creativity.

The fifth and final narrative is entitled *The Word Weavers/World Builders*. It addresses the role of language in making us human. We do not know when or why we began to speak. We probably began by speaking to ourselves, but the final outcome is that we use language to create the world. If there is a world in-itself, outside of language, it remains unknown to us. Knowledge mediated by language organizes our experience, gives measure, places things in time and space, and constructs the network of relations between things. School education should be committed to teaching young people the connection between language and world-building. And it should not fail to emphasize that the use of language has a moral dimension and a social dimension as well.

To conclude without closing, if we project Postman's discourse onto our contemporary world, it seems to me that his basic assumption holds an indisputable explanatory power since the conflict between the “First curriculum” (today's social media and Infosphere) and a school curriculum that increasingly loses ground in communication and education, keeps many of the characteristics it had fifty years ago. Among the differences, an important one is that today's media are much more complex and pervasive. Therefore, the “thermostatic” function assigned to the school by Neil Postman is all the more difficult and urgent, just as urgent as the need to help people defend themselves from tyranny, to borrow the words of Thomas Jefferson. «This man - Postman maintains - would certainly not have thought, as today's leaders do, that young people should learn to read for the sole purpose of increasing their economic productivity. Jefferson had a deeper god to serve» (Postman, 1995:34):

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