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The Endogenous Ends of Education (for Aaron Swartz)

Through the words of the English translator of Agamben's "Requiem per gli Studenti" ("Requiem for the Students") we come to know that Italy is the exceptional place where the theory of exception holds — "Agamben refers specifically to developments in Italy." [1] Agamben's requiem sketches an idyll of the university which, he notes, is coming to an end owing to the coronavirus pandemic. Implicit in this text is a theory of, or a way of seeing, education which is a troublesome fantasy with disturbing precedents. This requiem determines "student [studentato, studenthood] as a form of life" in the collection of those "who gathered together according to their place of origin in *nationes*" and formed "friendships [...] according to their cultural and political interests". Further, he asks the students and the professors to exit the university destroyed by "specialist ignorance" in order to "constitute themselves in new *universitates*, only within which, in the face of technological barbarism, the word of the past might remain alive".

The sadness one feels after reading this text comes from its effortless repetition of a certain other "word of the past" which too called out to "the body of teachers of this university [to] really step forward into the most dangerous post, threatened by constant uncertainty about the world". This infamous text of Heidegger too objected to the transformations of *studentness* and the university which he saw as decaying due to "rigidly separated specialties" and the threat of global technology. Heidegger called on the students, instead, to heed values exogenous to education which "binds into the community of the people" such that "the entire being (Dasein) of the student as *Armed Service*" fulfills "the spiritual mission of the German people" [2].

Dire observations about the future of the university and that of education, in general, have been made by several others since the coronavirus pandemic began, and in fact it has been a genre in the past two decades. The destruction of the relatively recent university systems of democratic nation states, which Agamben wishes to accelerate by asking the students to withdraw from the online education programs, has been in the making in Europe through the *Bologna process*. This process was created uniform structures imitative of the American university system so that, it appeared then, to integrate European universities into the "capitalistic" educational system. It is an unfolding process based on intergovernmental agreement starting with the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and the Bologna Declaration of 1999, to restructure and standardise European higher education through domestic reforms of curricula, credit systems, and academic cycles. This technocratic process sought the adoption, by countries in (and soon outside) Europe, of "initiatives and ambitions such as educational harmonization, comparability, mobility, flexibility, employability, and qualification frameworks." [3] Motivated by economic and administrative ends (and lacking in reason), the Bologna Process has made higher education 'modular' and 'outcome-oriented.' It has been seen (including by its own proponents) [4] as a departure from the Humboldtian model of the university, although abundant research in the past four decades has shown that this model is an idyll projected retrospectively from the writings of Humboldt discovered towards the end of the 19th century rather than in the few institutions supervised by him. An amalgam of the proposals of Humboldt, Schleiermacher, Fichte and Schelling has served to imagine the university as a free and equal relation between the professor and the student of a

nation-state so as to somehow unify research *and* teaching; human *and* natural sciences; autonomy from political and techno-economic processes *and* the moral and cultural guardianship of the ‘national life form’ of that very society. Over the past 100 years, without ever having had the conditions for its implementation or having prevented the progressive differentiation of disciplines and educational institutions, this utopic and idealist myth has certainly worked to uphold the elitist and ethnocentrist ideas of nation-states while excluding most of the non-elite people. And yet, it continues to be invoked by conservatives, liberals as well as leftists as a form of *paternal reason*[5] – the invocation of the father’s name for contemporary contingent ends.

The Bologna Process was opposed by massive protests without success.[6] Since then, its implementation has been accepted and (*therefore*) resisted as the “neo-liberal” model of education. The process of standardisation was soon spread to the other parts of the world. In India, this process began 19 years ago when the government accepted a report named after, for most purposes, illiterate industrialists. Protests, acceptances, and therefore resistances still continue in India, the UK, France and the Americas. The sufferings brought on by these processes on not only the students, but also university teachers, some of whom are driven to practice sex work and live in their cars[7] to continue in their ‘profession to profess the truth,’ are yet to be attended to sufficiently. This is an urgent task for everyone concerned about the future of education.

At least since 2010, significant control has been exercised by technological corporations in the universities. The explicit arguments were many. Of them the most significant was the computational power that is essential today in several areas of scientific research; for example, the correlations within the data generated by the vast array telescopes can be explored only through massive computational power. The appearance of the machine in the theatre of knowledge was the expected continuation of the proliferation and cooperation of researchers across the world since the early 20th century which augmented and multiplied the domains of knowledge, which in turn was made possible by what is pejoratively called ‘the massification’ of modern education. Since reason vacated the theatre of knowledge (“has it or not”, might be the most important question of these hours) we were left with mere correlations, and *correlationism* can be best practiced through computational power. The industrial standard of super massive computational power was called “big data”; big data is any scale of computation which *cannot be* performed by anything other than an industrial computational architecture, which can therefore be updated only by the biggest corporations. The risk that knowledge will come to be that which machines can compose through their discoveries of correlations is directly related to society being conceived as the composition of the behaviours which a machine can arrange and manage.

In all the ‘major’ universities, through the nomenclature of ‘digital humanities’ and through conditional endowments, American technological corporations have been determining the conditions in which “knowledge” appears. The “extra push” for the destruction of the older models of the university was provided by many, including an industrialist supporter of Trump who offered a massive stipend to those students who would reject university education[8]. The trajectories of these developments have their *principle of sufficient reason* which cannot be attended to in a short intervention.

There can be, at least, two necessary lines of enquiry into the transformation of the meaning of education today. First, knowledge, as that which displaces our orientation with respect to the appropriate “ends,” while simultaneously assessing the “grounds” of these very ends from a thought which can be called “transcendental” in the Kantian sense, underwent extraordinary changes through philosophical interventions in 20th century. Second, education as the conscripted mass procedure over the whole society through which nationalistic parameters and linguistic constants—or, as it comes to the same thing, *the exogenous variables of education*—were set in place to constitute a new kind of mass-organism which created uniform “ages of man” with their specific nationalistic differences; the individuals of this organism thought and spoke together in such a way that they appeared to be the components comprehended by some other law, and for this reason, in Althusser’s idiom we could say that schools were the institution in which the system of interpellation was coded into men. Since the end of the last century, gradually, these old *exogenous*

variables of education were being exchanged for something else; for example, national integration was exchanged for technological integration, citizenship values for employable values. These processes of integration were continuous with other world-wide standards and protocols which were being introduced, without any democratic consultation, simultaneously including SDR (Special Drawing Right) and GST (Goods and Services Tax).

Derrida, who had been alert to these changes coming over the universities through both the turmoil in philosophy and the mutations of *the exogenous variables of education*, had dedicated a significant part of his last texts to this problem and he said “one can bet that in these domains no transformation can arise that does not take shape on the borders of philosophy.”[9] The danger that techno-corporatization poses to all domains of knowledge comes precisely from the (forced or voluntary) withdrawal of philosophy (and through it of the drive of reason) giving place to the fantasies of (for these purposes) illiterate men of ‘the codes’. Without undertaking the minimum of these two lines of enquiry any act of ‘resistance’, including boycotts, can only lead to individual tragedies, and they might not be recalled in great glory in the ages to come.

Instead of constructing idylls of education, which are rooted in their *idyllic a priori*, we should look at the role that the modern university system, which appeared alongside the development of “modern science” and technological institutions, has performed. It allowed for the first time, thanks to ‘massification,’ women, the poor and the lower caste peoples to take a seat at the table of contestations of reason. It reduced the number of the poor who had to toil the fields and clean the seminaries to create the conditions for the romance amongst the culturally and nationally attuned “scholarii”. In India, universal education arrived through colonialism and struck the first blow at the oppressive caste order which even today strives to exclude the lower caste people from the remains of the university; the university is even now dominated by the upper caste “scholarii” who come from less than 10% of India’s population. This modern process was followed by the universal right to education[10], which is being augmented by the internet.

Unbeknownst to many academics, places in the internet such as “Khan academy” have been educating those people who are without the means for a university education and those who have access only to the majority of universities which are mediocre. Nearly everything—with the capitalistic exception of the portals of academic journals which was tested tragically by Aaron Swartz[11]—is available on the internet, there are cooperatives discussing the developments in all fields of knowledge. Institutions which are mindful of the history of the university, the *exogenous variables of education*, and the crisis of knowledge have been experimenting, some successfully and others tragically, in the past few decades, including the Nalanda Academy[12] (Wardha, India), and DOC![13] (France). However, we are yet to see co-operative facilities for large scale computation, which should not be very difficult to institute.

Instead of lamenting the losses of the idyll of some privileged men it will be necessary to undertake a philosophical enquiry into the *exogenous variables of education* and a historical study on the precise exchanges of homological powers—between kings and priests, between the peasant and the guildsman, between the factory worker and the college student—which resulted from each phase transition of knowledge during the past five centuries. While doing so we must now imagine with precision the new possibilities of education, without falling into the model of friendships between the culturally attuned. Instead, we must come together towards creating a world-wide community of those who “learn to rejoice at the world’s progress, although it may not be to their own advantage or that of their country.”[14]

This community of education already awake at the evening of the university will have to bear a *responsibility* and suffer the torsion of a *drive*: The philosophical responsibility of being the community that will *endogenously* generate the variable ends which determine education out of education itself; and, the drive of reason, arrested in development in the past, which often brings surprises and shocks, will demand again that *reason must be rendered* before taking its fruits.

Notes:

[1] Giorgio Agamben, “Requiem for the Students”, translated by D. Alan Dean, 23 March 2020, <https://medium.com/@ddean3000/requiem-for-the-students-giorgio-agamben-866670c11642> ; “Requiem per gli Studenti”, <https://www.iisf.it/index.php/attivita/pubblicazioni-e-archivi/diario-della-crisi/giorgio-agamben-requiem-per-gli-studenti.html>

[2] M. K. Gandhi had objected to the appearance of mass education based on the then developing specializations in the sciences. His objections came from several reasons—education as colonialism, technology as un-godly, and knowledge as disruptive of traditional society in India—which were unified by his concern to preserve the oppressive caste order.

[3] Katja Brøgger, *Governing through Standards: the Faceless Masters of Higher Education – The Bologna Process, the EU and the Open Method of Coordination*. Cham: Springer, 2019, p.32.

[4] For example, the then Federal Minister for Education, Science, Research and Technology, Jürgen Rüttgers declared in his address at the German Rectors’ Conference in 1997, “Humboldt is Dead!”. It is noteworthy that after the protests he returned to the same audience in 2009 to say “Humboldt’s university is dead. Humboldt’s ideal is and will remain alive!”; see Mitchell G. Ash, “Humboldt the Undead: Multiple Uses of ‘Humboldt’ and His ‘Death’ in the ‘Bologna’ Era” in Josephson, P., Karlsohn, T., & Östling, J. (Eds.) *The Humboldtian Tradition: Origins and Legacies*. Brill Academic Publishers, 2014.

[5] See Mohan and Dwivedi, *Gandhi and Philosophy: On Theological Anti-Politics*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019.

[6] <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2010/0827/European-students-protest-US-style-capitalist-education>

[7] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/28/adjunct-professors-homeless-sex-work-academia-poverty>

[8] The coincidence of Agamben’s call to quit and that of Peter Thiel are not due to a mutual understanding. <https://medium.com/@cosmoscharf/why-im-leaving-the-thiel-fellowship-7205ca88766b>

[9] Jaques Derrida, “In Praise of Philosophy” in *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, p.162. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

[10] <https://en.unesco.org/themes/right-to-education>

[11] https://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/03/11/130311fa_fact_macfarquhar

[12] Which is an Ambedkarite education resource center that helps students from marginalized communities to pursue quality higher education <https://nalanda-academy.org>

[13] <https://doc.work/>

[14] Immanuel Kant, *On Education*, translated by Annette Churton, New York: Dover Publications, 1899.

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