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An Open Letter to Young People who Aspire to a University Career

Some of my (not so young) friends who work in “culture factories,” commenting on the pandemic times in which we’re living, have told me, “I detest video conferences/classes/seminars/groups. Why don’t we just sit out the epidemic until we can get back to meeting as we used to.” I feel a certain compassion for them, and not wanting to upset them, hesitate to tell them what I really think: “Even post-pandemic, you’re going to find far fewer face-to-face conferences!”

I have already argued elsewhere how the COVID pandemic is throwing us headfirst into a change that was already underway, and which in the near future will change our lives even more radically (in *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics, and Society*, edited by F. Castrillon and T. Marchevsky, Routledge, in press). That is, our work will increasingly be done via video. And not just work. Take entertainment, for example. Thanks to streaming services like Netflix (and there will be ever more to choose from), we have already been downloading and watching films at home, on ever wider screens.

Even seduction will increasingly take place via dating apps like Tinder. Researching for a partner through apps has become, for many, a compulsive activity. There will no longer be any need to go out dancing to find a love interest or sex partner, nor will we need to settle on finding a marriage prospect among colleagues or co-workers of our same firm.

One needn’t be a professional futurist to imagine the effects of this conversion to remote video in the field of teaching. While quite a little will change on the level of primary school education, little by little, as we move up through the levels of education, teaching will increasingly be done remotely. It is inevitable, like it or not. Online college degrees have been around for some time; in the future, most college degrees will be done online, or via streaming platforms. That is, a professor could possibly conduct an actual course in person for 30 or so students who might be there for a variety of reasons (to meet the professor in person, to court a fellow student...), while thousands of other students might be following him or her in streaming mode.

So, universities will be ever more delocalized. I might be a student in Nanjing enrolled at Oxford in the UK, or a Paraguayan in Asunción enrolled in mathematics at Paris-Saclay. A young woman living in Trinidad, Colorado, will not be obliged to move to costly Boston to enroll at Harvard Business School to take a degree in Economy.

This deterritorialization of teaching will have an irremediable effect: the **progressive reduction of teaching personnel**. And clearly at the university level, only the most important and internationally recognized will remain. More and more students will insist on following remotely only those they consider the “best professors,” and those VIProfessors could be teaching a class of thousands of students simultaneously. Nowadays, a mediocre or boring professor is in any case guaranteed a certain number of students because

these, being based on campus, have no choice; but what will evolve when, in fact, students will be able to choose their professors? Universities will have an interest in hiring the most important, noted professors for their courses, or even simply the most charming, to raise enrollment; in short, professors will be increasingly chosen by students. Whether a university is public or private will not matter, it will be a race to attract professors who in turn attract students. And as already happens in the US, it will be increasingly the students who decide, because the students pay—and the client is always right.

The grand epic of American campuses—for many representing one of the best periods in life—is about to come to an end.

So, a progressive reduction in teachers, with the “best” (whatever the definition of that is) grabbing most of the students, and the rest left with the crumbs. And when the crumbs are almost gone (probably for the majority of teachers), this will lead to the elimination of marginal teachers. As happens in any other field, cultural or not. (And while these star professors will teach thousands, a second-tier of “teaching assistants” will grow, to do the mind-numbing work of grading student work. Or even those will be substituted by computers which will grade students’ work through multiple choices tests.)

When private television was given the go ahead in Italy in the 1970s (before all television networks were state run), only the delusional thought that the increased available channels would lead to mediatic democracy. In fact, for decades, practically the entire public was concentrated on just six channels, three belonging to RAI (the state television), and three to Berlusconi. But this happens even in philosophy, for example. There have been many good philosophers throughout history, but how many of them do we read and study? Just a miniscule part. This is not so different from search engines—there are others, but Google holds almost 87% of the market.

It is calculated that every year only a very small portion of the books published and films distributed (around a dozen) will reach the greater part of the market, around 80% or more of the audience, and what remains—and some of it very good—ends up as scraps. In fact, no matter where we live in the world, we are practically all reading the same novels, seeing the same films, listening to the same music, and reading the same philosophers.

Professors and universities will follow the same pattern—very few will remain.

So, if a young person were to ask my advice today about whether to pursue a university career or not, I would respond: “Go for it only if you are absolutely convinced you are *really exceptional*. Otherwise, you’ll just draw a blank.” It is not enough to be “pretty” good. And when I say “exceptional”, I don’t mean simply having a great gift in one’s chosen field, because whether you have it or not, you’ll have to also embody other talents which assure a successful teaching career: seductive oratory, teaching talent, organizational capacity, and the ability to use the media to garner fame. Being a university professor will return to being what it once was, when professors were few and far between: being part of a very prestigious, and almost unreachable, corporation.

In short, my young friends, good luck! And Happy 2021.

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Bio:

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His publications in English include: With A. Molino, *In Freud's Tracks* (New York: Aronson, 2008) nominated for Gradiva Award. "The Monsters Next Door", *American Imago*. Psychoanalysis and Human Sciences, 69, 2012, 4. "The Gaze of the Blind. Notes on Cézanne and Cubism", *American Imago*, vol. 70, 3, Fall 2013. "Ethics, Wonder and Real in Wittgenstein", in Y. Gustafsson, C. Kronqvist, H. Nykänen, eds., *Ethics and the Philosophy of Culture: Wittgensteinian Approaches*, 2013, Cambridge Scholar Publishing. *What are Perversions?* (London: Karnac, 2016). *Conversations with Lacan. Seven Lectures for Understanding Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2020). [eu.jou.psy@gmail.com]

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