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## ON EDUCATION REFORM

*"... their remedies do not cure the disease: they merely prolong it. Indeed, their remedies are part of the Disease."*

**Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism***

*"There are only a million blacksmiths who forge chains for tomorrow's children."*

**Federico Garcia Lorca, *A Cry to Rome***

I do not have any illusions that this article will have much positive effect on the transformation of schooling in Croatia. Practically none of the previous criticism of the existing system of education, of which I myself am also a victim\*, have in any way effected a change in the dominant school practice, largely because the teachers, even when they do see the current mistakes, do not feel the need to get actively involved in overcoming numerous atavisms that are insupportable if we truly want a developed society. On the contrary, people with ever so slightly liberal ideas often find themselves pressurised.



It seems that only a coherent and continuing pressure by parents, students and the interested scientific and cultural public can lead to any serious change.

### WORK AS AN INSTRUMENT OF ENSLAVEMENT

In order to improve the education system it is, of course, essential to change the entire school setting: the teaching environment must develop in total contrast to the present stressful surroundings of coercion, boredom and conformism. It is necessary to do away with the inhumane view of *work as a mere means to achieve goals that are outside*

*me*, which is currently dominant. No wonder there is opportunism and aversion to work, imbibed by children thus made neurotic. By preventing autonomous thinking and presentation of one's own ideas, the school system leads pupils, who are inactive in the education process, to resist the uncompromising coercive authorities, particularly regarding the required non-creative, deeply non-free and stressful "learning" focused not on understanding but on remembering, on mere data input. Such a logic of a man-machine is then continued later in life.

We are exposed to "data cramming" as an insult to common sense, and readily forgetting them (which is just as well for the sake of one's mental health). The assumption that "everything is important" implies that actually nothing is - the result is uncritical factopedia. Used to a system where thinking and creativity are not desirable, new apathic, depressed and frustrated generations will not be able to answer the demands of the time, let alone be a subject in a globalised world. It is stubbornly ignored that the most productive and for the full development of human potentials necessary environment is the one that has witnessed the greatest achievements of human creativity: the atmosphere of freedom, a feeling that bureaucratic alienating institutions have been so thoroughly and successfully stifling from the day of their inception. The affirmation of the concept of spontaneity in gaining knowledge, which is in harmony with the modern findings about mental processes and natural dispositions of humans, would have immediate beneficial effects. For as long as learning is a tedious duty, tremendous damage is done to the intellectual and emotional development of a pupil's personality, since the object in the education process is resisting coercion, simultaneously developing negative habits and stereotypes about work as an instrument of enslavement, not of freedom and self-actualisation.

#### FREEDOM AND HUMANISM AS FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

Some Western societies have to a somewhat higher extent done away with the untouchability of authority (although they, too, still have so much open coercion, as well as more or less sophisticated methods of manipulation striving towards uniformity), as reflected in the more relaxed relation between the teachers and the students (in Denmark, for instance, students address their teachers by their first names only, which is normal in their relatively advanced society which promotes a certain egalitarianism). This is an indication of the now neglected ideal, so nicely put by the Croatian philosopher Vanja Sutlić, that *"the humanity of humans becomes the only bond between people"*. In this sense, the (imperfect) experience of Summerhill is particularly valuable, though it was still far ahead of its time. It proved that children, living and learning in a non-authoritarian setting, grow up without complexes and great limitations imposed by such surroundings. Understanding the role of education in the development of democracy, Summerhill introduced pupils' autonomous and participatory decision-making in matters that directly concern them, which greatly develops the child's awareness of personal freedom and responsibility, its independence from external influence - such people will take an active stance on life, defending their interests and guarding the inviolability of their individuality (also great, although under existing circumstances perhaps quite unrealistic, progress would be to establish direct forms of education control by the public). Instead of being understood as a productive exchange, an interaction between free individuals, socialisation is still a synonym for "instilling wisdom through a funnel", which to a great extent represents mere slavish submission to the imposed hierarchy and social conventions. *The social sources of knowledge are by all means necessary, but the adoption of knowledge must be in accordance with the desire*

*for a certain autonomy of the individual, which is only possible when the principle of the individual's passivity is truly abandoned.* Simultaneously, group interaction between students should be encouraged (the Barbiana school is a relatively better known example), which would also be a splendid contribution to the development of democratic relations, because it would encourage mutual recognition, acceptance of compromise, coming together in the realisation of common interests, general development of emotional and social intelligence, areas in which our civilisation has so far mostly been flunking. The principle of cooperation is more constructive than the usual principle of competition - cooperation is the most productive form of human interaction and a path to human happiness.

The curriculum and teaching methods should be diverse and dynamic, forward-looking, not monotonous like today. However, it would be an illusion to expect great changes in this regard, unless there is decentralisation in creating curricula and the impractical directives "from above" are gone. There is also a very pronounced need for teaching staff retraining.

Believing that "it is not only thought that should aspire towards reality, but also reality towards thought", I also think that the concept of humanist education should in the future contain elements of an "Ashram-style" educational principle, resembling the peripatetic school of India made famous by Rabindranath Tagore, who established a world university at Shantiniketan, whose requirement, as Sutlić puts it, to "detechnify" man's relation to the world as de-alienation, is particularly felt today, in a society of total commercialisation, fetishisation of technological achievements with the economic sphere dominating human interests, and more generally, considering the unimaginative and dry patterns of social nivelation.

In any case, the door should be widely opened to discussion and the possibility of open disputation or polemic (an enemy to any dogmatism), deeper elaboration of problems (these concepts are, however, easy to twist around in order to just legitimise neoliberal indoctrination and make it possible to prepare students for their subsequent functional roles in the capitalist economy). Additionally, only the greatest possible individualisation of teaching would enable the establishment of an educational process capable of meeting the differing needs of pupils (this includes a longing for social equality of chances and compensatory education).

## A TRANSITIONAL MODEL

In order to acquire the general basic education, all the students would be obliged to attend some main courses (mostly all those that we already have now, and in secondary schools I would also introduce continuous teaching of sociology and psychology, and perhaps something like "humanism and democratic relations", as an elaboration of the principles on which the everyday practice would be based, whose interpretations are presently often not easy to listen to) as a basis, with considerably reduced teaching scope. There would also be elective courses (artistic and literary expression, choir singing etc.). Most secondary school students have an idea of their capabilities and affinities, on the basis of which they would be further directed, opting for additional courses in the basic subjects to be learned at a higher level. Conservatives would deny the ability of students to make a proper choice of elective courses (in spite of the fact that it would offer the possibility to attend several courses more intensively). Although it is true that students do not have a very clear picture of their potential future occupation, the fact is that the abolition of the present bureaucratic system, and dedicating more attention to the children, their inclinations and talents, would make it easier for the students to find

the direction that suits them individually, and they could better develop their capabilities and be happier. The economic imperative of the system, on the other hand, encourages the ranking of students according to qualifications, primarily for the sake of the division of labour and further social stratification, as reflected in the existing grading system based on "objective" criteria.

Focusing on several areas, students would better come into contact with those who share their interests and could interact as a group in various projects and discussions that would make a basis for such a creative education. Critical thinking and creativity would be insisted on, generally including deeper cognitive processes, not just memorising, which together with the already mentioned combination of individual and group work, participation in decision making and more direct approach to all the problems present in the society, the contemporary occurrences and processes, and better contact with real life, would make it possible to more completely develop individual student's potentials and better quality of knowledge. In this superstructure students would also be entitled to have mentors, if they chose so.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the long term, the optimum education would probably be deinstitutionalised, "deschooled" permanent education open to all, as sketched for example by Andre Gorz quite some time ago in a discussion in *Les temps modernes*: as opposed to the present situation, educational institutions would become a sort of polyvalent centres (workshops, laboratories, libraries etc.), where anyone could acquire qualifications on their own or with the assistance of persons ready to share their knowledge with others.

Of course, much of what has been mentioned are subversive elements that could not possibly be tolerated by the ruling elites. Some developments towards liberalisation might have to occur in time (primarily because it is the imperative of the economics of production and competitiveness), but it will not be for a long time to come on the basis of the principles I have mentioned above, as this requires substantial social development. It is, regrettably, quite certain that in Croatia the "development" will largely follow suit of the Western (partial) replacement of traditional authoritarianism by "liberal totalitarianism" referred to by Slavoj Žižek (essentially based on the "anonymous authority of persuasion and suggestion", as this more subtle form was characterised by Erich Fromm). However, there are also some positive elements that have already been established in particular segments of the more developed societies (it is the principles of collective work and search for original methods that are characteristic of modern high technology) prompted by modern requirements of "globalisation".

We should not be misguided by the enlightenment ideal of initiating big upheavals solely through education, for the fate of education is largely to be forced into integration and manifestation of the existing social and economic relations, and to reproduce them. The decisive "battles" (in which critical pedagogy is one of the elements) are fought elsewhere, which brings us back to politics or rather its radical form of self-abolition and overcoming that aims at changing the world.

\*This article was written in 2001, when the author was a high school student.

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