

SHIFTING TRENDS / FUTURE POSSIBILITIES: INTERROGATING THE CULTURAL ARTIFACT CALLED HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The ideology behind contemporary trends in Higher education is systematically increasing inequalities between the rich and the poor. Therefore it is part of the agenda of a corporate world order which thrives on lopsided development. First, higher education was lost touch with the vision of emancipatory world order by putting into place a system of knowledge which compartmentalized knowledge in the name of specialization. Thereafter , with the further entrenchment of corporate sector , through the phenomenon called globalization, the ruling elite to further their greed for maximum profitability through increased production but minimum labor has begun to concentrate on Hard Sciences viz nano technology, genetic engineering, computer engineering as the only viable, marketable and relevant kind of knowledge in the contemporary world order.

The paper argues whether such an approach is actually ushering us into a brave new world of total happiness and total freedom that so integral and vital to the vision of the emancipatory project envisaged earlier. Are we really becoming progressively happy? Is increased consumerism an index for happiness? Is it time to sound the death knoll for Humanities, for philosophy? First it was End of History, Death of Author. Now it seems that the techno-centric world is ready to announce the end or death of humanities and social sciences. Is happiness nothing more than equipping our youth with bizarre levels of technology and sophisticated manufacturing skills whereby they intellect itself becomes reduced to the status of a high - premium commodity. Is happiness and progress a bizarre spawning and acquisition and mindless splurging of wealth. The paper seeks to explore this sinister ideology of the corporate world which is out to reduce intelligence education to stocks and shares which has only one quotient -

high yields, high return in terms of invitation to the best party or best marriage prospects (if marriage stills remains relevant) or helping one to indulge in commodity fetishism like being a faultlessly fitting dinner jacket. Quoting the likes of Adorno and Zizek the paper expresses reservations for such a model or higher education which is rapidly advancing depthlessness as depicted by Andy Warhol's retake (Diamond Dust Shoes) on Gogh's 19th century painting "a pair of Boots" . The paper ends with a hope that it is time to declare the end of Simulacrum of such techno-centric parochialism. The very dialectics of the real and reality in society is fast getting problematized. Only an inclusive course of study, in which philosophy and literary studies are major components, would help overcome such a problematic by developing 'a new resistant reading' in higher education

Things fall apart:, the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...
The best lack conviction, the worst are full
Of passionate intensity (Finneran, 187)

The merciless wheels of Civilization has created a bizarre world where human have developed a “gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” , what ‘Civilization this is!’ if we are overwhelmed by shadows of indignant , ruthless men and women... It seems we are moving into a century of darkness ... the result of education and cultural practices gone hay where. The shocking surge in violence , rape, terrorism , rapidly widening gap between the rich and poor, the thoughtless consumerist binging , makes people who have still some traces of sanity left to yearn for a ‘Second Coming’, a ‘ second renaissance’ in knowledge production and its dissemination. Enlightenment, in the most general sense of progressive thought, has always aimed at liberating people from fear ,[from indulging themselves in inane getting and spending] and establishing their mastery over the universe. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant (Hayward, 8).Therefore, the time has come for fundamental changes in higher education so that we develop as holistic beings who have the wherewithal to arrest the helpless but rapid movement a towards the ultimate ‘catastrophe’ a perennial and stony Silence. Already life has become ‘a sordid boon , where getting and spending we lay waste our lives’

Pitfalls of Capitalist Utopia

James Pettras, talks about ‘productive competition’ on the world level. He says that the industrially advanced nations have established certain norms of productivity. They also talk of increasing productivity, and decreasing the cost of production. As a result, the labourers of the third world countries are under tremendous pressure (Pettras, 121). They are exploited more but payed less. In this connection, Amit Bahaduri, Prof. Emeritus, JNU, says that the present production under capitalism is systematically increasing inequalities within a Nation and also among Nations, in order to sustain the present level of production. The products so produced are elite oriented and pamper the buying power of the elite. The production process, therefore, ignores the masses. Amit Bahaduri, questions how long such lopsided development will be carried on or sustained.

Both these observations refer to the stigmata of capitalism, which is manifested through all types of machines and industries designed to promote the interests of a particular class. One such industry is the culture Industry, which is bringing in massive social transformation, through its Shopping Malls, SEZs, Super ways, Expressways, Multi lingual, Cross-over films and Magazines which cater to the elite. Although, this culture Industry has

immense potential for promoting ‘integral freedom’, it is evident that this ‘culture Industry’ is working to block ‘freedom’ (Wilson, 102). How are the two observations made above connected to the concept of culture Industry? How do all these aspects relate to education and knowledge in the present times when we find ourselves “trapped in a quagmire of fossilized, principles that are regurgitated day in and day out,” (Walia, 12) leading to the creation of a cesspool of specializations that have begun to suffocate whatever little that is left of the ‘emancipatory project’ for the world.

Increased Production/ Tecno-centric Education do not mean more Happiness

It would be naïve to think that we can have quick fix answers to such complex issues especially in these times of globalization and mass- culture of consumption. Interestingly, on the one hand we are encouraged to indulge in the free market induced mass cultural products, while on the other; we are creating an entrenched system of education which is gradually getting cut off from political reality which is spawning it. Ultimately, we have created a system of knowledge which has disciplined itself into specialized and disparate courses i.e. we have compartmentalized knowledge. We are aware the process of globalization and industrialization has led to increased production. But have we realized the ideals of an emancipated society? Have we achieved total knowledge and total happiness? Is our education and intellectual quotient shaping up a progressive, society? Is the end of philosophy and the end of criticism/Literary Praxis in institutes of higher learning correct? The policy makers are talking about computers, genetic engineering, nano technology & environmental studies. But philosophy and literary study courses are considered ‘impractical’ and ‘lost subjects’. There are no takers for these courses in contemporary society. In ‘The Tribune’, dated December 28, 2010, there was a news item which stated that “The future of music in state schools is in peril, with countries across the U. K. laying off music teachers ahead of swinging cuts to budget (funding to the tune of 82.5 will cease in March 2011)”. Apart from this, the news items stated that “there is a decision to wipe out all funding for the teaching of arts and humanities courses at university (12)”. The item quoted Prof. Sue Hallam of London University’s Institute of Education that if music funds are cut, and if music and [the arts and humanities] are taken as some kind of ‘Cinderella’ service, the long term consequences can be unimaginably disastrous (12).

In Punjab, a Central University has been opened at Bathinda. No doubt, that there is a department of ‘Culture Studies’ in the University but the stress is to bring in more courses related to genetic engineering, basic engineering, etc. Philosophy and humanities have become marginalized here. Even in Guru Nanak Dev University, there is talk of reducing the workload of teachers of English and Punjabi literature, because it is felt that literature is a dead subject.

These intellectuals, who talk about introduction of new techno-centric courses in institutes of higher learning at the cost of philosophy or literary studies, forget that no course of study can ever move out of the sphere of language. These intellectuals speak as if the language of science and technology has been “constructed, spoken and talked independently of the subject as if it had fallen from the sky or grown out of the earth?” (Irigaray 2005:116). It seems these intellectuals are bent of ignoring the fact language pervades the entire social fabric in various forms. No form is politically neutral (even the language of science is not sex / gender neutral). Just being grounded in science, is not enough to have a truly enlightened mind. The language of science is a language,

With certain sex forgotten? Or a relation between Micro and macrocosm [forgotten]. This [so called scientific] structure of language [has] lost its properties, its propriety, [because] there is a [certain] degree of pathology in [it]" (Irigaray ,116).

Because this language of science has created a language infrastructure that has systematically entrenched a drama of utterance, which is habitually concealing. The 'crisis' in the social fabric of our society is because of this veiling – especially in the context of man-woman relationship, where women have not as yet been able to situate themselves. We are talking in terms of revamping education by introducing techno-centric course, while the ground reality is that women have as yet not been able to emancipate or protect themselves from 'he – she', they have still not be able to achieve a praxis of meaning for themselves. Despite some 'expose' of the circularity of male – discourse in every aspect of society, women's effort in this direction is still in the inceptive stage and encounters a lot of resistance. They have just begun to 'speak-think'. At this challenging threshold of change, it would be a socio-political hari-kari, if the intellectuals and the ruling –class joins to dismantle courses in philosophy and literary studies as is already being done, in the name of 'revamping education' to meet the needs of industry. The unrepresented and the silenced have to be given their share in knowledge and power, which can come only through a more elaborately designed curriculum in institutes of higher studies, as well as middle / secondary level centres of education. This practical---'activism' is calling music, humanities, and especially philosophy to a halt. Why is this being done? Probably, it is done at the behest of the departments of the governments of rich countries which are talking about 'International development' and 'economic growth'. The parameters of economic growth as set by them are: (i) increased consumerism, (ii) happiness and knowledge. These are defined as characteristic undertakings of an emancipated society as envisaged by the super-rich countries. The ideals of such a society naturally become concerned with (i) acquisition of greater knowledge (not of the multi-disciplinary kind or a kind of knowledge that help in understanding of the historical perspectives which need to be assimilated as tools to analyze the social-cultural affairs of the society but the knowledge disseminated is of a very limited, reductionist, parochial kind) (ii) Perpetual increase of economic productivity. This model of emancipated society, is trying to or rather has already made virtue of the pursuit of wealth. In such an emancipated-society, activities like mountaineering and wood work of houses are established as whole some activities. The confused compulsion of conquering strange stars is glorified as visible symbols of economic strength and true knowledge (Wilson, 97). In this world, which puts a huge premium, on bizarre acquisition of capital, Intellect, too, is perceived as a possession. Even, happiness is nothing more than a mere commodified thing to be possessed.

A person's intelligence or education is ranked among the qualities that make him suitable for inviting or marrying, like good horsemanship, love of nature, charm or a faultlessly fitting Dinner-jacket. Intelligence and education are like stocks and shares. It does not matter about the content of intelligence as long as you have it and it yields a high rate of return, such as a good marriage or invitation to the best party (Wilson, 102).

Adorno and the relevance of Philosophy in a Tecno-Crazy World.

Adorno is suspicious of such an emancipated society. He says that such intelligence can only produce rampant destruction and more destitution in society. It has actually led to the creation of a system that is riddled with inequality, poverty, and mass unemployment, giving rise

to the pathologies of the underprivileged who labor under class difference and economic deprivation that in the long run are the main causes of violence, depression, rape, drug abuse, disease, increase in school dropouts and low-mortality rate [Walia,12]. We would only be deluding ourselves that we are living in an emancipated society, if we are coerced into believing the market-oriented vision of society.

In former East-Germany, says Adorno, the inhabitants were constantly reminded that they were living in a society which was finally fit for humanity. This process of make believe, was carried on by putting up large bill-boards with the image of Karl Marx with a caption underneath declaring “we have achieved his ideals”(Wilson,93). Similarly, a political outfit in India, coined a slogan a few years ago which referred to ‘India as shining’. Once again, to take the train of Adorno’s thought forward, such hoardings and slogans are reminiscent of what the advertisers in the western world do. In spite of their efforts to the contrary, their advertisements imply that no emancipated society has been created as yet. Had it been so, there would have been no need for these advertisers to sell car-insurance, pet-food or talk about the existence of a free market for the sale of goods(Wilson,93). It is to critically analyze such complexities of the ruler’s ideology that philosophy can be put to use. In his critical work “why still philosophy”, Adorno asserts that he has a vision of an emancipated society, and in his vision, an emancipated society is one: where we do not have to conform to a centrally imposed set of values like pledging allegiance to the flag but as one in which people could be different without fear- An emancipated society, therefore would not be a unitary state but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences (Wilson,95).

We cannot help, but agree, with Adorno. Should millions starve to death in this world, when literally speaking we have a huge buffer of food grains rotting unconsumed. We have perpetuated a system of kind of knowledge and increased productivity, where we keep huge quantities of food grains as buffer stock, and talk of mountaineering and woodwork as activities worth a robust and refined mind, while millions go starving(Wilson,96).

Intellectuals are guilty of complicity because instead of creating system of education which would have made students highly critical of the “quagmire of fossilized principles that are regurgitated day in and day out“(Walia,12), they legitimized the acts of the ruling class. They helped in entrenching strongly, in the minds of the young people, the beliefs and the ideology of the ‘powers that be’. Shelly Walia, quotes Chomsky to explain further:-

Ideas that circulate in the faculty clubs and executive suites can be transmuted into ideological instruments to confuse and demoralise (Walia,12)

Only a teaching of philosophy, can help us remold this dead and decaying ‘world-order’ where we do not talk and where we do not care about genuine human needs anymore. This world order, has made ‘us’ i.e. humans, servile to pelf and power and made us fashion our conduct in such a way that we have only grandiose desires and elaborate wishes. As a consequence, we have enchained ourselves not to the selfless service of the suffering humanity but to the production of goods. These ‘commodities’ have in vain quenched our insatiable appetites which yearns to gorge some more. This unfettered production has only shackled our

lives to ever –increasing productivity (Wilson,96). This is not emancipatory. Emancipation (Adorno’s kind) is one which seeks to overcome such material hankering by the privileged few. In fact, it aims at universal transcendence of such ‘vulgar appetites’. We have to be critically aware of the fact that ‘international development’ need not just be viewed in terms of ‘heightened economic growth across the globe. We should also be able to see through the trick of ‘fair trade’. Fair trade does not mean ‘fairness’ in dealing to all. It simply means converting the whole world into a market place (Wilson,97). It is not concerned with the ‘sacha sauda’ kind of ‘fair trade’ of Nanak, where it implied that no one must be hungry ever again. But precisely the opposite has happened. Instead of undoing the deleterious impact of such a ‘world-order’, the ‘intellectuals’ have joined hands with the ruling class, to strengthen and perpetuate at system of education which bolsters the foundations of a society driven by ‘large-scale production motive’. This ‘drive’ has made humans, i.e. ‘us, servile to machines instead of the opposite. No doubt, human productive capabilities have been facilitated by this ‘technology creating’ and ‘technology use’ education, but it has also lead to ‘large scale’ standardization of intellect. The subversive content has been ‘tamed’ and ‘effectively covered over’.

This education sans a deep grounding in subjects like philosophy is ‘intellectually empty’, producing as it does ‘push button automatons.’ The intellect, so created, is an ‘inert kind’ of intellect, because the policy makers abhor, (in fact, they are hostile to) the subversive kind of intellect, which can be the outcome if one is deeply grounded in philosophy, in a world which is ‘techno- centric by and large. Such an intellect is by nature independent of anything given or existent. Hence, it is dangerous to the ideology of the ruling class which can only prosper and rule by extinguishing the spark of resistance to the ‘lop sided’ development, (be it mental or material) which is happening today. The vision of an emancipated ‘world –order’ is under seize because of the naked and cold bloodied agenda of profit oriented multi-nationals who are trying harder than ever to halt the study of philosophy. Their singular agenda appears to be to erase resistive thinking/ Independent thinking/ subversive thinking. ‘The world is out of joints and philosophy has the potential along with literary studies to set it right’. The increasing polarity between the rich and poor, the ever increasing racism and oppression and the ‘identity politics’ of the worst kind, is making the course of civilization run amok. It needs to have its unbridled recklessness reined in. According to Adorno, teaching of philosophy can definitely create a résistance to this unbridled flow of the ‘empty’ intellectual’s complicity. Philosophy can check the anachronism of capitalism, because it is itself by nature anachronistic, in the sense, that it resists the mechanisms and process of indoctrination. Being independent, it is subversive and interventionist. Philosophy can provide refuge to freedom. Marx had said. “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways the point is to change it” (Wilson, 93). Marx, when he said this, was not being dismissive of philosophy. Neither is Adorno, a century or so later. He says:

The Actuality of philosophy lies in its interpreting powers. Interpretation is active, not passive. It creates a configuration of reality and out of this constructed reality the demand for reality’s real change follows promptly. Interpretation views the given world in terms of what is and how it ought to be. In grasping the discrepancy between how the world is and

how it ought to be, interpretation demands change. Actual practice must be informed profound insight if it is not to risk blindness (Wilson, 94).

We wish for a society which is violence free. We desire a world where the right-wing fascists can no longer scar the body politic. But no practical change for the better can come about in this world where the teaching of critical theory and philosophy is on the wane. It is high time that such obnoxious distortions are stripped of their intimidating menace. A counter hegemony which challenges the elitist spheres of power and knowledge that is calling philosophy and its teaching to a halt ,needs to be worked out because philosophy “does not merely reiterate what there is, it wakes things from their sleep as it were, on the basis of its independence from those things”(Wilson,95). The present system has greatly objectified things. Philosophy can help us develop a ‘resistant reading’ because it talks from an independent position. This talking from outside the things as they are is inherent in the very nature of philosophy. Consequently, philosophy helps us in becoming critical to the extent that we do not conservatively justify the things as they happen to be .Hence; philosophy is a refuge to freedom. Of course, the opaque jargon of philosophy and other literary studies and theories have to be toned down so that it can easily be disseminated among the masses and help in their ‘consciousness-raising’, which in turn can go a long way in critically molding our appraisal of our culture and society. So indulging in philosophical debates holds the enviable possibility of ‘freedom in thought’ and more importantly, ‘thought in freedom’ (Wilson,102). The structures around which our present day society is organized are very coercive. As a result we make all our decisions and choices which confirm these coercive practices .The freedom which can come about if we are strongly grounded in philosophy, holds immense possibility of criticism. It is through criticism that a transformation of situations is possible. In other words, our survival depends on our moral responsibility and our conviction to challenge the unquestioned foundations of knowledge. Only when we are able to create a theoretical –critical framework which has a liberal intermix of traditional or indigenous constructions, modern scientific theory as well as the cultural and philosophical theories, can we have a genuinely emancipated society. We ought to have freedom to criticize. Freedom implies criticism and a genuinely emancipated society requires a genuinely emancipated practice of theory. Philosophy can therefore be a major instrument of change, because the socio-economic and political practice involved in its teaching can lead to a new kind of academic activism which can alter the very conditions of reading or interpreting. Instead of joining the present knowledge –systems which aim at creating unthinking push-button automatons, the teaching of philosophy could help in bringing thought into the education policies from which thought is increasingly and systematically being banished. The threads which hold together a thoroughly subservient society would become all the stronger if we call the teaching of philosophy to a halt...Understanding Higher Education and the Importance of Philosophy through Zizek, Foucault and Lyotard.

To borrow an idea from Zizek, through from a different context, the type of education we are imparting today is just like the industry flooding the market with products which are:

Deprived of their malignant property : coffee with caffeine cream without fat, beer without alcohol,... [and] virtual sex...sex without sex” (Butler,143)

This education is doing only one thing. It is pushing us headlong into ‘commodity fetishism’, instead of helping us to understand how ideology works. An education which is not grounded in philosophical reflection or critical theory (which is a form of philosophical reflection) is like being grounded in a world of ‘virtual reality’.

Virtual reality simply generalizes the [above mentioned procedure] of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real - in the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and taste like the real coffee without being the real one, virtual reality is experienced as reality without being on” (Butler,143)

The way the policy makers are bent on shaping new educational policies with near total emphasis on technology to cater to the market created by the elite class, we will never be able to have a truly emancipated and enlightened society where the people would be critically aware to analyze issues dialectically. In such a ‘consumer oriented’, ‘technologically-driven society’, we would be urging the young generation to revel in the ‘fantasy images’ generated by the culture industry, where in the name of tolerant and liberal multi-culturalism, we would be ushering them to begin to :

experience the other deprived of [its] otherness [the idealized] other who dances fascinating dances and has an ecologically sound, holistic approach to reality, while features like wife beating remain out of sight (Butler ,143).

This would mean having only a piece meal understanding of our society. The new generation would become used to taking things at their face-value, believing, without reflection, that such ‘packaged products’ of the market have ostensibly superior intrinsic value. They would be in no position to understand or analyze issues and cultural practices by taking into consideration their global strategic circumstances (Butler,149) Zizek asserts, that such analysis of society (critically aware) in a dialectical framework is possible but for that one has to be grounded in philosophy and its allied discourses. In the *Fright of Real Tears*, Zizek says that the difference between first order and second-order philosophical thinking is that while the later involves merely talking mechanically and journalistically reporting about issues and concepts, the former involves in depth elaboration of the issues. This is done by introducing a certain ‘gap’ or ‘void’ in ‘what is’ (Butler ,17) which is in symphony with what Marx and Adorno asserted in the comments mentioned earlier.

In this age of Post-modernism and ‘high end technology’ that is an important ingredient of the cultural logic of late capitalism, such an education which is divested of philosophy in its varying shades, can only lead us to encounter depthlessness on the intellectual and emotional level. Lyotard in his analysis of Vincent Van Gogh’s painting (as an example to explain depthlessness) “A pair of Boots” points out that in the 19th century, this painting had a very rich, bold and sensual depiction of rural life highlighted through the pair of old-worn out shoes worn by a peasant woman as she trod heavily on the solitary paths meandering in the green-fields, complete with the picture of weather-beaten hut, the worn out and broken instrument’s of labour, the furrows and the hearth. But in the same painting reproduced in 1960’s by Andy Warhol entitled ‘Diamond Dust Shoes, there is no illusion of depth and no visual sensual perspective.

The shoes once (lived a context) but in this painting we have a conglomeration of women's shoes painted in tones of gray. Jameson says,

Andy Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes evidently no longer speak to us with any immediacy of Van Gogh's footgear; indeed, I am tempted to say that it does not really speak to us at all. Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer... we are witnessing the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literary sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the post-modernisms (Robert, 127).

A sort of simulacrum is being created by the parochial approach to knowledge consequently, in this 'culture of simulacrum', the very dialectics of the real and reality in society is fast getting problematized. Only an all inclusive course of study in which philosophy and literary studies are a major component would help us overcome such a problematic.

Michael Foucault in *Space, Power, Knowledge*, asserts that to understand and critically analyze the complex changes in society, we cannot ignore the different discourses and values which prevail at any given time. Through the example of chimneys, he elucidates his point. When chimneys were incorporated into the design of a house, it brought a change in interpersonal relations. New interactions were woven around chimneys. But still the mere building of chimneys is not sufficient to explain all changes in subjectivity. Only an understanding of varying discourses would help in explaining changes in subjectivity and the role of chimneys in it. Complex exchanges take place behind simple ideas or practices and it would be a shame to neglect these practices as is being done today in institutions of higher learning, by intellectuals in the name of specializations. Foucault asserts:

Abstract worlds, like 'liberty' and 'rationality' refer neither simply to ideas nor to practices – but to sets of complex exchanges between the two (During, 161).

Therefore, we cannot and (should not) marginalize philosophy and its allied disciplines from the educational policies as is being done today, without a detrimental impact on our consciousness raising.

Urgent need to reorient Higher Education

The above discussion leads us to conclude that we realize that we are at the cross roads where challenges to higher education are manifold. It is high time we begin to get self reflexive and question ourselves seriously about the need to realign and redefine the rubrics of higher education. We have to rethink the purpose of higher education. A mere call for transparency, and greater accountability and fixing responsibility is reflective of impotent minds bereft of ideas which propel change. The compartmentalization of knowledge in the name of specialization; categorising knowledge as 'disparate literatures' and focussing only on techno-centric knowledge has caused much harm. Knowledge has to be 'tied together' -blended holistically in such a way that it fundamentally impacts the purpose of the emerging paradigms of research and education in higher educational centres. There is a clear cut discrepancy between acquisition of

knowledge and attainment of happiness because our acquisition of greater or specialized knowledge is linked with only one thing –perpetual increase in productivity bringing into play , the vicious cycle of exploitation of man and nature alike . Right from the policy level to the institutional level we have to do a bit of brainstorming to create a second wave of institution building leading to a truly emancipated society. An emancipated society is not one which is compelled to attain a complete conquest of stars, but it is one where ‘no one shall go hungry anymore’. Surely, it is a diseased society where millions go hungry while there exists a capacity to feed its inhabitants many times over. It is time to realize that ‘total knowledge and total happiness are not the same thing’(Adorno,96-97).Philosophy has not outlived its utility in the world which is witnessing the ‘rise of the machines’.

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