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EDUCATION IS NOT JUST A SIMPLE GOOD

0. Abstract

In the recent past education has been transformed from a virtual good of value to a consumer good, which is seen under a pure economical aspect. The value is not measured in what it brings to the individual being, it is merely seen as to what it can contribute to the current economic situation of a country. Managerial categories are applied onto all kinds of education and sciences, no matter what the real differences and scientific methods among them are.

1. Non vitae, sed PISA discimus¹

Today the term “education” is mainly used in a quantitative way. Various possibilities of testing the untestable – respectively called “education” – have been developed, with the notorious PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test being the most famous one. They try to measure in a standardized form the educational level of school children at a certain age in various countries, based on the ideas of an international organization called OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). When the ranking of the countries is published, the various ministers responsible for education start lamenting why they are not in the first place in the ranking and they start searching for faults in their country’s educational system. This procedure is very similar in each country and the various reactions do not differ from each other. The ranking inspires a competition among the different secondary school education systems and might lead to a common standardized global education system one day. In Europe, the introduction of the so called Bologna Process has triggered off such an unification process at university level, but so far it has lead to nothing but a gigantic monster of administration, which nutrifies itself out of the funding, which would be better used for its initial purpose: the financing of scientific and scholarly discoveries and the staff working on them.

The education systems of the different countries are under pressure by these standardized testing methods, their students are not tested of what they really know and what they have been educated for, they are tested of their knowledge of some basic competences². However, PISA e.g. does not ask about the knowledge of foreign languages nor does it test the creativity in arts, it simply retrieves the basic mathematical and nature-scientific competences of 15 year old teenagers, who probably are not even interested in filling out the quantitative

¹ Alternation of the Latin phrase „Non vitae, sed scholae discimus“ (Seneca, epistulae morales ad Lucilium, 106, 11-12), in which the philosophy schools of Roma were criticized. The changed version „Non scholae, sed vitae discimus“ is better known, in order to demonstrate that stuff that is learned at school should prepare the students for their future life.

² cf. Münch, 2009, p. 39ff

standardized forms provided by the PISA organization; it simply demands competences in exact sciences, which have been made measurable in a quantitative way³. PISA has achieved something, which has not been achieved anywhere else in science and education: it has made the unmeasurable measurable. Various attempts have been made in sciences, scientometrics being the most famous one, but all have failed in their practicability and acceptance among the scientific community. That leads to the question if knowledge is really measurable in scientific ways.

2. The Triumph of Semi Knowledge

Today's concept of knowledge is based on the idea that the human being is aware of its uniqueness and the recognition of the possibility to achieve nearly every goal that it has set for itself. Of course these goals change within the course of life, but the human being has the ability to realize that its aims are not God-given and an unchangeable destiny, but can be alternated only by itself and education is part of this process of self-awareness, as the human being has the ability - and should also have the courage - to use one's own mind⁴.

So when come to think about that, knowledge and education go hand in hand. In the dark shadows, which these two gigantic terms throw behind them, the dwarfs and trolls of semi knowledge and half education follow very closely and they offer bandwagon jumpers a wide platform of self-production. Together with the money grabbers of the culture industry⁵, half education is portrayed in the media nearly every single day. Mediocre quiz shows provide the chance to give superficial answers to superficial questions, knowledge is reduced to a simple warehouse like storage of information, which can be called upon the plate when needed for a few seconds in order to shine in a bright spotlight⁶. In schools teachers have to compete with these shows in order to create an atmosphere of interest in their classes, otherwise they are standing as lost cases and none of their students will follow their words and explanations closely⁷. In other words, thanks to the mass media and its tight interweavement with the culture industry, the level of education has to be lowered in schools, so that the students can actually follow of what is going on in the world around them without questioning the background of it, or even think about further information sources.

This is what Theodor Adorno calls "socialized semi knowledge [...], the omnipresence of the alienated spirit"⁸. It does not antecede education, it is

³ cf. Münch, 2009, p 37, cf. Lissmann, 2010, p. 74 ff

⁴ cf. Kant, 1923, p. 31ff

⁵ cf. Adorno, 2011, p. 128 ff

⁶ cf. Lissmann, 2010, p. 13ff

⁷ cf. Postman, 2008, p. 174 ff

⁸ cf. Adorno, 1975, p. 66 (trans. WT)

following closely behind⁹. In the shadow of knowledge it is easy to score with the knowing of single sentence quotas and citations of notable dicta to make oneself popular that way. Desultory sentences are thrown around and shallow phrases count more than the profound familiarity with a topic or even a whole subject. But that is not really surprising, when we take into consideration that through the ranking mania the education systems have to “produce” graduates, who know how to answer questions of basic competences in order to achieve higher ranking points for the country, but enhanced and broader knowledge, the basis of personal or even scientific progress, is not valued at all. The introduction of “Universities of Applied Science” (Fachhochschulen) in Central Europe in the mid 1990ies is a clear sign of the times. They were not destined to give the students an education following the idea of an *universitas litterarum* (collectivity of all sciences), as it was the original idea of an university and which would also justify the usage of the name “university”, they were intended to provide the economy with one track specialists only. The English appellation also suggests, that “real” universities would have nothing to do with applied research or science at all, only with fundamental research or they would be some kind of ivory tower, far, far away from reality. The idea of an entirety of knowledge was lead *ad absurdum* that way and semi knowledge in the service of economic interests finally triumphed.

3. Education is just not a simple Good

Economic interests have always tried to influence the education systems in order to “produce” an outcome of graduates, who will provide their labour for economy. That is a good reason – from the economy’s point of view. But the human being is not identical with an economic being. The human being also has other interests and this alone justifies the existence of such disciplines like philosophy, linguistics, arts or other fringe subjects, which take the grey colour out of the daily routine and provide the human being with mental nutrition, far away from sole numbers and profit charts. But these scholarly fields also need a fertile soil to be able to develop themselves. If the chance for development is not provided, then they die and remain dead subjects. Only with a broad education it is possible to provide this breeding ground for the future. Therefore the individual curricula should also take care of bringing in related fringe subjects into them, and this should also be thought about in a sustainable matter.

Oskar Negt puts it that way: “Education is a way of warehouse storage [...] which can not be substituted by Just In Time production”¹⁰, and: “Today progress deals mainly with problems of the past and handle them and education is merely like a warehouse storage in qualitative sense. Not in a hamster way, to protect the stock against competition. It’s more like building up a stock in a way

⁹ cf. Adorno, *ibid.* (trans. WT)

¹⁰ cf. Negt, 2010, p. 31 (trans. WT)

of intentional acquirement: to internalise thoughts, terms, views, symbols, which you can't use right away, but can be decisive in certain situations of life. This setting up of intellectual warehouses, which are a matter of course for the inner lead human, contradicts the current dominating ideology of emptying warehouses cost effectively out of economical reasons. But Just In Time production does not really save costs, it just shifts these costs when the entire stock of goods is transported on the streets. [...] this mentality penetrates more and more the education institutions, as if the imminent application of knowledge would really contribute something to character formation. [...] we can learn a lot from Humboldt still"¹¹

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¹¹ Negt, 2010, p. 75 (trans. WT)

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