

The Ass Between Two Chairs

A Communique to the Copenhagen Free University

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“Become many, brave the outside world,
split off somewhere else...” Michel Serres

Education systems are crumbling. Whatever country it is to which we do not belong, whatever state or nationality we have been abstracted into, whatever desire it is that can never be granted... we can agree that education is concerned with the reproduction of conformist subjectivities; it produces isolated beings rather than social becomings, it produces conscientiousness rather than self-consciousness, political emancipation rather than human emancipation.

As the factories disappear, new factories open. Factories of facts, data and information. Factories that put the final gloss on socially enforced ignorance with a machine-tool monitoring. Here people are made to want to be follower-factotums. Children - careerists; careerists - children. So, the enlightenment project has succeeded: sensual apprehension has been driven out of mind by too much education. The general intellect has been copywritten.

Nowhere does the link between the state and a capital that presupposes it, show itself up more revealingly than in education. We were never educated for a practice of life but, instead, were disembodied for a non-practice of work. Split faculties. They never mentioned that learning could be a matter of a “desire-to” or a “desire-for”. No. They left it so that we did not know what our desire could be until it was too late, until we desired the job and became libidinally attached to it. Dependent on needs we know not wherefrom they came.

So, the educational qualification amounts to this: it is a form of value. We know that money makes equivalencies; it reduces the differences between things to something that can be measured by the same form. The educational qualification reciprocates by reducing human differences to the same standard of measurement: it awards our aptitude to reproduce the already “known”. Both forms of value operate by providing the “practical illusion” of difference: just as differences in price cover over the profit motive so too do adjudicated differences in ability cover over a hierarchical structure that instills ambition.

Your certificate is a cheque. You're in the queue to realise its value. As with all queues there's time to reflect: what they call “knowledge” is really only a knowing how to conform without thinking about it; a downgrading of experience to the point of your being made ashamed of the ellipses of intuition. What they call

“qualification” is really only your being sanctioned to dispense with any desire to know; it’s the freedom that comes with arrogance. So, education creates perfect citizens: knowledge is not practiced but possessed, it becomes private property and is attracted to those states and corporations that know how to accumulate masses of the same thing, that offer their interest.

As an “associate-researcher” of the Copenhagen Free University I have temporarily adopted and adapted a Nietzschean maxim: “knowledge; i.e., a measuring of earlier and later errors by one another” (1). Too often, it seems, we are witness to a wielding of “knowledge” that is quite the reverse of the openness that Nietzsche had in mind. “Knowledge” is either wielded like a weapon or placed into conversation like a rampart; it is a form of attack-defence that blocks any flow, an operation sanctioned by the education system whereby a modicum of difference from the prevailing norm is celebrated not for its critical purport, but for the way it bolsters an economy of knowledge that is in conformity to private property: a culture of individualism rides eloquently over the social relations that bore it.

This operation, the ring-fencing of ideas, their being attributed to individuals rather than to practiced social relations, is one factor that has always made “knowledge” into value for capitalism. Knowledge is an acquisition, a property, and, as such it needs insurance and protection. This is afforded by the labour of coherence: knowledge becomes aestheticised, hermetic, when it is made to take on forms and structures that alienate it from the practical sensuousness of discovering and sharing (a book is overcoded and copy-protected); knowledge becomes currency when its bearers seek the securities of non communicating certainty and in so doing exacerbate the autistic social relations of private property through seeking commendation for the possession of the same patchwork coat each of us wears.

Here we have another ramification of the education system. Its costs are high. Dangerously so. For in touting learning as possession, in thereby instilling intellectual property rights, there is the reinforcement of ego boundaries. Knowledge, in being pegged to the individual as gradated value, becomes a contributing factor in social separation rather than a proof of social wealth, abundance. In the absence of equitably distributed social wealth and its concomitant reevaluation of needs, the psychic cost of relating knowledge to possession is immense: knowledge becomes a rarefied object rather than a diffuse activity, it hardens into certainties that become dogmatic thus making us reluctant to experience the emotional suppleness of not-knowing. When there is always something to prove rather than to discover, a result instead of an exposure to “error”, individuals become autistically attached to themselves and not precipitates of social practices, intuitions of relations. Our education systems offer us self-demonstrative fulfillment rather than social-remonstrative questioning: knowledge bureaucratised in a paper trail that could have been a tinder-flint.

For Nietzsche “knowledge” is a practice that allows for the traumatic and time-wasting experience of being wrong. This is one way of coming to re-appreciate that what we “know” is intimately tied-up with a sensuality, an emotional investment. It is in history and in our own history. Reminiscentive (2). Just as Nietzsche defies the customary split between “earlier” and “later”, there should be no

boundary between what we know and how we know we feel it. What we know is not a possession, but an achronological modality of feeling, an emotional continuum. Knowledge is mood in modulation. Crucial to this is the social-relation that Nietzsche places firmly in the midst of his fleeting definition of knowledge: it is the combination of an openness to admit "error" and the socialisation of being-amongst that can make knowledge into a mode of intimacy. We come to know other people through how they feel their knowledge, how they express it. Here we begin to depart from the notion of knowledge as a value that separates people (alienation of grading, patrolling of ego boundaries) and come to see knowledge as that which, far from being a coherent object, is a "labour process" that must be enabled to reveal both its means of production (social relation) and its means of expression (celebration of "error") if it too is not to contribute to the reification of social wealth as "scarcity". It could be tinder-flint, a spur to social change: the abolition of property goes hand in hand with an exposure, an abandonment of our "self" to "error". In one of his last works Foucault has written: "Does not the entire theory of the subject have to be reformulated once knowledge, instead of opening onto the truth of the world, is rooted in the 'errors' of life?" (3). We could perhaps add that such a knowledge, a sensualised knowledge that demands empathy, could reformulate the subject as a pre-individual, as caught up in a non-definitive affectivity, and could have wider ramifications than those envisioned by Foucault. Being able to be practiced everywhere, being capacitated to setting up relational contexts and situations, such a knowledge "rooted in the errors of life" would no longer have need of an education system that offers itself as a pivot between the state and private property.

Is it not that the Copenhagen Free University is attempting to offer an enabling change in context? To be between chairs with an off-knowledge? To know to feel? What occurs when knowledge is valorised is the same as happens when our capacity to produce renewal is stifled into wage labour. We have no sensuous relation with the objects we produce. Education alienates. Its institutional spaces are stock markets. Its educators are stipended tellers filled full with the arrogance of functional curriculums. There is a business of knowledge and no volition.

Rene Daumal: "I thought I knew a few things quite well. Since then, however, I've been pushed into a corner and I've regurgitated my small appearance of understanding. Now I know that I know only in order to be silent. No more knowing, not yet understanding, the ass between two chairs, tell me is it a position for discourse?" (4). This could be the context for a free university - to be between "two chairs" in the way Daumal means - to have to levitate, to refuse to sit comfortably, to be exposed to "error" - means that educators should be "idiots", which is to say, we are all educators with nothing much to prove, but with many "errors" to share. Only "idiots" can want to research, find out; only "idiots" can have "error" feel through them enough to make desire-to-know a force, a production of knowledge-objects that can carry affectivity, that, being a practice of pre-individuals, are "not yet understanding".

In this light, before arriving at "knowledge" and hence perpetually subverting its commercial value, there can be no divisions between teachers and students. More. There can be no more curriculums, but participants who, meeting as pre-individuals, willingly share their own ignorance. In this way there cannot only be the production of affective-objects (passion can come from what there is to know, not from the already known), but the production of a crucial solidarity. As with

that solidarity that could be formed in the factory environment, the new means of production, knowledge, could become a similar factor in cohesiveness. It is necessary for such a solidarity to inform the context, to be in-built into the social relation, for coming to people with your own error is traumatic: we must “suffer an alteration (a becoming other) through learning. Whoever already possesses knowledge... is not obliged to suffer an alteration” (5). This is perhaps why the education system fails and produces individuals who are taught to possess knowledge and why initiatives like those of the Copenhagen Free University, that come together on the premiss of the freedom of “failure”, are not so much aiming at potential knowledges to sell as at practices of knowledge that are creative of becoming: non-definitive affectivity of pre-individuals.

How is knowledge practiced? To begin to grope we could perhaps offer that the basic activity of the Copenhagen Free University, the activity that institutes its social relation, is speech; simple relational talking. But, how does this social practice of speech effect the “knowledge” that a university is supposed to produce? In the social relational space of the Copenhagen Free University it could be said that an “object of knowledge” does not form from those “myriads of drifting minds” (6) that are not minded individually, but comes to be attributable only to a relational context by means of which subjects can reformulate themselves as the precipitate of histories of interaction, as pre-individuals displaced by their affectivities. With speech, then, language, the conduit of knowledge, the means of “knowing things” and a “self”, is made malleable by the immediacy of its practice. The uncensored enters into it as an associative interruption and any resultant “knowledge” is sensualised ... immeasurable ... continuously open (7).

When we speak to each other we do not simply exchange quanta of information, but practice language by means of an erring and meandering speech that has no definitive object. Rather than finding the “last word”, rather than drawing the conversation to a close, this very spoken stumbling, the feeling in intonated language, is itself the presence of intervening emotion. The presence of “error” in what we say, assured by the emotional quotient in an unedited sentence, means that we experience our practice of language as an effort of articulation that is premissed on what Giorgio Agamben has referred to as the “unsayable”. Whereas a defined “object of knowledge” in all its various guises as “truth”, “coherence”, “judgement”, hinders the will to communicate, the unsayable, not only makes communication a necessity, but, as a thought-emotion beyond our grasp, is creative of becoming.

If, for some, then, it is an immense effort to speak it is perhaps because our experience of the education system is one that, not premissed on “error” and paying no cognizance to the unsayable in each - the same struggle with articulation whatever the potentially expressed content - instills in us a notion that to speak is to speak the “truth” of a centred self. So, an education system that judges and measures, that has a conception of “knowledge” that is viewed as appropriate to a “self” effects a servility that is linked to a diminishment of the unsayable: like a mass produced object that which has already been said is repeated in the hope of commendation. Rather than an “object” of knowledge becoming sensualised through speech-acts informed by “error” and openness, which in turn leads to a reformulation of the subject, everything and nothing becomes sayable and we not only have a diminishment of the desire to gather together to

communicate to know, but a standardisation of the means of expression. In short, we have the “sayable” as politics; the covering-over of “error”.

Following on from this it should be said that the pursuit of the unsayable as the spur to a sensualised practice of knowledge is not another way of seeking an original formation of thought, something entirely new or filled with “genius”. These latter are what form an “ideology of knowledge” that reinforces the whole idea of individuals being in possession of some “object” of knowledge that is measureable (or capacitated by a certificate). What militates against this pervasive outlook is that when knowledge is practiced as speech in a context of solidarity it is not knowledge that takes on a life of its own (alienated object), but the relation between participants who come to a practice of life by means of being free to express themselves regardless of institutional legitimisation. The “unsayable” in this instance, then, is the spur to singular means of expression, which is to say, the risk of improvised thought coupled to the risk of saying it with a language that is not only enabled to speak of experience and intuition (i.e. outlawed conjecture), but can become acknowledged as originating in a speech-act made original by its time, place and interlocutors. Does this not amount to an affectivity that reformulates the subject as a composite of the context: a pre-individual? So, so many sensuous deceptions that deceive a sense of self, so much becoming: “I invented the colour of vowels... I organised the shape of every consonant, and by means of instinctive rhythm, flattered myself that I was the inventor of a poetic language, accessible sooner or later to all the senses” (8).

Taking a cue from Rimbaud it may be that the question of knowledge is a misnomer. How can it be differentiated from sensual experience? How can it be separated from an emotional investment? The reason seems to be that knowledge, prized as a commercial value, must be failsafe. As a component of production it must take on the greased, metallic turns of fixed capital, it must be that which is regurgitable without glitch. But this is knowledge in its alienated form: as information that cannot admit of its basis in “error”. Admitting this basis would not only create the “absolute doubt” that Charles Fourier pursued, but it would necessitate an awareness of the emotional component in what we “know”, which is to say, following Nietzsche’s maxim of the ‘falseness’ of emotions per se, that what we “know” would become a matter for experimental personae in conflict with a sense of self shored-up by the activity of possessing.

The much instilled mania for paraphrasing, for getting at an “essence”, for “finical criticism”, has the effect of severing knowledge from sensual experience and thus makes the effort to say the unsayable even more of a non-starter. The narrative form of knowledge (pedagogy), with all its indicators of being rehearsed, with its need to keep within the bounds of a syllabus, comes to police any improvisational speech-act that takes its impetus from intuited experience: the attempt to recount a tale “as” another person, an enactment of another, reveals “knowledge” as a matter of bringing emotion into expression by means of experimental personae, a play of the “false”, a becoming the “other”.

The emotions cannot be trusted so we sever them from our utilitarian conception of “knowledge”. As “variable labour” they cannot be trusted because they are destabilising, they urge us to alternate, to be receptive, to be between forms, between chairs, to be error-ridden, to “suffer an alteration”. As the

“unsayable” they urge us to become rather than to be. Rather than this be a case of the inferiority of emotions in relation to the powers of conceptualising, we could say that emotions, being compounds of feelings and receptivity to place and to others, are what can redraw knowledge as our capacity to be “affected”. This is maybe what Marx meant when he offered that the “senses have... become theoreticians in their immediate praxis” or what, much later, Deleuze meant when, in his last work, he offered that “sensation is pure contemplation” (9). For both is it not that the illegibility of emotions, their imperviousness to instant expression in language, is what provokes in us a form of thought that cannot be readily articulated; a form of thought that subtends what we call “knowledge”; a means of expression that is a sub-tense marking out what is “unsayable”?

The ramifications of this for the Copenhagen Free University or any akin initiative of self-institution are manifold: with “error” rather than “expertise” as the watchword there are no barriers, patrolled by experts, placed before participation which means that trust comes to replace judgement; that the “unsayable” is identified as the impetus to a winning of the means of expression means that there is a permanent constituting tension played out in improvisational speech-acts or through a clash of differing means of expression i.e. lingual, visual, aural; that there is a sensitivity to “knowledge” as that which is subtended by the “theoretical” work of the senses means that “contemplation” is valued as a constant attribute of lives lived in practice.

But perhaps the most telling ramification is that capital’s benign relaunch as a “knowledge economy” has not only effected a “for-profit” colonisation of the education system but, by having “knowledge” as a component in the production of value it has redrawn the question of the “revolutionary organisation”. Whereas the left has managed to produce much knowledge and theory it has consistently failed to bind knowledge to social experience in such a way as to undermine the paradigm of the education system. Be it “summer schools” or “seminars” the same social relation has been replicated, a relation to knowledge as private property rather as a modulation of social experience, a glut of the sayable rather than a reach for the unsayable, a dogmatic “making true” rather than an experimental “making false”. Such an adoption of the educational paradigm with its fear of “error” and its mania for “empirical affidavits”, means that its associated authoritarian and defensive positions are perpetuated at the expense of an affectivity that increases participation by being creative of trust and solidarity. The Left falls into the trap of overestimating the power of an informatised knowledge to change things: if only people knew what was going on...

That “labour power” is becoming more explicitly equatable with “knowledge” is nothing new - what is a syllabus if it is not a manufacturing blueprint upon which both teachers and students labour to complete? But, what is maybe new about the situation is that it reveals that there has always been a knowledge component to labour whether our work was classed as “intellectual” or “manual”. Whether “knowledge” is seen as raw material or private property it is still that, a means of production, through which we are defined as “labour power”. The point, then, is that capital is not just saying that it wants our “labour power”, but that it wants our “knowledge”. In the terms we have discussed knowledge here this represents a request for our very sensuality: capital has always been bio-political production; it has always aimed at the subsumption of surplus energies. Similarly, under the

terms of the “knowledge economy”, the wage-relation remains unchanged and the question to pose is still one of reappropriating the means of production and taking control of our own energies, our own “intermutuomergent” desires.

So, rather than its being a matter of our having to work to live, to be the objects of a labour process, it should be possible for us to live to work, to produce our own becoming: “the only thing distinct from objectified labour is non-objectified labour, labour which is still objectifying itself, labour as subjectivity” (10). This process of objectifying our work under our own terms, in our own time and by means of our own institutional contexts is what differentiates it from its being objectified for us in the education system or at a place of work. Such institutions have always been underwritten by the presupposition of private property, but if we begin to view knowledge as collective endeavour, an activity premised on the idea of the “error” of emotion, an assemblage of desiring-energy, then could it be that any resultant “knowledge” could challenge the concept of “labour” itself?

The notion of a “knowledge economy” can present an opportunity to shift the space of struggle to meet bio-political production head on. If it is that the “object” of bio-political power is the production of subjects - a production based on the premise that an individual is the paradigm of private property (an “owner” of genes) - then, “labour as subjectivity”, what Marx has elsewhere called “free expression” and “the enjoyment of life”, is still the stake in any revolutionary endeavour. Is this endeavour tantamount now to a fledgling politics of becoming? Under the regime of bio-political power we could say that the subject is reduced to a knowable being rather than an unknown and unforeseeable becoming. The possible is reduced to what is probable, empirically ascertainable and exhaustible. Here knowledge, to quote Nietzsche, is “possible only only on the basis of belief in being” (11), and it is a knowledge that reduces life to a state of equilibrium by excluding the non-knowledge of the emotions, the sensuous knowledge of affectivities. These latter, as provocations to forms of thought that resist categorisation as “knowledge” and as such defy the surety of being, are factors that can inform a “labour as subjectivity” and secure its potential to resist a bio-political power that values “knowledge” as that which reinforces being as an object, that delineates it to the point of incarcerating it. So, is it not that free university initiatives, in contesting the relation between knowledge and economy, are tantamount to new forms of revolutionary organisation? Can they be factories of everyday life wherein knowledge is sensualised away from its status as private property to become a component in the production of subjects as “non-definitive affectivities”? Can these factories produce pre-individuals as the affective classes?

No more occupations!

Put the ass between two chairs!

All Power to the Affective Classes!

Notes

- 1) Friedrich Nietzsche: *Will To Power*, Vintage 1968, p. 281.
- 2) James Joyce: *Finnegans Wake*, Penguin 2000, p. 23.
- 3) Michel Foucault: *Life: Experience and Science* cited by Giorgio Agamben in *Potentialities*, Stanford University Press 1999, p. 221.

4) Rene Daumal: "Between Two Chairs", *Nouvelle Review Française*, March 1936. Translated by Louise Landes-Levi for *Text* 7, 1978.

5) Giorgio Agamben: *Potentialities*, *ibid.*, p. 179.

6) James Joyce, *ibid.*, p179. Could also insert here Joyce's phrase "intermisunderstanding minds", *ibid.*, p. 118.

7) Cfr. Gilles Deleuze: "... interactions caught at the point where they do not derive from pre-existing social structures and are not the same as psychic actions and reactions, but are the correlate of speech-acts or silence, stripping the social of its naturalness, forming systems which are far from being in equilibrium or invent their own equilibrium - interactions are established in the margins or at crossroads, constituting a whole mis-en-scene or dramaturgy of daily life, opening up a field of special perception..." See Deleuze: *Cinema Two*, Athlone 1989, p. 227.

8) Arthur Rimbaud: *Collected Poems*, Oxford 2001, p. 135.

9) For Marx see "1844 Manuscripts" in *Early Writings*, Penguin 1975, p. 352. For Deleuze see citation by Agamben, *ibid.*, p. 233.

10) Karl Marx: *Grundrisse*, Penguin 1971, p. 272.

11) Friedrich Nietzsche, *ibid.*