

THE TRAGEDY OF HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

by BOGDAN SUCHODOLSKI

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1. ADAPTIVE AND CRITICAL EDUCATION

History reveals education to be a process of adapting the younger generation to the needs of the existing material and spiritual civilization. This process is based on the conviction that civilization is the total of the knowledge and abilities which have to be assimilated for further development. It is also expressed through the view that civilization is the total of the values and norms as well as models of life that people have to adopt in their social and individual lives.

Such an understanding of civilization allows teachers to organize and to conduct their own activities. It is true that the history of education has witnessed a current of criticism which has questioned the authority of the existing civilization and has offered the vision of school reform and of a different future society. But this criticism came from eminent creators of educational concepts, such as Comenius, Pestalozzi or Rousseau, and has not spread to entire societies.

Today, this system of relationships and dependencies has changed fundamentally. While contemporary civilization has become more complex, and its requirements in the scientific and technological field have increased, a number of dangers and cataclysms are to be observed which give rise to concern and anxiety for the future. The task of adapting the younger generation to the scientific and technological needs of this modern civilization has to be supplemented by a critical analysis of the possible consequences of its realization.

2. CIVILIZATION THREATENED

For the first time in history, the civilization created by man, while improving his living conditions on this earth, is increasingly threatening him. For centuries the human race feared nothing but natural disasters. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts and floods, fires and epidemics are a threat to fragile human civilization. Today nature no longer threatens civilization, but civilization threatens itself. The ecological movement has unmasked this failure of civilization. The devastation of the environment has exceeded local concerns and has become a problem of cosmic scale. It is no longer a matter of polluted earth, water or air in different regions of the world, but of danger to the whole planet, which is threatened by the shrinking of the protective ozone layer. Increasingly the question arises: will the earth survive?

The discovery and the use of nuclear energy is a global problem as well. With some difficulty, we manage to prevent the use of this form of energy for military purposes, but people of our time constantly fear that the fragile barrier may be broken one day. Even the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes arouses anxiety, as a possible catastrophe would have tragic effects on both earth and sea and would persist for decades or even centuries to come.

Shall we manage to save our natural environment? Shall we be capable of dominating the dangerous forces which humanity has discovered, like the sorcerer's apprentice? And if so, how? In other words, how can we reconstruct our technical, scientific, urbanized and industrialized society, so that it does not become a danger to itself?

But criticism of modern civilization not only concerns ecological and nuclear problems, but also shows up the social and economic conditions of life. It is difficult for us to realize that our affluent and comfortable society comprises at the same time misery and famine. Millions of people live without shelter, deprived of medical care. The number of illiterates does not diminish: on the contrary, it increases despite efforts to make education accessible to everyone. Differences in standards of living, expressed in per capita income, are considerable and are not likely to decrease. The wealth of the North grows while the misery of the South becomes worse. The way of life in the rich industrialized countries fascinates the poor countries, which more than ever become conscious of their own misery. At the same time, increasing demographic growth leads to almost disastrous living conditions in many countries.

Rising international tension and conflicts throughout the world can be observed. With much effort peace between the superpowers is being maintained, but local wars in several parts of the world continue. They flare up and die down persistently in the Middle East, in Asia, Africa and South America. They devastate countries with ancient cultures such as the Lebanon, Ireland, Ethiopia, Iran and Iraq. There are several reasons for these conflicts: tribal feuds and nationalist movements, problems linked to decolonization, the desire to exploit the wealth of natural resources or to seize power. These conflicts and wars harden aggressive attitudes: dictators emerge and new kinds of fascism triumph. The human being no longer counts but becomes the enemy that is to be destroyed. The fundamentalism of different groups leads to violence with the aim of annihilating those who think differently.

This global pattern makes us aware of a major crisis of values. The great religions turn out to be weak and are often abused by fanaticism and fundamentalism. In their minds and their hearts people do not support secular culture. A huge crisis of values and authority has spread across the entire world. Dictators use grand ideas to manipulate the history of their peoples. People who have been deceived many times by ideologies escape from the world of politics and take refuge in the world of consumerism. This is the sign of the disappearance of authentic values. In contrast to consumer societies, those of domination and violence implement programmes of conflict and extermination of their fellow citizens, who are treated like enemies. Tribal feuds and nationalist struggles lead to wars and the misery of whole nations. The price of human life has become very cheap, while at the same time we make declarations about the protection of human rights.

3. HUMANIZING THE WORLD AND MANKIND

Under these conditions, education faces two significant groups of problems. First, the question to be answered is how to prepare the younger generation so that they can protect and reconstruct our contemporary civilization and develop it further. Secondly, we have to find the answer to the question how to live in a world full of chaos, danger, injustice and prejudices; how do we create and realize the values determining the sense of life? These two groups of problems cannot be separated. The improvement of civilization and the implementation of a programme of extension of the humanistic idea in the human mind are inseparable. This programme, which we shall call a programme for the humanization of the world and mankind, gives rise to the question: how can this aim be achieved through education?

So-called humanistic education gives attention to the problem of the “repair of human things”, as Comenius put it, meaning the world of objects as well as that of subjects. I shall present some principles of this education and, while pointing out its difficulties, shall try to justify why I am speaking of the tragedy of humanistic education (“la pédagogie de l’humanisme tragique”).

4. EDUCATING ABOUT THE SOLITUDE OF MAN WITHIN THE COSMOS

In raising the issue of the value and meaning of life, humanistic education has to make reference to yet higher ideals. It has to be an education of metaphysical solutions, even if we do not admit this willingly. From this point of view, we can define humanistic education as that of the solitude of man within the cosmos.

Several attempts have been made to justify human values by rooting them in the natural order, but this justification has proved inadequate. Today we have difficulty in accepting the optimistic conviction that we are “children of the universe”. Rather, we resent our experience of solitude in the vast universe. Like Kant, we can perceive the sublimity of the vault of heaven sprinkled with stars, but this is only a projection of our feelings directed into an obscure and indifferent cosmos. It would be difficult to gainsay the solitude of man within this universe and to deny that our civilized world is exclusively based on the work of man. We are alone in the universe and nobody can guarantee the rightness of our actions.

5. DIALOGUE WITH TRADITION

Educating about the solitude of man within the universe nonetheless has at its disposal valuable educational material. This material is the history of culture, which has already been used for centuries in education. But, in the educational process, is it possible to exploit this universal history of culture unreservedly and without risks? The difficulty is to be seen in the conflict between existence and knowledge. At the level of consciousness, the history of culture can be presented in our contemporary life, but at that of existence, this is no longer possible.

We may know a lot about Greece, the Roman Empire or Christianity, but it is not possible to live at the same time like a Greek, a Roman or even less like a Christian. The authenticity and the spontaneity of our existence needs existential fidelity. Without keeping this fidelity, everything which occurs in our culture becomes an interesting spectacle but is not very important for life. It is a way of constructing the setting and not life itself. Of course we can and should admit that the cultural reality in which we live is of utmost importance. But at the moment it is no longer supported by tradition, which is becoming a mere decoration of life.

Let us go further in this analysis of educating about solitude. If the cosmos is silent and indifferent to our aspirations and our hopes, if history supplies us with a number of dead values, we must dig deeply into our own conscience.

Well before Hegel, Wilhelm Humboldt pointed in a profound analysis to the process of alienation which can take place in the historical education of the human being. Traditional cultural values can enrich us, but they can also provoke this kind of alienation. It is a dramatic tension which becomes sometimes tragic. How can we save the values of tradition and at the same time safeguard the personality of man and ensure that he remains faithful to his personality?

6. DIALOGUE WITH SOCIETY

This grand dialogue of the living with the dead leads us to the following aspect of tragic humanistic education, namely the attitude taken by the individual towards contemporary opinions concerning the world and life, towards generally accepted ideas and towards model life styles. There are two possible ways to form this attitude. We can have confidence in the intellectual atmosphere of our milieu, or we can oppose these ideas and trust only personal experiences.

In the first case we find support for our opinions, but at the price of our individuality. In the second case we protect our independence but we run the risk that our positions will be questioned. It needs character to maintain them. Both of these ways are difficult and both include tragic elements.

These elements become more obvious as soon as the selection of one of the two ways not only requires an intellectual choice but also appropriate action.

Thus arises the dramatic problem of tolerance: more precisely, the exercise of tolerance when one is convinced that one is in possession of the truth. Usually this conviction leads to the need to proclaim the truth to others and to convert those who do not yet know it. Very rarely this happens by a missionary method, without violence. Fundamentalism in its different forms leads to fanatical and aggressive actions. But how can we reconcile the conviction that we know the truth with the principle of not imposing it on others? Can we hide the truth which should enlighten others as well? Tragic responsibility rests both on those who hide the truth and on those who use it in the name of fanaticism.

Another anti-humanistic variation on the conception of society and of the role of the individual is the tendency to exclude the human being from the image of the social milieu. Man is degraded and deprived of his qualities as a human being both when society is regarded as an organism as well as when it is seen as a mechanism. Under these conditions, social education is understood as the introduction into the objective world of social and economic dependencies, and as a demonstration of development mechanisms. Humanistic education cannot accept these conceptions. It takes on the risk of defending man by allying itself with those currents of social thinking which stress the primordial role of man in the development of civilization. The question of the possibilities of education in this field often leads to difficult and dramatic situations. They reveal the destiny of man, sometimes tragic in his solitude, sometimes victorious in achievements made in common with others.

The way to success is full of obstacles. One of them, which deserves special attention, is the poisonous fascination of grand ideas. Every activity in the interest of grand aims always seems to deserve approval. The old proverb that the end justifies the means is still a temptation. According to the humanistic vision of the world, it is specific intentions and activities which count.

A Polish poet expressed as follows the truth about specific responsibility: He loves his fellow men? Why then does he flee from them? Because he loves humanity and not the human being.

This test of true love of man serves to show the authenticity of community feeling, and to reveal the evil hidden behind the masks of remote ideas.

7. THE GREATNESS OF MAN AND THE MEDIOCRITY OF PEOPLE

The problems of the individual in society and those of man's responsibility for specific actions lead us to yet another group of problems which are particularly important for tragic humanistic education. These problems can be expressed in the question: why are people so mediocre, while Man is so great? This leads our attention to the multiplicity of evil, usually well hidden, within people. Contemporary psychology and anthropology have uncovered the great extent of this obscure truth in the nature of man. The diversity of this evil is very broad: from aggression and destructiveness, vengeance and cruelty, to indifference towards the beauty of values and the discipline of conscience.

Humanistic education deals above all with the manifestations of evil which remain within the limits of relative normality. Education does not aim at eradicating criminality. But the elimination of relatively normal evil is itself an important task. The famous dialogue between the Grand Inquisitor and Christ in Dostoyevsky's novel contains an excellent example of this evil. Christ offers freedom to the people and promises to unite them in the name of love. This is a programme for good people. But the Grand Inquisitor knows they are not good. The people want to be rid of their freedom as soon as possible and to make the Grand Inquisitor responsible for their sins. And he also knows that the people are not capable of disinterested love as they willingly hold out their hands to beg humbly for bread. By taking all responsibility on himself, by organizing forced labour, and by allowing the people freedom, satisfaction and even sin, the Grand Inquisitor gains power over the masses. The Grand Inquisitor has Christ burnt, Christ who has brought chaos by returning to earth on a mission of freedom and love. The stern High Priest knows very well that the masses will follow him, happy to be slaves who can sin.

Dostoyevsky's novel shows the tragic horizons of the interests of men who, by their nature, do not want to be true human beings.

What conclusion can we draw from this reality for humanistic education? How should we act so that man does not fear freedom and demands more than bread? Will the humanization of man fail, and will the Grand Inquisitor burn all those who, with love and courage, call upon the people to use their freedom in order to build a better life?

These hopes and failures once again reveal the tragic destiny of authentic education. Dostoyevsky's novel can be transposed to the realities of education today. We can see that what is at issue is the failure of the idea of an educative *polis* and the triumph of a consumer society. The contradiction between these two views of life and education hides a tragic conflict between the freedom of creation and the satisfaction of satiety.

8. TRAGEDY IN EUROPEAN CULTURE

This concludes my review of the problems of tragic humanistic education. I know that the tragic motif running through my reflections may be surprising. But it is enough to think for a moment to see that this is indispensable, because authentic education is the question and not a superficial preparation for utilitarian social functions. Education has always been profoundly linked to the tragic vision of life and death. It is only in appearance that it is an unexpected and deceptive paradox.

At the roots of the grand theory of educational practice we find two great personalities: Socrates, who learnt to use wisdom in the process of self-learning, and Christ, who taught love of others. It was men who killed both of them, and their deaths confirm the tragic message of education.

And it is this understanding of education which is of the essence of European culture and leads particularly to the notion of the tragic. This is an aspect of that hope which is confirmed even by failure and which finally shows itself victorious.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

BOGDAN SUCHODOLSKI

Bogdan Suchodolski was for 22 years Professor of Education at Warsaw University, Poland and was Director of the Institute of Pedagogical Sciences from 1958 to 1968, during which period he was also Head of the Laboratory of History of Science and Technology in the Polish Academy of Science. From 1969 he was a member of the Academy's Presidium. From 1969 to 1973 he was President of the International Association for the Advancement of Educational Research and from 1968 to 1971 Vice-President of the Académie internationale de l'histoire des sciences.

Author of several publications.