

Dehumanisation and education

Article version of a talk given by Gurnam Singh at a Coventry University UCU Teach out Event on 27/1/20

Can I begin by congratulating Coventry UCU for coming up with the idea of a Teach Out, and on adopting the theme of '(Re)Humanising the University: An Alternative Coventry Programme'? When I thought about offering to give a talk, my mind immediately led me to think that before we can talk about (re)humanising, we need to understand what we mean by human and the processes of humanisation. And so what I would like to explore with you is the notion of 'dehumanisation', and to consider how, both historically but also in the present period of the shift towards a utilitarian model designed essentially to serve the needs of industry and capital, the modern university, as Henry Giroux has noted in his book *University in Chains*, is increasingly becoming subservient to the 'military and pharmaceutical industrial complex', where education is increasingly being displaced by training as the primary focus. To end, I will briefly outline what an alternative 'pedagogy' for humanising the university might look like.

At the outset, let me make it clear that I am not against what is termed the 'skills' agenda, but that, for me, just emphasising this aspect, especially in a world where, because of the growth of automation and artificial intelligence, the shelf-life of a wide range of employment skills - and, for that matter, knowledge - is limited, simply is short-sighted. The trend of closing down philosophy departments (eg Hull and Middlesex) over the past few years, and the recent news that the University of Sunderland is to withdraw degree courses in history, politics, modern languages and public health, illustrates the point I am seeking to make. Following a review, Sunderland has decided to make 'curriculum changes to make the institution "career-focused" and "professions-facing"'. The chair of the board of governors, John Mowbray, said:

While recognising the value of the subjects the University is withdrawing from, the Board of Governors agreed that they do not fit with the curriculum principles of being career-focused and professions-facing. Nor are they of a size and scale to be educationally viable in the medium to long term, given the competition from other institutions, both regionally and nationally.

Some may argue that, in the competitive world we live in today, institutions are compelled to make necessity into a virtue. But many of these decisions tend to be based on short term expediency - student numbers - rather than thinking through the wider consequences, both for students and society as a whole. And, as Julian Baggini, author of the 2018 book *How the World Thinks: A Global History of Philosophy*, commenting on the closure of the philosophy department at Hull University, said, 'The crude pursuit of what is "practical", "efficient" or "useful" is threatening everything of value that isn't evidently profitable'.

Yesterday was Holocaust Memorial Day, for almost twenty years a national commemoration day in the United Kingdom dedicated to the remembrance of those who suffered in the Holocaust, under Nazi persecution, as well as subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. The 27th February was chosen because of its association with the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by the Russians in 1945. Much has been said and written about the Nazi Holocaust, but perhaps one of the key central messages is, as Primo Levi, the Italian Jewish Holocaust survivor and writer famously noted: 'Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous are the common men, the functionaries ready to believe and to act without asking questions.'

Across the world, from Bolsonaro in Brazil to Modi in India, we are witnessing the rise of rightwing authoritarianism. Incidentally, guess who was the chief guest of honour at the Indian Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi on Sunday: none other than Jair Bolsonaro! Let me give you a flavour of political views which he has openly expressed. He wants criminals to be summarily shot rather than face trial. He presents indigenous people as 'parasites'. He advocates discriminatory, eugenically-devised forms of birth control. He has warned about the danger posed by refugees from Haiti, Africa and the Middle East, calling them 'the scum of humanity', and even arguing that the army should take care of them. He has accused Afro-Brazilians of being obese and lazy, and defended physically punishing children to try to prevent them from being gay. He has equated homosexuality with

paedophilia, and told a representative in the Brazilian National Congress, 'I wouldn't rape you because you do not deserve it' (1).

You may be thinking, what has this to do with humanising education? To help answer this point, I would like to briefly introduce to you the work of the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who was herself a Jew who had to flee Germany during Adolf Hitler's rise to power. Though she was a prolific writer, focusing on totalitarianism, perhaps her most celebrated work is a book published in 1964, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. She was a reporter on the trial of Adolf Eichmann for the *New Yorker*. In this book, Arendt asks the simple question: what enabled educated humanbeings like Eichmann, who, insofar as he failed to think about the crime he was committing may well have lacked 'intentions', to participate in such a heinous crime against humanity, and to justify his actions? For Arendt it wasn't so much that Eichmann denied that he'd acted consciously, rather that the term 'thinking' had to be reserved for a more reflective mode of rationality. In other words, there was a kind of unreflexive instrumentality, almost devoid of any moral dimension, in the way that Eichmann sought to justify his actions. His defence was that he was a good worker, following orders efficiently and effectively, and that he had no other option than to follow orders.

The popular characterisation of the Nazi leaders is as perverted, sadistic monsters and extraordinary individuals. In *Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt sought to challenge this view and to understand how it was that, as she states, 'terrifyingly normal' and, in many instances, quite bland and introverted individuals who could end up committing such a terrible crime against humanity. Indeed, for Arendt the important truth that needed to be uncovered was the unprecedented nature of the Nazi genocide, which saw the wholesale destruction of people, of Jews, Gypsies, gay people, communists, the disabled and the ill, on an industrial scale. Key to her analysis was to see the holocaust as not only an infringement of the basic human rights of the victims and their families, but a crime on humanity itself; a profound act of dehumanisation of the self. As the term implies, dehumanisation represents the stripping out of those essential characteristics that we possess as humans that distinguish us from all other species - that is, to have the potential to step beyond an instrumental/mechanical relationship with ourselves, with each other, and with nature. It is not only to have a functioning brain, but to develop a theory of mind and common sense. Unlike all other animal species, including higher primates, humanbeings have a unique capacity to display mental states related to expressing intentions, hopes, expectations, imaginings, desires and beliefs. It follows that any diminution of these aspects leads us down the slippery slope of dehumanisation.

In a follow-up book, *The Life of the Mind* (1978), in a chapter titled 'Science and Common Sense', Arendt sought to argue that the practice of science is quite distinct from thinking as a philosophical activity.

'Thinking, no doubt, plays an enormous role in every scientific enterprise, but it can only be a means to an end; the end is determined by a decision about what is worthwhile knowing, and this decision cannot be scientific.'

What distinguishes us from robots is that robots think logically but are incapable of making moral judgements. And what makes humanbeings humanbeings is that, unlike robots and all other species, we possess a capacity to develop a theory of mind. In other words, for Arendt, science cannot justify itself on scientific grounds, but rather must somehow depend on something outside of and beyond itself. Perhaps more to the point, science, especially as associated with empiricism, cannot be divorced from concrete reality, and it is the concrete reality that makes all the difference - for example, the development of sophisticated weapons or the burning of fossil fuels.

Arendt goes on to argue that instrumental scientific speculation lacks 'the safeguards inherent in sheer thinking, namely thinking's critical capacity'. This includes the capacity for moral judgement, which became horrifically evident in the ways in which Nazi Germany used science to justify its genocidal policies and actions. Auschwitz did not represent a retrieval of tribal violence, but one of the ultimate expressions of the scientific enterprise in action.

In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt is interested in the absence of 'critical thoughtfulness', which she terms 'non thinking'. This is a kind of dogmatic approach to life, where one simply replaces one set of commonsense ideas with another, without really engaging in critical thought. For Arendt, the horrors of the 20th century are not so much a failure of Enlightenment thinking, as Zygmund Bauman would have us believe, but a failure of critical thoughtfulness. An education system that teaches students to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society results in them getting used, less to the content of the rules, which on 'close examination would always lead them to perplexity, than [to] the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars' (Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p177). In other words, for Arendt the emasculation of critical faculties leads to thinking and judgement becoming a matter of sentiment and sophistry, and persuasion rules - if you like, a kind of virtual thinking, or what Stephen Cowden and I have referred to as a kind of 'sat-nav thinking' (1).

And so Arendt doesn't dismiss Enlightenment thinking, but is at pains to argue that, in its desire for

objectivity, at best it is limited and at worst, as we have seen over the past 300 years, it can lead to the point where we are on the verge of destroying the planet. So, for instance, she argues, judgement for the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant is only a faculty of the mind, whereas for Arendt judgement is dependent on interaction with others. In other words, there is a social dimension to reason, since speech and action need to be received by someone in a public realm.

Furthermore, following Wittgenstein, because any idea has no meaning until it is described to others through language, i.e. it is social in nature, enlightenment for Arendt cannot simply be about the establishment of ideas, but [also] the social impact of these, and that is essentially how that needs to be understood. For example, the true impact of the French Revolution is not in the event itself but in the different public responses to it. This could be applied to most historical events. There cannot be a separation of the event from the impact it has.

Arendt argues, first, that a person perceives through imagination, a specific faculty that moves from a physical to a mental instance. Secondly, in reflection, one achieves a distance from the original representation that further distances us from it. Indeed, here Arendt speaks of the 'proper distance, the remoteness, or involvedness, or disinterestedness, that is requisite for approbation and disapprobation, for evaluating something at its proper worth' (Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 1992: 67). Judgement proper occurs in this second step, where one takes a stand on one's first impression in terms of a value assertion.

Conclusion

In the current climate it is not an exaggeration to assert that the defence of genuinely critical educational spaces is, in and of itself, an act of (re)humanisation. The demise of humanities teaching and research within UK universities in all but the so-called 'elite institutions' on the one hand, or the annexation of the creative arts by neoliberal consumerism on the other, is a disaster for students and society as a whole. The disastrous effects of the £9,000-plus student fee, along with the tyrannical research excellence framework, and the total obsession with utterly flawed student satisfaction surveys, is turning university managers into zombies.

And so, in the short term, our job must be to maintain a commitment to an engaged pedagogy that positions students, not as consumers, but as co-creators/producers of learning that is meaningful to them in their chosen course trajectory, but is also capable of taking them outside their comfort zone, and able to mature the kind of critical reflexivity that is going

to serve them well beyond their course of study. Above all, a pedagogy that is truly humanising will be built on a profound belief in the inherent ability of all students, irrespective of their background, to achieve and succeed. But unless we can help students to dream, horizons will be constricted by the political economy of higher education. And so there can be no doubt that the single most important step we can take towards humanising education is to see it, like health, as a human right that should be free at the point of delivery.

1. Stephen Cowden and Gurnam Singh, 'Sat-Nav Education: A Means to an End or an End to Meaning?', in Stephen Cowden and Gurnam Singh (eds) with Sarah Amsler, Joyce Canaan and Sara Motta, *Acts of Knowing. Critical Pedagogy In, Against and Beyond the University*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp. 441-60.

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Ben Cosin

3 Halliday Drive

DEAL CT14 7AX

CAFAS website: www.cafas.org.uk