

On the Rocky Road. A Polemic Against Managerialism in Philosophy and Education

I.

Recently I listened to an Austrian radio programme which broadcasted an interview with a known philosopher. He called Philosophy "a life-project". Although studying it does not provide one with a professional profile for the labour market, he tried to argue for the value, sense, importance, even usefulness of Philosophy in our times: as an alternative to the mainstream and as a resource for orientation. As a man gifted with eloquence, well-read and brilliantly in his manner of choosing his answers, he did his job fairly well. He was doing professional philosophy by standing up for it in public.

This is not the only, but still a rather lonely, voice in public confronting the many voices which since the time I finished school in 1987 until today have not ceased demanding a stop to the "waste of money" on "luxury subjects" like the humanities. Instead, they say, pupils should get a fast, preferably practical education which fits them for the economical demands of our times. The earlier they enter the labour market, the better. Economy and enterprises ask for more computer scientists, technicians, psychologists, and doctors than for ethnologists, philosophers or artists.

Society, it is maintained, cannot pay the price for some heavy brained men and women enjoying an intellectual freedom almost undisturbed by restraints: at a time when the public is confronted with financial cuts, when the pension systems are under reform, when unemployment increases and competition dearly asks for technological innovations.

II.

Well, neo-liberalism and managerialism, the omnipotent econometric thinking of our times, profit-orientation as well as a new utilitarianism hardly go along with the notion of a "life-project" consisting in the devotion to thinking. The productivity of thinking is not measurable in the way economic productivity is, and the striking incommensurability between education for an economic purpose and education for

education's sake is (in the public's eye) a reason to eliminate the latter, since the short-sighted public tends to even and flatten everything until it becomes easily and readily consumable.

Conceptual innovations, as philosophy brings, and which brought it about, do not automatically bear financial fruits, and putting one's stakes into studying an ancient writer or into some phenomenological research certainly do not correspond to the rise and fall of the stock-markets with lightly-taxed pay-offs. There are some seemingly plausible arguments to the effect that society should not invest in the fun some can enjoy in their well-paid secure academic positions. If the times are that bad as they are, it makes sense to set aside one's means for the *necessaries of life* instead of spending them on luxuries.

Yet is philosophy really luxury, contrasted with *the basic needs*? Is this contrast in itself the result of an adequate perception and representation? Contrasting philosophy or art with basic needs and claiming that the latter are necessary, the first not, comes up to say that we better should not have started painting the walls of the caves when we still lived in them, because such an artful undertaking did not satisfy any basic needs. Instead of making clumsy drawings, we should have gone hunting. Yet it is clear that we then would still live in the same caves.

III.

One nicety about the so-called "basic needs" seems to be that they are manageable, especially if they refer to *a material substrate*, to some substance like bread or water, to objects like oil or cars, or if they correspond to the application of affordable workforce. Even if these basic needs imply more abstract necessities of life like money or the constitutional state, they are still calculable and often too easily made a matter of trade and negotiation.

Thoughts are not that easily turned into tradable stuff, they cannot that easily be planned, refined, stored, transported, negotiated over. The costs one has to put into bringing them about, are often high and hardly foreseeable. They are not that restricted in time and space, and it needs a lot of investments into social and educational frameworks to bring about a certain quantity of them, not to speak of the quality. *Thinking asks for a culture to be able to grow*, and it has the peculiar quality that it may reoccur in different garments, expressed in some other way years or centuries later. If for clothes there are fashions, for thoughts there are ideologies.

The funny thing is that managerialism and neo-liberalism are themselves ideologies, i.e. systems of thinking that form a way of life and have a philosophical background. They were once conceptual innovations, yet introduced with the hidden or even unconscious intention to finish with conceptual innovations or at least with their impact on society. Freedom here is understood as the liberation of the mind *from* thinking. Liberality seems to boil down to the free floating of markets and goods, liberating the consumer to buy for his money what he wants, without deliberately answering the question if he is then as free in earning money as he is in spending it. Yet what about the freedom to think, the freedom to fancy alternatives — *has freedom become the choice between ketchup and mustard to go with one's take-away hamburger?*

IV.

I maintain that *the humanities, arts, philosophy are just as basic and necessary as water and bread are or as the experience of love and security*. Yet managerialism as the application of neo-liberalism to questions of education and training has found its way into universities, colleges, schools, research-institutions, ministries. It is not only in the head and hearts, talk and trades of many people; *it forms and transforms our educational institutions into the hallways of an economized society*. It is about to turn these institutions into little factories hatching brain-bearing people whose ready-made minds will help raising the national income and animate the obedience of tax-paying and of behaviour in the line.

Behind all this stands a sort of "economism", as I would call it, viz. *the belief that something only has value if it can be measured in money*. I disagree with this tenet, but my opinion and arguments will hardly be enough to eradicate it. It is clear that *value* is a manifold concept whose materialist content does not exhaust its extension. Beauty, the Good, Love, Democracy, Virtues, Humanity and Human Rights are but a few aspects of values that cannot be expressed in money (although money might be among the means helping with establishing them). Philosophy is of a different character, and it shows a man's character to be able to grasp this very difference.

Yet the politics of our times, whether at the level of the European Union or within the national states, have turned into econometrical problem-solvers that try to trigger all social and political processes by

pulling the strings to which the brain-bearers are attached. *Managerialism turns the human being into a Jumping Jack on the money-lines of our times.* Nothing seems to cause Jumping Jack to move his own limbs by himself. And for little Jumping Jack the talk of reason has been neither reason nor cause to breathe the life of self-consciousness into his wooden bones.

For these brain-bearers, life is projected for them, planned and cared for. Fast food is the dominant habit of eating in the managed lifestyle leisure-time, paralleled by the fast thinking as the dominant habit of brain-use in the managed work-time. *Simple style is used to explain simple things to plain people,* since Jumping Jack can read only when the strings holding him allow for it.

And so philosophy, creativity, the arts have no place any more, because they don't fit in. Only as compartments in the big game of money laundry can they play the role of objects of an exhibition in the museums and libraries. To be glanced at, admired for their age and for the dust they gathered, and passed by. Being out-dated is not the problem. The problem is that having become timeless, philosophy lost its ability to be real-time.

So Jumping Jack is told: either you live, eat, work, travel, love, teach by the book, or you are out! Managerialism is just *a subtle form of putting a semantic and mental chain around people's necks that leaves them some space to frolic around as if attached to a rubber leash,* pulling them automatically back when they go too far. Too far means here: *self-determined.* Speak only when you are asked, Jumping Jack, we move your mouth and tongue. Remember and forget on command, and don't look into the mirror that shows you a marionette: stick, rather, to television.

Let me make clearer what I mean with the danger of managerialism – and *why I am not a Jumping Jack.* It is, indeed, not easy to manage thinkers. The power-distribution within parts of academia seems to follow the strings of us strained little Jumping Jacks that are held by the hands of grown-up Jumping Jacks, whose mind has already absorbed all the strained mentality a Jumping Jack is allowed to have, *reproducing an ideology* they themselves had grown up with.

I sometimes call it the "Ideology of the Even Road", in an academia that never really got rid of a feudalist frame of mind. These marionettes walk on the Even Road like sleep-walkers with saturated faces; they stumble on the command of an invisible hand, and bow for applause when asked to, lining up the masses for the big photo-opportunity, and groping for publicity with every little move of their eyelids.

V.

Well, I ask myself, *why* one of the last resorts of minds working freely, viz. philosophy, is given over to managerialism, to a sort of drill in administering marks and tests instead of trying to attract the interest of young people for thoughts about life, morale, history, methods, logic? Why is it so important whether one ticks the right answer in a multiple choice test? Why not let young people chose their styles in writing a text in order to let them find their ways of expression, having a conversation with them over their thoughts afterwards? Why are time-tables and pre-organized compulsory colloquia with students more important than an open seminar, responding to the individual needs of each class? *Why does philosophy have to become a mass-product on the production-lines of education-factories? Why is it being conceived as an out-put of graduates to be sold and to function like tiny wheels or nano-robots in the huge organism of a collectivizing globe?* It is easy to bring a marionette to nod, and Jumping Jack can only fly his hands in joy.

One of the answers to my questions could be a rather left-wing one: it makes them easier to manage, and if they become managers themselves, they will be more effective in managerialism than their managers have been before. *Managerialism is a power-structure that shoves the power from the authority of outstanding individuals into the structural force of organizations.* The package and the delivery are decisive for price and costs, not the content. It is difficult or impossible to effectively manage philosophical contents and comparatively easy to advertise the management of its package, organisation and distribution.

What managerialist institutions in education can't stand are disobedient teachers, that is, teachers like me that loudly say *NO* to certain changes that most likely are set into action by people that through such measurements widen their range of control and deepen their connections within the system. *Managerialism serves to a large degree the promotion of the managers and does not serve those that are managed.*

In other words: managerialism is just a subtle way of showing off with one's power. The interests behind it are manifold, e.g. selling the achievements of an institution better in public, attracting money due to some (doubtable) success-measurement, making results and students comparable, even in cases where it does not make any sense, or does not tell much.

Managerialism in education produces people who have a one-dimensional thinking, often accompanied by a hidden cynicism. It does not count (with them) whether the students have gained any insight or guidance, even their frustration is not taken into consideration. They get a piece of paper with a mark, and that's it, because that was what they came for. The statistics are always right, because we do everything to set them aright. The usual reaction of a student who does not put an extra effort into his or her intellectual development, is just to throw away the text-book after the philosophy-part is over. Disappointment is an understatement for somebody who has been kept from the acquaintance with the refreshments for a dulled mind.

VI.

In this way, philosophy will soon be managed-away, out of our educational institutions, out of our universities. It will be replaced by computer games or DVD-courses, downloaded from the internet, restricted to some gurus one might encounter on TV or in esoteric circles. It will soon become a matter of private experience, a playful object of leisure-time, even a hoax, and society will neither be willing to accept it as one of the European traditions, nor be willing to finance its public presence that seems to be the unnecessary luxury — an experience of frustration and idleness. In other words, *by adopting managerialism, we manage ourselves away.*

The final step will be some robots or computer programmes that manage the courses the students have to consume, distributing lessons like pills, in small doses like drugs or tranquilizers. The human teacher is rationalized away, like the human, the personal, the individual student. The task goes over from the manager and economist to the rationalized bookkeeper and account-balancer, the automatized controller and automatic planner. In the end, the difference between machines and managers will diminish just as well as the difference between students and machines. To describe it as a "knowledge laundry" will be a weak description.

And the contents, the ideas, the thirst for asking questions, the astonishment, the curiosity? Where do they go? Ah, they will eventually arrive at the management of solvable questions, at programmes that do not only optimize the schedules and modules, but the answers to give, the tests to develop, and the time consumed in ticking off the right answers. The happy Society will then have automatized management as

such, by a distribution of labour that pushes the fault for hard problems onto an incorrect analysis. Those that then can enjoy their leisure time — if they belong to the alphas and not to the gammas — get some soma-drug for free, to enjoy the illusion of a self-made experience with the self-experienced illusions of their bodies and their minds. This new world will not be brave, but "perfectly manageable", because managed to be perfect.

VII.

"What would you suggest?"- That's the usual, aggressive attitude one meets from managerialists when airing such a criticism, admittedly a criticism that is polemical and tries to get to the issue's roots. I suggest further enquiry, not more action. Deliberation, balanced doubt, not solution processes and workable analysis. *We have to ask the questions managerialism does not dare to ask.*

First of all, why is it necessary to change anything in this respect — if not for the sake of the change itself, or for the sake of those that gain in influence by implementing the change? Secondly, why should there be a general way for teaching, why not let every teacher himself or herself decide what to do with the students, how to do philosophy with them? Or do they not trust into their own decisions, to give the job to certain persons through an application process? Why do we have to *manage the biographies of people*, when education is about *developing their personalities*?

Why do managerialists not trust the teachers they have picked? Are they afraid of their competence or of their critique? Why do I have to play their game to get a position? Why, in the meantime, have many of these teaching jobs of which I head one been given to less experienced, young and obedient newcomers without foreign experience, not even that of another university, with lower qualifications? Why do jobs at many universities go to politically connected people or to those that follow into the footsteps of their masters, chosen in a feudalistic manner, to entrust them with the Key to the Golden Shrine of the True Doctrine?

Am I too individualist? Am I too *unsocial*, as a colleague once called me, a fellow that seems to compensate for his lack of scientific achievements (which leaves him nonetheless undisturbed in a tenured position of high salary) with a penchant for harassing colleagues that do not fit into his power game? As having grown up with a lot of siblings and as having worked for youth groups, humanitarian

projects, in social teaching-projects, I am not perceived as unsocial by those that know me. This is simply a contorted description from the side of somebody whose laid back position rests on the diligence of others. *I am only unsocial in the eyes of those to whose privileges I am a danger*, perhaps because my criticism is too sharp, too stingy, too obviously justified. What sort of poison will they serve me, if not the distorted semantics of their managerialism?

These people, these managers and power-mongers, do not represent and promote the advantages of philosophy as an important element in the canon of education. *They are the real luxury we philosophers cannot any longer afford!* I simply maintain that *managerialism is unsocial*, because it suppresses the principle of individual development as a valuable contribution to, and enrichment for, Society. It is an undemocratic element that has to be eliminated. Societies like the Nazi or the Soviet are unbearable to me, but so is a neo-liberal managerialist one. The stakes are high.

VIII.

Like all social systems, the social system in which managerialism occurs is putting a certain amount of effort into maintaining itself. Managers of such a system are often people with a rather streamlined scientific standing and a CV that is short enough to be easily read through: "manageable", in a word. Those reading through their applications, if they ever had to deliver one, are managers of such a sort themselves, people that haven't read or written thick books but know a lot about Public Relations and the Political Network.

I do not want to dwell any longer on this subject, because I do not really want to endorse Paul Feyerabend's well known dictum that compared the academic world to the mafia.¹ His mocking conclusion was, that one finds the same social principles, the same sets of rules here and there: Authority, Obedience, *Omerta*. So by the social criteria one cannot tell Science (as mediated by managerialism) from Organized Criminality. Of course, Feyerabend was provocative, and certainly by far most, if not all scientists are far from being criminal. *Yet mafia bosses have undeniably to be good*

¹ Cf. his "Consolations for the Specialist" in: Lakatos, Imre; Musgrave, Alan (ed.) (1970, 1999): *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. New York: Cambridge University Press; loc. cit. pp. 199 f.

managers. So obviously the difference between science and the mafia cannot consist in management, but in content, principles, devotion, moral standards, in *values*.

Let me finish my contribution with a small story, a note: Since I became a casualty of managerialism, I was unemployed. I took up giving tuition in Mathematics again, just to earn some money. Recently I had a pupil around the age of sixteen that had troubles with calculating logarithms. I told him about radioactivity, and how one could calculate the time elapsing until only half of a radioactive substance is left. We did some examples, and I let him bring forth further suggestions. Finally I found myself talking about the Weizsäcker-Bode-circle of elements, about the Big Bang Theory, the age of stars, and the part of the universe we can observe.

The student gazed at me and was prepared to stay longer than planned, without asking for a break, whereas I simply forgot about the time. Next day he asked for another lesson, and again the day after. He tried to squeeze the source of knowledge to get the last drop out of it. Between talking about what plutonium is, and what happened when Chernobyl blew up, how mathematical methods are applied to empirical research, and what a falsification would be, he learned to solve logarithmical equations.

He left with a glint in his eyes, a nice overview about cosmology and an impression why mathematics is fundamental to the Natural Sciences and what methodology has to do with it. The riddle of the mathematical signs vanished. He got some notion about Philosophy of Science, and, most important, his interest in the subject, no, in many subjects was awakened. With his interests his personal self-esteem grew, his subjective ability to tackle problems improved, and finally his results in calculating got better. He was asking for more. *He had discovered the satisfaction of intellectual thirst*, and I was happy to have made him thirsty.

I don't know his original maths teacher, but he had certainly never previously encountered enthusiastic teaching, fed on astonishment. In between our conversation, our asking to and fro, he corrected some of my minor mistakes and tried himself certain solutions. When finding out that he could improve on my approach by sticking to the method and logical conclusions, he was prepared to take over the course of his mathematical life himself. Has he ever met a teacher that made mistakes and asked the pupil to find and correct them?

In some side-conversations, he also talked about himself, about quarrels he had, and about friends, and he took my personal advice or comments as those of a friend, even though they were just asides to

our lessons, accepting me as somebody that wanted to help him. I had won his confidence, because I showed an interest in his interests, also in private stuff, and because *I valued interests per se*. I did not manage him, it was not necessary to do that. I just showed him the values and virtues of knowledge, and that failure and mistakes tell us about what there still is left to us to learn.

I do not think that I am an extremely talented teacher or an educational wizard. I miscalculated at least one example on the blackboard and together we corrected it; there was no magic behind it. But I think that *the atmosphere* of this non-managerial teaching was the best we could entertain. He brought forth his questions. I provoked more by answering them. There was no schedule to keep to, only a book to copy examples, and the most he learned came from the ad hoc examples I made up, some of them quite funny: their solutions had no easily calculable numbers. All the solutions had to be proven by ourselves, which was good for training him further in mathematical calculation.

In the end we achieved much more than any managed schedule or testing method could have achieved. *He wanted to know more by himself*. I made him learn how to learn, that is, I did not much except *letting* him learn how to learn. As a teacher, I do not predominantly live in order to satisfy the thirst of people for knowledge, I simply set to and raise it. If a pupil feels intellectual needs, his search for knowledge becomes a natural one. *If one calls this sort of philosophy of education a "luxury", I want to be paid in gold.*

IX.

Yes, I chose Philosophy by myself. I could have tried to make a career in a bank, could have studied economics to become one of the many young people that are useable and useful for Society, that earn good money, get good jobs, have a house, cars, kids, paid leave and an orderly existence, are ready-made voters and nice little smiling Hollywood-existences, with an address in Even Road.

Why was I so stupid to become a thinker, when I could have achieved this relative luxury they have? Well, it is clear, that my choice was or is a "luxury" in quite a different sense. They chose the even path, I went down the Rocky Road. The even path leads them to known areas — and keeps them there, like a herded flock. The Rocky Road takes you over the mountains and to new shores.