

I only know One Who knows everything

I will start from recent events – one of which is going to take place again shortly – and I will try to analyze it in order to extract some meaning. Head hunters from Western Europe came to lure physicians from Romania to go work in their respective countries. More than 6,000 Romanian physicians accepted the invitation, and are now preparing their departure to France, Great Britain, Germany and so on. Before that, other head hunters came to lure high school graduates to be in order to make them want to go to college in western universities.

A question arises: how is it possible to have interesting products while everybody seems to deny your quality as an institution? How come much-blamed Romanian high schools can produce youngsters that could be interesting for colleges like those in Oxford, or for universities like the one in Vienna?! Then, how come much-blamed Romanian high education in medicine can produce interesting physicians for western countries (at their standards, I mean)?!

Maybe it's not the school, or maybe it's not only the school which is responsible for the situation of the education system in Romania. Maybe – just maybe! – the national strategy is wrong, and blaming the education for being what it is does not solve the problem.

Changing the education system was a too frequent attempt of all the political parties in power, but no one had the idea that it goes along with other major changes in the society as a whole. When a top politician prides himself publicly for not having been such a good pupil (meaning, probably, that you can become whoever you want even starting from modest school records, like that former Ministry of education from the communist era, who claimed that studying foreign languages was not necessary, arguing that she had become a minister without any such knowledge), the general image of the school gets a blow. When the same top politician claims that we do not need so many philosophers, but we need instead lots of mechanics able to repair our cars, the balance goes wrong, and we assist at a sort of manipulation both of the school and of the work market. When we assist at a violent propaganda against learning, based on the principle that students do not have to memorize things, but just become “competent” for doing concrete things, we understand that an era of vocational education is forcing its way to replace the era of the academic education, the one that gives its subjects the chance to get knowledge, and then to make out how to implement their knowledge in the social life.

I do not claim that learning how to buy tickets on the Internet, or how to use an ATM to pay your bills or to get cash are not necessary competencies. I know that our young students have to cope with much more than we had to face in our passed era, and I know that globalization makes spreading around all kind of technological devices, some of them coming maybe too soon for some cultures. I know our students took from us and exacerbated the need and desire to be like “them” (Americans, French, Japanese and the kind), and I know it comes from too many years of frustration.

But I still believe that learning – I mean studying: reading, writing, reproducing from memory, ordering information to turn it into knowledge – is and has to be the real basis for a solid social construction. Romanians have never been in short supply of models in their culture. We need to recognize them around, to prize them, and to follow them, even if they come from our midst. Elites can be recognized as such, not only when we discover them among other nations. Some of them might have difficulties in coping with the day-to-day life, but it’s our duty to appreciate the simple fact that we have them around, and we have to see them as models. Good education gives people solid knowledge. Good schools offer good education. At the academic level, good education means forming the sense of critical approaches to the world of knowledge, but it also means pushing the limits of knowledge, training the youngsters to seek further and deeper for new ways of appropriating the Universe around. Good universities might not produce “cool” young individuals able to operate all the gadgets that seem to take over our existence, but their products are a much more solid basis for long term development, and all we have to do is to use them appropriately.

Which makes me go back to the idea that schools and universities can only make an offer to the community, but it’s the job of the community to make good use of the products of the education system.

This is why I let myself sound paradoxical: yes, the education is the educators’ job, and yes, education is everybody’s duty. The inside work of the education system can only be the responsibility of trained educators, while the reform of the entire society in order to use in a smart and ethic way the help of the education system is everybody’s business.

With all the due respect for functions like communities’ mayrs, no such official can really help the school with the curricula or with the specific way things are done in the classroom (unless s/he is a trained teacher). No industrial entrepreneur can know better than the academic staff what disciplines are needed to form a good specialist in such or such domain.

In fact, this is how we could explain the fact that in powerful economies, top specialists go from time to time to measure themselves to the science in the big universities. Living under the stress of the business life, one may simply lose contact with real, top science. The domain evolves differently and the reality of the business may lose touch with this evolution, which happens mostly in the academic sphere. So, now and then, men in the top of the business world go to school again, and again. The whole splendor of the civilized world is there: autonomous universities stand for models for the rest of the society, and smartly articulated societies follow into the passes of the invaluable models coming from the universities.

To go to the case of our days' Romania, we do not need everybody to feel invited to participate in the educational act *per se*, because we have inside the system enough power to make it work (I won't say "again", but "better and better"). Instead, we need everybody to feel obliged to get involved in the social reconstruction in order to begin making good use of the good products of our education system all along with insuring an adequate material support to the school. There is only one supreme authority I know about: the good Lord above knows it all. Down here, we need to understand our respective domains of epistemic authority, and act accordingly. People who think they know everything are dangerous for any serious project.

I will not finish this intervention before saying that there is much to do inside the education system, but I strongly believe that it is something only people from inside can do. We do need changes, but we need more than that to know what is to be kept and how to keep it from the Romanian tradition in education. If we go on changing things just because they sound better in (American) English, or in French, we risk losing the very idea of who we are and the idea of where we are going. It will never stop, because it will be like in the world of fashion: new colors, new fabrics, new cuts, etc. Adapting is different. It means keeping the fundamentals, and making the necessary efforts to cope with the others. I came recently from an international conference on terminology, and I am still reflecting to a presentation given (in Catalan!) by a professor from the Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona. It was about their efforts to cope with the necessity of going out in English, on the web. They did not accept to just adapt their realities to make them be named by the usual English names, from the usual English realities. They have created a study group, with native English speakers, native Spanish speakers, native Catalan speakers, and specialists in terminology (academic structures and administration as well as curricula and research), and this group works to get the adequate description of the Catalan vision of the academic organization and academic studies in English. They made this option: do the

necessary research and the needed work to avoid unnecessary changes. They will not appear on the web, in the English version of their home-page, ressemblant to the English/American universities, because they are Universidad AUTONOMA de Barcelona. They will simply describe in English who they are and what they are doing, because they know they are good.

“Change is certain, progress is not” was supposed to be the title of my intervention in this Phoenix conference. It was the motto of a book on stalinism and other -isms, and I find it quite appropriate for the topic of the conference. My idea starts with something I found in a book about the development of Japan after the war (“Japon, troisieme grand” was the name of the book): it seems that the astonishing development of this third power was based upon the fact that the Japanese made of the idea of schooling a theme for each and everyone of them, from the Mikado down to the poorest fisherman from the smallest village. Only, they didn’t change everything! They took good care to preserve the traditional basis of education, and they adapted new features, picked up from around, to modify what their strategy said it had to be changed. We all know now that it worked, but very few are aware of the time it took to get there, and even fewer are aware of the fact that this came from a global national strategy, not from a so called “strategy in education”, only. To sum up, I would like to say that changes in our educational system should not come from the exterior, from the labor market (which is immature, and guided by nasty, changing rules); it should come from the inside, from real teachers, who know better what to preserve and what to put under the sign of change. We can leave to the labor market and to the other social and political factors the responsibility to adapt to what the school says. Remember Albert Einstein who once said that if the practice does not match with the theory we have to change the practice.