



---

## PHILOSOPHICAL NOTIONS CONCERNING THE IDEA AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF UNIVERSITY – AN ANTI-CRITIQUE

- **M.P. Terence Samuel**

Assistant Professor

Dept of Philosophy and Comparative Religion

Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, WB – 731235

### Abstract

Critiques of the university system fall broadly under two categories, namely the ‘idea of university’ and the ‘accountability of university’. The ‘idea’ camp thinks that something is lost within the university education system due to its enveloping socio-economic conditions and the ‘accountability’ camp criticises the university system for not accomplishing the immediate concerns and needs of capitalist business interests as well as social/local interests in a meaningful way. This article attempts to analyse such critiques to understand what they try to mean and what are the specific problems associated with such critiques of both camps; further, this paper attempts to find out the paradigm on which the ‘idea of university’ and the ‘accountability of university’ could meet to address the problems arising out of contextual necessities and contingencies that define what universities are meant to be.

**Key Words:** University, Idea, Accountability, Critique

### Introduction

While commenting on the introduction of the legislation (Factory Act, 1844) in English Parliament for the legal requirement of elementary education for factory workers in England, Marx discusses about “the intellectual degeneration artificially produced by transforming immature human beings into mere machines for the production of surplus-value”(KM 1990: 522) in the capitalist system. The linkage among education system, capitalist production and political class was very much visible as early as the early decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. This linkage is being lamented for different reasons at present, though such dissents were not uncommon earlier; the resentments include the moral degradation of education system by the educated elite, the unemployability of graduates to the immediate concerns of the capitalist system and the social paranoia about the intellectuals and the nature of researches in university which are thought to be ‘unproductive’ towards the unsettled social questions.

Such resentments and laments often take the shape of critique of university education system and a lot of literature has been written on it. Such critiques fall broadly under two categories, namely the ‘idea of university’ and the ‘accountability of university’. The ‘idea’ camp thinks that something is lost within the university education system due to its enveloping socio-economic conditions and the ‘accountability’ camp criticises the university system for not accomplishing the immediate concerns and needs of capitalist business interests as well as social/local interests in a meaningful way. This article attempts to analyse such critiques to understand what they try to mean and what are the specific problems associated with such critiques of both camps.

---

As this article is a critique of such critiques, it has been sub-titled as ‘anti-critique’. Before attempting to critique the critiques belonging to both ‘idea’ and ‘accountability’ camps, let us be clear about what we mean by ‘anti-critique’. This phrase is not new. It has been used earlier. The use of the phrase here was due to the influential book by John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, titled *Marx and the Earth – An Anti-Critique* (JBF& PB 2016). The authors of the book used the phrase as a critique of ecological critiques of Marx and Engels.

Before them, the concept of ‘anti-critique’ has a clear history and meaning, deriving principally from Rosa Luxemburg’s famous work, *The Accumulation of Capital: An Anti-Critique* – usually referred to by its subtitle. But the meaning of anti-critique can be seen as having its roots in Engels’ work *Anti-Dühring*. As Engels observed in his second preface to *Anti-Dühring*, he was ‘compelled to follow’ Dühring ‘wherever he went and to oppose my conceptions to his. In the process of carrying this out, my negative criticism became positive; it was transformed into a more or less connected exposition of the dialectical method represented by Marx and myself’. In his original preface, Engels noted that he was forced to engage in controversies in areas where his own ideas and knowledge remained undeveloped. With such an understanding of the phrase, I mean to use the phrase here to have further clarification on ‘what university is meant to be’/‘what universities are for’ by critiquing the ‘idea’ as well as ‘accountability’ camps, representing the two sides of the critique of university system.

Most of the philosophers try to enquire into the ‘degenerative’ educational system from the point of cultural criticism. Paulo Freire discusses about the problems in pedagogical discourses to show how education serves as a tool for cultural hegemony; Martha Nussbaum (2010), while accepting the inevitability of the contribution of education to further business interests in any democratic society, holds the view that humanities stimulate critical thinking and empathy for the Other which are the necessary elements for a democratic society. However, philosophers like Noam Chomsky locate the problem in the political-economic system and critically analyse the corporate model of university education system and how it dehumanises the people.

All such criticisms and utopian futuristic imaginations about the education system in general find certain lacunae in the present system and educational administration, though all of them propose a growth trajectory for the general welfare of society. But such ventures cannot be captured by the metrics of a society alone, as the open-ended nature of intellectual enquiry threatens and runs counter to the traditions and beliefs held by the society. Without challenging the presuppositions of growth, cultural assumptions and beliefs associated with university system of education in the modern period, an adequate case for the universities cannot be made too. With this aim, this paper analyses the arguments put forward by Paulo Freire, Martha Nussbaum (2010) and Stefan Collini (2017) and attempts to enquire into the historical trajectory of the arguments pertaining to the ‘idea’ and the ‘accountability’ of university in order to arrive at broader understanding of what university is for and is meant to be.

In the first part of this paper, I would like to delve upon the problems that we witness in the education system in general through the writings of Paulo Freire. The next part of this paper attempts to analyse the notions surrounding the perceived ‘ills’ of the university system of education and the consequent remedies proposed in its stead. And the conclusion part of this paper attempts to find out the paradigm on which the ‘idea of university’ and the ‘accountability of university’ could meet to address the confusions arising out of contextual necessities and contingencies that define what universities are for.

## Banking Concept of Education

Paulo Freire (1921 - 1997) was a Brazilian educator and philosopher. Though he was born in a middle class family, he experienced hunger and poverty during the great depression of the 1930s. He understood the relation between poverty and its effects on the ability to learn. He theorised the problems surrounding the education system out of his lived experience *with* the people of Brazil, Chile, and the African Portuguese colonies such as Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique, and not *of/about* the people. Out of this dialectics of experience was born his philosophy of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*<sup>1</sup>.

Especially, he tried to understand the pedagogical structure through the convergent theoretical framework of categories such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, language and culture. In this way, his philosophy of the sociology of knowledge is distinct and it explains how the oppression is overdetermined by the social and cultural categories through the pedagogical means. Being situated in the post-colonial context, he underscored the affective investment and the logic of domination perpetrated through education by the coloniser and the native elites, to program an individual towards conformity of the oppressive conditions.

Freire's criticisms about the present educational system begin with the critique of delinking the pedagogy with the politics of culture. For him, culture is not an absolute category, but embedded in ever-changing dynamics and multiplicity. But the pedagogy of the oppressor exoticises the lived experiences of the people as a means to coming to their voices. Born out of the middle class narcissism, this romantic pedagogy celebrates one's own location and history without yielding a space for epistemological curiosity in order to come to terms with actuality. Alienating the people's lived experience and silencing the voices of the oppressed through such cultural invasion, the oppressed are imbibed with 'self-depreciation', a peculiar characteristic of the culturally suppressed. The student begins to feel that he/she is ignorant and only the 'professor' has 'knowledge' and that the student is the recipient of what the 'professor' has in him/her. Internalising the opinion of the oppressor, the oppressor has begun to be housed within the oppressed.

With the housing of the oppressor within the oppressed, the latter begins to feel that "*to be* is not to resemble the oppressor, but *to be under* him" at a certain point of their existential experience (PF 2005: 65 - 6). This emotional dependence is taken advantage by the oppressor to maintain a still greater oppression. Following Fromm and Fanon, Freire says that this sort of emotional dependence leads the oppressed to necrophilic behaviour, not merely self-depreciation but destruction of life of the self and the other suppressed fellows; that it does not lead the oppressed to biophily. "Necrophilous person loves all that does not grow, all that is mechanical. The necrophilous person is driven by the desire to transform the organic into inorganic, to approach life mechanically, as if all living persons were things... Memory, rather than experience; having rather than being, is what counts. The necrophilous person can relate to an object - a flower or a person - only if he possesses it... He loves control, and in the act of controlling he kills life", says Fromm (PF 2005: 77). Here, *to be* means *to have*. The ontological possibility of developing

---

<sup>1</sup> While defining oppression, Freire says that "Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression". See Paulo Freire, Myra Bergmann Ramos (Tr.), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, New York and London, 2005, pp. 55 - 6.

oneself into a fully human is thought to be possible only through the possession of the ‘object’, through the negation of negating possibilities.

This necrophilous behaviour of the oppressed is realised through the transformation of communication into a communiqué, dialogue into monologue. Impeding the process of communication as two-way-traffic, the humans are reduced to the status of things, the recipients where the oppressor dons the role of the depositor. The students are not understood as *actors in intercommunication*. The anti-dialogical nature aims at conquest of the other through a paternalistic behaviour in the teacher-student relationship. “The vanquished are disposed of their word, their expressiveness, their culture” (PF 2005: 138). Once this anti-dialogical process is initiated, it leads to the preservation of power, not holistic development of the individual and furthering the cause of necrophilism.

Explaining the process of oppression through cultural invasion within such a dialectical process between the conditions of oppression and the subjects of oppression, Freire maintains that the oppression is maintained, regulated and reified through the pedagogical structures. Here, he names such a pedagogical structure as ‘banking concept of education’. Though he does not rule out the possibility of emergence from suppression even within this model of education, he underscores the importance of critical consciousness as a means of emergence. Now let us see what he means by the ‘banking concept of education’.

According to Freire, a careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship reveals that the education system suffers from what he calls as ‘narration sickness’. “The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalised and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to “fill” the students with the contents of his narration - contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated and alienating verbosity. The outstanding character of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power” (PF 2005: 71).

In this way, education becomes an act of depositing, according to Freire, where students are turned into depositories, the containers to be filled with the ‘knowledge’ of the teacher. The teachers turn into depositors, acting as bank-clerks. Though “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue *in* the world, *with* the world and with each other” (PF 2005: 72), the banking method of education projects an absolute ignorance onto the students and thereby makes the student and the teacher as necessary binaries. The authority of knowledge is confused with the professional authority and the teacher sets himself/herself against the emancipatory interests of the students.

Further, the banking method of education is in conjunction with paternalistic social action, considering the oppressed as ‘pathological welfare recipients’. Normally the word ‘marginalised’ is used within the academic circles as another nomenclature for oppression and exclusion. Through the word ‘marginalisation’, what is presupposed is that the marginalised need to be included within the mainstream. Freire does not accept such a definition of marginalisation. Rather he says, “the oppressed are not “marginals”, are not people living “outside” society. They have always been “inside” – inside the structure which made them “being for others”. The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they become “beings for themselves”” (PF 2005: 74). As the banking method is in-built with the

contradictions of welfare and of integration into the system, these contradictions may lead the 'massified' students against domestication and to emerge from the submerged conditions.

According to the banking method of education, there is an assumption of dichotomy between the world and the human beings. In other words, being-in-the-world as recipients does not mean being-with-the-world and others in transforming it. The beings are understood as possessors of consciousness, not the masters<sup>2</sup> of their consciousness. "For example, my desk, my books, my coffee cup, all the objects before me – as bits of the world which surround me – would be "inside" me, exactly as I am inside my study right now. This view makes no distinction between being accessible to consciousness and entering consciousness" (PF 2005: 75 - 6). This dichotomy between the world and the human beings is further strengthened through banking model of education where the educator regulates and organises what should enter into the consciousness of the educated, to make them 'fit' for the world, through the method of continuous evaluation.

In this manner, the educated person becomes the adapted person; the majority culturally adapts to the dominant minority. By quoting Fromm, Freire says that through this symbolic cultural adaptation to another person's life, the dominated have the illusion of acting, but in reality they are a part of those who really act. In populist manifestations, the oppressed identify with the dominant elite and thus feel themselves to be active, whereas in actuality they are immersed in bad faith. As the freedom is inseparable from authority, the freedom of the oppressed is realised through the adaptation of the values of the cultural dominant. In such authoritarianism, freedom as the full development of the human<sup>3</sup> is denied and the hypertrophy of the one provokes the atrophy of the other (PF 2005: 178).

As a further development of the preservation of the cultural domination, the world is mythicised. The actuality of the world is not problematised but the world is mythicised as a fixed unchanging entity to which the spectators must adapt. For example, Freire quotes the following as myths perpetuated to maintain the status quo of domination: the present oppressive order as 'free society', all are free to work as they wish, the street vendor is as much an entrepreneur, the universal right to education, the equality of individuals, the charity and generosity of elites (in awarding fellowships and starting educational institutions), the docility of the weak and so on (PF 2005: 139 - 40). All such myths get massified with the well organised slogans and propaganda of the media. Through such a cultural conquest, the passivity of the oppressed becomes complete by the oppressor.

Here it is very important to note that the terminologies of the class contradiction are not used by Freire to denote the economic and cultural power relations of the classes. The class contradiction is not a compartmentalised rigidity also in the theory of Freire. Freire attempted to analyse how the class contradictions are maintained through the culturally invasive pedagogy. In place of it, he proposes critical pedagogy as an alternative. Interestingly, in the writings of Paulo Freire we find the problems affecting the student-teacher relationship, the problems surrounding curriculum and pedagogical structure which are interlinked with the historical, economic, cultural and political contexts. Though Freire did not discuss the problem affecting the university system in particular,

---

<sup>2</sup>Here mastery does not mean domination. Domination presupposes the defeat of the other, whereas mastery is about coexistence with critical consciousness.

<sup>3</sup>According to Freire, "The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or in individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed." *Ibid.*, p. 85. For a further discussion on the development of collective-individuality, please refer to Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life - A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2008.

his critique of education system offers an insight into what is presently happening within the tertiary education system as well.

### **The Accountability and the Idea of University**

While Paulo Freire theorised the structural deficiencies and systemic ills of the education system, the literatures on university system mostly dwell upon the utilitarian aspects of university education and the declining moral and intellectual standards of university education system. These literatures can be broadly classified into two types; the ones that discuss about the utilitarian aspects of university education can be categorised as literatures on the ‘accountability of university’ and the ones which resent about the declining moral and intellectual standards of university education system can be categorised as literatures on the ‘idea of university’.

It needs to be remembered here that the procedures that govern the funding, assessment, quality control and impact factor surrounding the academics today were not present before the 1990s in India. The direct public funding of university is gradually being replaced with higher fees; the open-ended enquiry within the university education is being replaced gradually by the pressures of academic scores. With the changing social, political and economic conditions, the university system is also being gradually recreated and modified. Hence a pessimistic diagnosis of such changes cannot be of help to understand the system properly. Though the universities were catering to the needs of industry in recruiting qualified people, there were resentments alongside about such instrumental value of university system too. For example, Ernest Rutherford, the Nobel laureate on nuclear physics, lamented in 1927 that the laboratories of the University of Bristol being utilised for research bearing on industry (SC 2017: 16).

The universities are considered to be a place where open-ended enquiry is possible and where pure thinking, un-adulterated by the common-sensical and routinised knowledge, is possible; pursuing such ideals is not to be subordinated to any other purpose, it is thought. Hence, there is always a constant tension between the practical and utilitarian ends of learning and the ideal of using universities for such subservient purposes. “A common element to many of the politically fashionable ways of making universities ‘accountable’ is that well-meant attempts to demonstrate the ‘relevance’ of universities to society’s needs can end up being counter-productive... Making it obligatory to pursue certain narrow forms of economic and social impact in the short term ends up damaging the quality of the research and thereby *reducing* its benefit to society” says Stefan Collini (SC 2017: 26).

Making universities accountable to the immediate concerns of the society and the political-economic needs also encourages an audit culture, which has damaging unintended consequences. For example, the need to measure the productivity of a faculty in a university through the number of publications has ended up in the mushrooming of paid journals which necessitated the UGC to go for auditing the credentials of the journals. The measuring up of the accountability of teachers through quantifying their works has often resulted in the compromise of quality of the produce. With the move from market economy to market society also indicates “how contemporary public debate tends to automatically to relegate anything that is not quantifiable to the status of subjective ‘opinion’”. Quoting American Historian Jerry Muller, Stefan Collini states that “The quest for numerical metrics of accountability is particularly attractive in cultures marked by low social trust” and he calls this process as ‘fetishization of metrics and benchmarks’ (SF 2017: 38).

Further, such accountability of university to the public and industrial demands would end up serving the majoritarianism in a world that is increasingly influenced by the popular right-wing

media, managed and controlled by corporate houses. “This popular interpretation of accountability means, therefore, not just democratic answerability or demonstration of proper stewardship of public funds. Insidiously, it comes to mean – though this is never explicit, of course – that the working conditions within these professions should be made to correspond more closely to those recognisable to the majority, regardless of whether those are the conditions favourable to high-quality work in those fields” (SC 2017: 41).

Further, regarding the metrical assessment of university and its impact on the society, it needs to be mentioned that universities are in pursuit of intellectual aspects. Such intellectual activities and creativities cannot be programmed or assessed metrically due to factors that are partly out of control of the university and that intellectual activities are not a product of a generation or a university alone. The word ‘impact’ is also a proxy for the public value of the research. Because, “It is not actually a measure of that value, but a measure of something else, something that is secondary, and in many cases contingent or incidental to the activity of doing a good research, something the required evidence for which is bound to be unevenly and somewhat arbitrarily distributed among a given population of scholars” (SC 2017: 51). There is a conceptual confusion that manifests in such phraseologies, as the incidental by-products are confused with the ‘targets’ to be aimed for. With such conceptual confusion, the assessment criteria and impact factors begin to shape the research potentials and activities where the seeker is subordinated to the sought. What such criteria suggest and whose interests they serve in spite of level-headed criticisms are further questions that spring out of them.

## **Conclusion**

The above critique is not intended to resist changes that occur within the field of university education system in the recent times. This article does not propose to say that the past was golden, the present is pessimistic and the future is bleak. It is undeniable that there are fundamental forces operating below the surface of the university education system that alter the course of the functioning of a university. Identifying them, analysing their intent and correcting the course of functioning are the main objectives behind this paper in order for the better articulation of an understanding of what universities are meant for.

## **References**

1. John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, *Marx and the Earth – An Anti-Critique*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2016.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital – A Critique of Political Economy*, Translated by Ben Fowkes, Penguin, London, 1990.
3. Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit – Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2010.
4. Paulo Freire, Myra Bergmann Ramos (Tr.), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum, New York and London, 2005.
5. Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital: An Anti-Critique*, New York: Monthly Review, New York, 1972.
6. Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, Verso, London and New York, 2017.