THE SOCIAL ROLE OF A UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

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As a result of the increasing division of work in modern technological society there is a strong tendency to create a type of university professor who is a narrow expert, interested only in promoting and conveying positive knowledge in a very specialized field. This trend can be regarded as a sign of both progress and crisis in university education.

The emphasis on creation and communication of positive knowledge at the University is, on the one hand, a supersession of an abstract, traditional, conservative form of humanistic education which prevailed at European universities until the nineteenth century. Traditional humanistic studies served to create the intellectual elites of European society; they offered a definite value orientation and a general erudition more or less adequate for the purpose of ruling and of developing the culture and ideology of the ruling group of society. However, rapid technological growth from the first industrial revolution onwards created a need for numerous cadres of scientists, engineers and other specialists, urging a total change in the character and structure of university education. The pendulum swung to the other side.

When I use the word "crisis" in order to describe the present day situation of university education, I don't share the views of some followers of the philosophy of existence and phenomenology, whose romantic protest against science and technology is tied to a rather conservative mistrust of positive knowledge and scientific method in general. What can be characterized as a state of crisis is the reduction of human rationality to a narrow technological rationality characterized by an attitude of indifference

toward the problems of goals and values, the realization of which should be mediated by knowledge. In an effort to liberate itself from the domination of theology and ideology, to develop objective methods of inquiry, modern science has, from its beginnings, tended to rid itself of unverifiable theoretical explanations and value-judgements. As a consequence, a spiritual vacuum was created which, under the given historical conditions, could be filled only by a faith in power, a faith in success in all its various forms. This ideology of success, this obsession with the efficacy of means - accompanied by an almost total lack of interest in the problem of rationality and humanity of goals - is the essential characteristic of the spiritual climate of contemporary industrial society.

This crisis, in a milder form, is present even in socialist countries. The fact that in these countries the program of building up a socialist society coincides to a large extend with the program of industrialization and the creation of an affluent society must be taken into account in order to explain why the ideas of the philosophy of Enlightenment, such as power over nature and technological efficiency, still have such a dominating influence.

By now it has already become quite clear, at least to some writers, artists, philosophers and scientists, that, while increasing power, material wealth and organization of social life, while creating new historical possibilities of liberating and humanizing social relationships, the material form of the positive science industry has neglected many essential human needs and has extended the possibilities of manipulation of human individuals. The universal penetration of technology into all forms of social life has been followed by the penetration of routine, uniformity and utilitarianism. Inevitably, it has stunted human spontaneity, naturalness, and authenticity. Growth of material walth has not made man happier; data on suicide, alcoholism, mental illness, juvenile delinquency, etc. indicate a positive correlation between the degree of technological development and social pathological phenomena. Obviously, positive science and technology triggered unforeseen and uncontrollable social processes. The scientist who does not care about the broader social context of his inquiry loses every control over the product of his work. The history of the creation and use of nuclear weapons constitutes a drastic example.

The greatest and ablest scientists of the twentieth centry, headed by Einstein, Fermi, Szilard, Openheimer and others, discovered the method for producing the most destructive weapon which has ever existed on earth; this discovery was alienated the very moment it was made. Another example of the abuse of science can be found in ideological propaganda. The most effective and therefore most dangerous propaganda is not one which is based on untruths and is therefore in obvious conflict with science, but one which, in order to rationalize and justify the interests of privileged social groups, uses partial truths established by science.

Science is helpless against such abuses if it is atomized, unintegrated, disinterested in the problems of wholes, and neutral with regard to such general human values as freedom, social justice, the development of human solidarity, the abolition of alienation, etc.

However, the most influential philosophy in contemporary science is positivism, according to which the sole function of science is to describe and explain what there is and, if at least some laws are known, to extrapolate what there might probably be. All evaluation in terms of needs, feelings, moral standards, etc. is considered basically irrational and should, it is argued, be discarded. According to this conception the analysis and determination of goals, ideals and criteria for evaluation fall outside the scope of science. The whole of science gets in ultima linea concentrated on the investigation of the most adequate means for achieving the ends which have been laid down by others.

There is obviously a vast difference between the positivism of an expert who escapes into narrow forms of his discipline because he is indifferent toward all social goals or because he rejects the official system of values of the society to which he belongs, and, on the other hand, the positivism of an "engaged" scientist who is ready to serve the leading social forces, to receive his tasks from them, and to leave to them the whole problem of the determination of the social value-orientation of his work. However, there is something common in the attitudes of (1) an indifferent petty bourgeois who sells his knowledge as a commodity to the most favourable buyer, (2) a sceptical rebel who deals with "pure", ideologically-neutral science because "nothing else makes any sense", and (3) a loyal expert of the government or the Party who conceives his work only as an instrument of politics. What is common to these different types of scientist is that each one of them makes efforts to create the most rational means and each one of them fails to consider, as a function of science, inquiry into the rationality and humanity of the goals. That is why the rationality of science can be described as technological, not cultural and humanistic. In this way science loses the power to supersede critically the existing forms of historical reality and to project new, essentially different, more humane, historical possibilities. By its indifference toward goals, by its value-neutrality, science leads merely to the growth of power, to the ever more efficient control of natural and social processes within the framework of the existing historical structure. So behind this apparent absence of any value-orientation one discovers clearly a conservative orientation. Even passive resistance to the reduction of science to a mere servant of ideology and politics is acceptable to the ruling elites, because pure, positive, disintegrated knowledge can always be interpreted and used in a profitable way, with the society finally losing its critical self-consciousness.

In fact, true intellectuals in the field of science do have a critical regard for existing world realities. They are very much concerned about the way the products of their mind will be interpreted and practically applied. That is why all leading physicists of our century, Einstein, Bohr, Planck, Heisenberg, Schrödinger, Born, De Broglie and others, were also philosophers and humanists. Many of them and their pupils took an active part in the struggle against nazism and against abuse of the achievements of nuclear science. All actions of scientists to prevent the use of atomic bombs in 1945 -- Einstein's and Szilard's letters, the Franck report, the petition to the President of the U.S. of July 17, 1945, later the Pugwash movement and increasing participation of scientists and university professors in the peace movement -- show clearly that they have not only been concerned with the accumulation and communication of knowledge, but also with the social consequences of the application of knowledge, and with the critical evaluation of unsatisfactory features of the contemporary human condition.

There is no doubt that the fundamental assumptions and values of each individual scientist are influenced by his adherence to a given nation and the way in which he has been educated within a particular tradition and in a particular social climate. However, truth is universal; science is a universal human product, and is being given a sense of direction by a universal humanist tradition. A true scientist will tend to speak as Man and will tend to rise above limitations of nation, race, class or religion. This is the language one finds in the First Pugwash Statement signed by Russell and Einstein:

> "We are speaking not as members of this or that nation, continent or creed, but as human beings, members of the species man, whose continued existence is in doubt.
>
> "... Most of us are not neutral in feeling, but as human beings we have to remember that if the issues between East and West are to be decided in any manner that gives any possible satisfaction to anybody, whether communist or anticommunist, whether Asian or European or American, whether white or black, then these issues must not be decided by war..."
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> "We appeal as human beings to human beings; remember your humanity and forget the rest."[1]

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[1] Russell, Einstein, An Appeal for the Abolition of War, Sept. 1955 The Atomic Age, ed. by Grodzius and Rabinowitch New York and London 1963, pp. 535-541.

In addition to their responsibilities as scientists, university professors have a special responsibility as educators of those who will educate coming generations of young people. Experts who are only able to convey information may become redundant in the not too distant future; they can be effectively replaced by teaching machines. On the other hand, students will always need living contact with a scientist who can put a piece of information into a broader context and explain its deeper meaning. They will always need the presence of a professor, a genuine intellectual, with a broad scientific culture, who can not only teach them the technical skills of scientific research but who in addition can help them to penetrate into the fundamentals of the scientific method and to realize the general cultural and ethical values implicit in science as a specific sphere of social consciousness. In this respect it is rather easy to distinguish between pure experts and genuine intellectuals. An expert remains at the level of partial knowledge, at the level of correct application of a given body of positive knowledge and a given method of enquiry to the solution of a specific problem. In short, he remains at the level of technics. A genuine, creative intellectual in the field of science critically examines and further develops its very theoretical foundations; he establishes important connections and generalizations; he creates new forms and new systems; he discovers the full meaning of scientific results by incorporating them into the broader cultural and philosophical contexts of his time. It is not too difficult to realize how this can be done in the social sciences and humanities. A good professor of economics will certainly pay attention to such crucial issues as the nature and forms of alienation of labour, the fetishism of commodities, the notion of economic rationality, the philosophical assumptions of various conceptions of technological progress, the merits and difficulties of planning within the global community, the social consequences of automation, etc. A good political scientist will by all means examine critically the very institutions of professional politics and the state; he will demystify various contemporary ideological rationalizations and discover behind the democratic façade hidden centres of political power; he will examine the place of political power as a value in the scale of other social and ethical values.

What can be reasonably doubted is whether such consideration of broader theoretical questions can possibly be introduced into the natural sciences curricula. And yet, the history of natural sciences is a history of struggle for rationality and objectivity, for freedom and independence of thought, against blind faith and dogmatism, against theological and ideological myths, against subordination to any external authority. Philosophical assumptions with far reaching cultural and social consequences are involved in quantum theory, the theory of relativity, the theory of evolution, the theory of heredity, of cybernetics and of psychoanalysis. Discovery of new sources of energy immediately leads to the problem of international control of their use, including even the problem of creating a world government. Discovery of new exact methods of management (operations research) raises the question: how can we create big technological systems without an undesirable strengthening of bureaucratic and technocratic forces within the society? The problem of biological adaptability of the human organism to his surroundings inevitably

leads to critical analysis of social surroundings in a modern industrial society. Space programs in the most developed countries surely give rise to a dilemma: is it more rational to conquer outer space or hunger and misery on earth? Psychiatry is socially neutral only at first sight; in fact, it allows very fruitful analogies in the study of mass behaviour within present day industrial civilization. Even the most abstract and exact science, mathematics, involves in all its branches a general problem which indirectly has enormous bearing on human life, i.e., the problem of the formalization of human thinking, the liberation of man from all routine intellectual operations and, eventually, the substitution of automatic devices for human agents. Such developments would obviously require drastic changes in social organization.

These illustrations clearly indicate that the problems of the natural and social sciences tend to fuse with every effort of reflection about the meaning of scientific discoveries and the consequences of their application. They also show how this kind of reflection naturally leads to a critical examination of present day society and to the projection of possibilities open for the future. In order to awaken the intellectual curiosity of his students and to broaden their spiritual horizons, a good university professor must influence them to ask not only how, but also why and to what purpose.

In order to facilitate the development of open-minded and productive intellectuals who have a sense of history and will work to improve upon existing reality, rather than sticking to it and tending to conserve it just as it is in all essential aspects, a university professor should teach his students to approach reality not only with the question, "What would be the optimal means to keep it going?", but also with the question, "What are the essential inner limitations and how can they be superseded?"

By now it becomes quite clear that in order to play the role of one who opens new horizons and helps others to become productive and future-oriented, sheer knowledge, no matter how great, does not suffice. In order to be a successful educator, one has to be a personality, a man of integrity and character, who is actively engaged in the realization of his beliefs. Students readily forgive if the beliefs are either somewhat utopian or too "realistic". What they cannot forgive is discrepancy between thought, word and deed. They have more respect for sceptics, or even for bold and energetic conservatives, than for soft and passive humanists who never dare to take risks.

It follows then, that a university professor who wants to live up to the ideal implicit in his calling will extend his activities beyond the limits of the relatively narrow university circle and become an active figure in the global social community. This need not necessarily be political engagement in the strict sense of the word. This can be any kind of engagement which leads to an intellectual and moral reform of the society, and which contributes to the creation of a culture more adequate to the genuine needs of the ordinary people. It is immediately clear that this public engagement

of a university professor makes sense only if he retains full freedom and independence of thought and action. Certainly freedom presupposes responsibility and strict observance of moral and legal norms. On the other hand, a genuine intellectual and educator cannot be expected to conform to any other prevailing norms, customs, twists and turns of day-do-day politics or temporarily fashionable patterns of thought and behaviour. He would be a complete failure if he simply assumed an apologetic role with respect to the policy of the state. His attitude toward the state's policy should depend on the nature of the policy and not on any mustified requirements such as "responsibility", loyalty", "patriotism", etc. In fact, he must be responsible, loyal, and devoted to his people, not to the state apparatus, whose will is not necessarily the will of the people. What follows is that he should not necessarily advocate the official scale of values, which is often only the expression of the needs and interests of the ruling elite of the society.

Certainly, if he belongs to a political organization his freedom will be limited by the values and norms of the organization. However, this should be a consciously and voluntarily accepted limitation based on the free acceptance of the basic principles of the organization. Otherwise, he would be faced with a dilemma: either become a split personality (homo duplex) or leave the organization. The latter alternative would be the only one which comes into account.

The public engagement of a university professor has a double meaning:

1) It is an important link in the process of mediation between the theoretical mind and the concrete praxis of a people An immense collective effort of the best minds of a people is needed in order to raise the social reality of a country to the point reached by the most advanced thought appropriate to the given level of historical development. This point might be considerably higher than the one envisaged by the official politics which, in this case, would have to be described as more or less conservative. Or it might be lower if official political practice is voluntaristic, based on an overestimate of the historical possibilities. Obviously the most favorable case (rarely found) obtains when practical politicians, with their experience, skill and additional sources of information, join forces with the leading intellectuals of the country, equipped with theoretical knowledge, reliable data, and scientific method, in order to discover the optimal real historical possibilities of the given society, taking into account the factual economic, political and cultural situation, trends of development and the needs and patterns of behaviour of the masses. Without the cooperation of its best brains (some of which are certainly leading scientists at the universities) a nation is likely to miss its optimal mark.

2) There is another (indirect) sense in which the public engagement of a university professor may make at least a modest contribution to the history of a country. By arousing admiration in his students -- not only because

of his knowledge, but also because of the honesty and boldness of his practical behaviour -- a university professor can become a real educator of those who will in turn educate others. In this indirect way, by having hundreds of young educators internalize certain values and principles, one can probably achieve much more than by directly justifying them and applying them in an effort to change the historical conditions of the society.

At any rate, this kind of activity is a break in the chain of blind historical determination and fully deserves to be called "revolutionary praxis" following young Marx who, more than twelve decades ago, wrote this famous Third Thesis on Feuerbach:

> "The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and education forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated ....
>
> The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can only be conceived and rationally understood as revolutionary praxis".