

# Education in Liquid Modernity

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Let me start by discussing a few seminal and interconnected departures from the old social order which are currently happening (at least in the ‘developed’ part of the planet) and which are creating a new and indeed unprecedented setting for the educational process, thereby raising a series of never-before-encountered challenges for the educators.

First of all, society is being transformed by the passage from the ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ phase of modernity, in which all social forms melt faster than new ones can be cast. They are not given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as the frame of reference for human actions and long-term life-strategies because their allegedly short life-expectation undermines efforts to develop a strategy that would require the consistent fulfilment of a ‘life-project.’

The second departure from the past involves the divorce between power and politics, until recently a married couple cohabiting ‘till death do us part’ the shared household of the nation-state. Power now circulates within the politically uncontrolled global (and in many ways extraterritorial) space. By contrast, politics, that historically-shaped way of linking individual and public interests and of engendering purposeful collective action, remains as before local; as such, it is unable to effectively operate at the planetary level. The absence of political control makes power into a source of profound and in principle untameable uncertainty; while the dearth of power makes the extant political institutions, their initiatives and undertakings, increasingly irrelevant to citizens’ most haunting life-problems and, for that reason, less likely to draw citizens’ attention. This situation also prods the state organs to drop, transfer away, or ‘subsidiarize’ an increasing number of previously performed functions. Having been abandoned by the state and left to the private initiative and care of individuals, those unregulated

functions now become a playground for notoriously capricious and inherently unpredictable market forces.

Third, the withdrawal of communal insurance against individual mishaps and ill fortune devalues collective action and indeed the social foundations of solidarity, exacerbating the frailty and impermanence of interhuman bonds. Such an undermined security net hardly seems worthy of a large and continuous investment of time and effort and of the sacrifice of immediate individual interests (or whatever is seen as being in individual interest). Individual exposure to the vagaries of commodities and labour markets inspires and promotes divisions, not unity; it puts a premium on competitive attitudes and degrades collaboration and teamwork to the rank of temporary stratagems that need to be suspended or terminated the moment their benefits have been exploited in full and used up. 'Society' is increasingly viewed and treated as a 'network' rather than 'structure' (let alone a solid 'totality'): it is perceived and treated as a matrix of random connections and disconnections, and of essentially infinite volume of possible permutations.

Fourth, the collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting—and the disappearance or weakening of social structures in which thinking, planning, and acting could be inscribed for a long time to come—leads to the splicing of both political history and individual lives into series of short-term projects and episodes that do not combine into the logically consistent and cohesive sequences to which concepts like 'development,' 'maturation,' 'career,' or 'progress' (all suggesting a preordained order of succession) could be meaningfully applied. Such fragmentation of human lives stimulates 'lateral' rather than 'vertical' orientations. Any next step needs to be a response to a different set of opportunities and distribution of odds, and so it calls for a different set of skills and arrangement of assets. Past successes do not necessarily increase the probability of future victories, let alone guarantee them; in fact, the methods successfully tested in the past need to be constantly inspected and revised since they may prove useless or downright counterproductive in changed circumstances. Swift and thorough *forgetting* of outdated information and aged habits can be as much or more important for success than the memorizing of past moves and building one's strategies on the hardened and lasting sediment of previous *learning*.

Fifth, the future, now largely out of control and unpredictable, is increasingly turning from a land of hope into a major source of

apprehension. Lives of even the happiest people among us (or, by common opinion, the luckiest) are far from trouble-free. Not everything works in life as one would like it to work. Unpleasant and uncomfortable events abound: things and people keep causing worries we would not expect and certainly not wish them to cause. But what makes such discomforts particularly irksome is that they tend to come unannounced. They hit us, as we say, 'as bolts out of the blue'; no one expects a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky, and no one can take precautions against and avert a catastrophe from that which is unexpected. The blows come suddenly, with irregularity; and their nasty ability to appear from anywhere and at any moment makes them unpredictable, and renders us defenseless. Insofar as the dangers are eminently free-floating, freakish, and frivolous, we are their sitting targets—we can do little, if anything at all, to prevent their arrival. Such hopelessness of ours is frightening. Uncertainty breeds fear.

Sixth, the responsibility for resolving the quandaries generated by these volatile and constantly changing circumstances is shifted onto the shoulders of individuals, who are now expected to be 'free choosers' and to bear the consequences of their choices. Every choice involves risks that may be produced by forces transcending the comprehension and active capacity of the individual; nevertheless, it is the individual's lot and duty to take on these risks, as there are no authoritatively endorsed recipes which, if properly learned and dutifully followed, would enable one to avoid error or to transfer blame in case of failure. The virtue proclaimed best to serve individual interests is not *conformity* to rules (which at any rate are few and far between, and often mutually contradictory) but *flexibility*: readiness to change tactics and style at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret, and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability rather than following one's own established preferences.

It is time to ask how this set of departures modifies the range of challenges men and women face in their life-pursuits and how it obliquely influences the way people tend to live their lives.

We can say that if the common, indeed 'normal,' premodern posture towards the world was akin to that of a *gamekeeper*, then it is the *gardener's* attitude that best serves as a metaphor for modern world-view and practice.

The main task of a gamekeeper is to defend the land assigned to his wardenship from (mainly human) interference, in order to

defend and preserve its 'natural,' so to speak, balance or equilibrium. The gamekeeper must promptly discover and disable the snares set by poachers and keep alien, illegitimate hunters from trespassing. A gamekeeper's vocation rests on the belief that things are at their best when not interfered with; that the world is a divine chain of being in which every creature has its rightful and useful place, even if human mental abilities are too limited to comprehend the wisdom, harmony, and orderliness of God's design.

Not so the gardener. He assumes that there would be no order at all in the part of the world in his charge were it not for his constant attention and effort; until that effort is undertaken, blind accident will prevail, bringing by chance some felicitous results, but also many numerous regrettable errors. The gardener knows better what kind of plants *should*, and what sort of plants *should not* grow on the plot entrusted to his care. He works out the desirable arrangement first in his head, and then tries, persistently and assiduously, to engrave the image on the plot: to re-make the plot in the likeness of that image. He implants his preconceived vision by the twin efforts of encouraging the growth of the right type of plants and of uprooting and destroying all the others (now renamed 'weeds'), whose uninvited and unwanted presence disagrees with the overall harmony of the design and challenges the very idea of preconceived, planned, and supervised order.

Both postures of the gamekeeper and the gardener are now, in the liquid-modern world, increasingly rare and at best half-hearted, giving ground to that of the *hunter*. Unlike the preceding types, sport hunters could not care less about the overall 'balance of things,' whether 'natural' or contrived. The sole task they pursue is another 'kill,' large enough to fill their game-bags to capacity. Most certainly, they would not consider it their task to make sure that the supply of game roaming in the forest is replenished after being decimated in the course of the hunt. If the woods have been emptied of game due to a particularly successful hunting escapade, sport hunters would rather move swiftly to another relatively unspoiled wilderness, still teeming with prospective hunting trophies. They may be aware that in some distant and still undefined future the planet may run out of virgin forests and undepleted game-havens. This is not, however, an *immediate* worry; and since it won't bear on the results of the current hunts it is surely not *their* worry, and therefore not a prospect about which a single hunter or

a single hunting association would see the need to concern themselves and do something.

We are all like game hunters now, or told to be hunters and compelled to act like hunters, on the penalty of eviction from the hunting world; and in case we don't repent and correct our ways, the penalty may mean relegation to the ranks of the game itself. No wonder then that looking around we see mostly other lonely hunters like us, or hunters gathering in packs for the occasion, which we also sometimes try to do. What we practice ourselves, and see other people practicing, is called 'individualization.' We would need to try really hard to spot a gardener who aims at predesigned harmony stretching beyond the fence of his private garden. We certainly won't find a gamekeeper with such vast ambitions (this being the prime reason for people with 'ecological conscience' to feel alarmed and try their best to alert the rest of us). That increasingly salient absence of gamekeepers and gardeners with a wider vision is called 'deregulation.'

As Jacques Attali (2004) recently observed in *La Voie Humaine*, "nations lost influence on the course of affairs and have abandoned to the forces of globalization all means of orientation in the world's destination and of the defence against all varieties of fear. . . . Individualism is triumphant. No one, or almost no one, believes any longer that changing lives of others has importance for him or her. No one, or almost no one, believes that voting may change significantly his or her condition, and so the condition of the world."

On the rare occasion when the word 'progress' appears these days in the public discourse (or for that matter on the homepages of commercial websites), it no longer refers to a forward drive. Rather than implying a joyful chase after a spinning-along utopia, it inspires fear of an imminent danger and instils the urge of salvation, or rather of lucky escape; it arouses fearful vigilance and cultivates the desire to run away from an impending disaster. Progress seems no longer to be about *improvement*, but about *survival*. Progress is no longer about rushing ahead and winning the race, but about staying on the track. It's not about the rise in stature, but about staving off the fall. It's not about a promotion, elevation, or any other advancement, but about the *avoidance of being excluded*.

We learn, for instance, from the widely read and diligently obeyed glossy magazines, that this coming year Brazil is 'the only winter-sun destination this winter' and so you must avoid being seen where people of aspirations similar to yours were obliged to

be seen the winter before. Or that you must 'lose the ponchos' which were so much en vogue last year, since if you wear a poncho now, 'you look like a camel.' Donning pinstripe jackets and T-shirts is over, simply because 'nobody' wears them. And so it goes, if you don't wish to sink, keep surfing; and that means changing your wardrobe, your furnishings, your wallpapers, your look, your habits—in short, yourself—quickly, and as often as you can manage.

I don't need to add, since this should be obvious, that the new emphasis on the *disposal of things*, rather than on their *appropriation*, suits well the logic of a consumer-oriented economy. People sticking to yesterday's clothes, computers, mobiles, cosmetics, and habits would spell disaster for an economy whose main concern and the condition *sine qua non* of survival is a rapid and accelerating acquisition of purchased products and their subsequent consignment to waste, and for which swift waste disposal is a cutting-edge industry. Increasingly, timely *escape* is now the name of the most popular game in town.

Semantically, escape is the very opposite of early modern utopias, but psychologically it is their sole available substitute: one could say it is their new rendition, refashioned to the measure of a deregulated, individualized society of consumers. You can no longer seriously hope to make the *world* a better place to live; you can't even make really trustworthy and secure that 'relatively better' *place* in the world which you might have managed to cut out for yourself. You are left concentrating your concerns and efforts on the fight against *losing*. The most you can do is to try to stay among the hunters, since the only alternative is to find yourself among the hunted. And the fight against losing is a task that requires your full, undivided attention—vigilance twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—and keeps you moving as fast as possible.

Joseph Brodsky (1997), the Russian-American philosopher-poet, vividly described the kind of life set in motion and prompted by the compulsion to escape. The lot of the *losers* (that is, of the poor) is sometimes a violent rebellion, but more commonly drug addiction: "In general, a man shooting heroin into his vein does so largely for the same reason you buy a video," Brodsky told the students of Dartmouth College in July 1989. As to the potential winners (or the 'haves'), which the Dartmouth College students aspire to be,

you'll be bored with your work, your spouses, your lovers, the view from your window, the furniture or wallpaper in your room, your thoughts,

yourselves. Accordingly, you'll try to devise ways of escape. Apart from the self-gratifying gadgets mentioned before, you may take up changing jobs, residence, company, country, climate, you may take up promiscuity, alcohol, travel, cooking lessons, drugs, psychoanalysis. . . .

In fact, you may lump all these together, and for a while that may work. Until the day, of course, when you wake up in your bedroom amid a new family and a different wallpaper, in a different state and climate, with a heap of bills from your travel agent and your shrink, yet with the same stale feeling toward the light of day pouring through your window.

Andrzej Stasiuk (2002), a remarkable Polish novelist and perceptive analyst of the contemporary human condition, suggests that 'the possibility of becoming someone else' is the present-day substitute for a now largely discarded and dismissed salvation or redemption. "Applying various techniques, we may change our bodies and re-shape them according to different patterns. . . . When browsing through glossy magazines, one gets the impression that they tell mostly one story—about the ways in which one can re-make one's personality, starting from diets, surroundings, homes, and up to rebuilding of psychical structure, often code-named a proposition to 'be yourself.'" Stawomir Mrozek (2003), Polish satirist of a world-wide fame, seems to endorse and complement Stasiuk's hypothesis: "In old times, when feeling unhappy, we accused God, the then world's manager; we assumed that He did not run the business properly. So we fired Him and appointed ourselves the new directors." But, Mrozek suggests, the change of management has not improved the business. Once the dream and hope of a better life had been re-focused on our own egos and reduced to tinkering with our own bodies or souls, "there is no limit to our ambition and temptation to make that ego grow ever bigger. . . . I was told: 'invent yourself, invent your own life and manage it as you wish, in every single moment and from beginning to end.' But am I able to rise to such a task? With no help, trials, fittings, errors and overhauls, and above all without doubts?" The strife produced by unduly limited choice of one painful option or another is caused by the obligation to choose while having no trust in the choices made, and no confidence that further choices will bring the target any closer. Mrozek compares the world we inhabit to a "market-stall filled with fancy dresses and surrounded by crowds seeking their 'selves.' . . . One can change dresses without end, so what a wondrous liberty the seekers enjoy. . . . Let's go on

searching for our real selves, it's smashing fun—on condition that the real self will be never found. Because if it were, the fun would end."

The dream of making uncertainty less daunting and happiness more permanent by changing one's ego, and of changing one's ego by changing one's dress and other wrappings, has become the current 'utopia' of hunters: the 'deregulated,' 'privatized,' and 'individualized' version of the old-style vision of a good society understood as a society hospitable to the humanity of its members.

Hunting is a fulltime task: it consumes a lot of attention and energy; it leaves time for little else; and so it averts attention from the infinite task and postpones *ad calendas graecas* the moment of reflection in which the sheer impossibility of the task at hand needs to be faced point blank. As Blaise Pascal (1966) centuries ago prophetically noted, what people want is "being diverted from thinking of what they are . . . by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show. We want to escape the need to think of "our unhappy condition," and so "we prefer the hunt to the capture." "The hare itself would not save us from thinking" about the formidable but intractable flaws in our shared condition, "but hunting it does so."

The snag is that once tried, the pursuit of prey turns into compulsion. Catching a hare is an anticlimax; it only makes the prospect of hunting more seductive even as the desire to hunt becomes an obsession. The hopes that accompanied the pursuit seem in retrospect to have been the most delightful (the only really satisfactory) gain of the affair. Catching the hare presages the end to those hopes, that is, unless another hunt is immediately planned and undertaken.

If early modern utopias envisaged a point in which time will come to a stop (indeed, the end of time as history), there is no such point in the hunter's life, no moment where one would say in clear conscience that the job has been completed, the mission accomplished. In a society of hunters, a prospect of an end to hunting is frightening—since it may arrive only as a personal defeat. The horns will go on announcing the start of another hunting escapade; the greyhounds will go on barking and resurrecting the sweet memory of past chases; everyone around will go on hunting; there will be no end to universal excitement. Only *I* will be left standing or pushed aside, excluded and no longer wanted, barred from other people's joys: just a passive spectator on the other side of fence, watching



the party but forbidden or unable to join the revellers, enjoying the sights and sounds of revelry at best from a distance and by proxy.

If a life of continuing and continuous hunting is another utopia, it is—contrary to the utopias of the past—a utopia of *no* end. A bizarre utopia indeed, if measured by orthodox standards. The original utopias promised the end to the toil; but the hunters' utopia encapsulates the dream of a toil never ending. Strange, unorthodox utopia it is—but utopia all the same, as it promises the same unattainable prize all utopias brandished, namely the ultimate and radical solution to human problems past, present, and future, and the ultimate and radical cure for the sorrows and pains of the human condition. It is unorthodox mainly for having moved the land of solutions and cures from the 'far away' into 'here and now.' Instead of living *towards* the utopia, hunters are offered a living *inside* the utopia.

For the gardeners, utopia was the *end of the road*; for hunters, however, it is *the road itself*. Gardeners visualized the end of the road as the vindication and the ultimate triumph of utopia. For the hunters, the end of the road would be the utopia's final, ignominious defeat. Adding insult to the injury, it would also be a thoroughly personal defeat and proof of personal failure. Other hunters won't stop hunting; and non-participation in the hunt can only feel like personal exclusion, and so (presumably) personal inadequacy. Utopia brought from the misty 'far away' into the tangible 'here and now,' utopia *lived* rather than being *lived towards*, is immune to tests (there can be always another trial, and another trial after that . . .). For all practical intents and purposes, this utopia seems to be immortal. But its immortality has been achieved at the price of frailty and vulnerability of each one who has been enchanted and seduced to live in it.

Unlike the utopias of yore, the hunters' utopia does not offer a meaning to life—whether genuine or fraudulent. It only helps to chase the question of life's meaning away from the mind of living. Having reshaped the course of life into an unending series of self-focused and self-referential pursuits, each episode lived through as an overture to the next, it offers no occasion for reflection about the direction and the sense of it all. When (if) finally such an occasion comes, at the moment of falling out or being banned from the hunting life, it is usually too late for the reflection to bear on the way life is shaped, and so too late to oppose its present shape and effectively dispute its propriety.

So where does this leave education and its practitioners? I suggest that the sole imaginable answer to such a question has been put into Marco Polo's lips by the great Italo Calvino (1974) in *Le Città Invisibile*:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be: if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (my translation)

L'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se ce n'è uno è quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui: cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all' inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio. (p. 164)

It is a contentious matter whether living in a society of hunters is or is not like living in hell (most hunters will tell you that being a hunter among hunters has its blissful moments). It is hardly contentious, however, that 'many' will go for the 'easy' strategy and so become 'part of it,' no longer puzzled by its bizarre logic nor irritated by its ubiquitous and mostly fanciful demands. Also beyond doubt is the prospect that the educators who seek for 'what and who is not hell' would face a daunting task when wishing to gain the attention and arouse the vigilance of their pupils, and would find themselves under all sorts of pressure to accept the 'inferno' and, moreover, help their pupils to make the application of the 'easy for many' life-strategy still easier yet.

Let us recall that, according to Gregory Bateson (1987), 'tertiary learning' (which trained the skills of dismantling the previously learned cognitive frames) would make learners akin to plankton, carried by random waves and unable to adhere to anything to resist the tide. In this way, tertiary learning is at cross-purposes with the 'deutero-learning,' which in Bateson's view could make the learners able to 'build upon a firm foundation,' adding new knowledge to the already acquired volume and thereby enabling the pursuit of the selected trajectory under any, even the most volatile, circumstances. If deutero-learning could make the learners creative and

their conduct autonomous, tertiary learning was bound to make them confused and their behaviour heteronomous. Tertiary learning left no lasting sediment, no firm foundation on which to build, and no knowledge fit for accumulation and growth over the course of study. The process of tertiary learning (if one can speak at all of a 'process' in such a case) was an unending succession of new beginnings, moved more by a swift forgetting of the previously acquired knowledge than by an acquisition of new knowledge; it militated against retention and memorizing. Tertiary knowledge was, one could say, an 'anti-memory' contraption. It is for such reasons that Gregory Bateson saw 'tertiary learning' as a pathology, a cancerous growth bound to eat into the body of education and—if not excised—leading to its demise.

However, the assumption on which Bateson's verdict was resting holds true no more; under the liquid-modern condition it has, so to speak, become 'counterfactual.' Tertiary learning might have looked pathological, hovering on the brink of madness and appearing potentially suicidal, if we had first accepted the assumption that the notoriously volatile and relatively brief individual life is inscribed in a stable and long-lasting world. In liquid-modern surroundings, however, the relation between life and the world has been reversed. It is now the opposite assumption which feels more acceptable: that of a longish individual life dedicated to its survival in frail and volatile settings through a series of successive 'new beginnings.' In the light of such new experiential evidence, Bateson's verdict is no longer safe, and seems ready to be quashed—if not yet by the educators sitting in judgment, called to the bench with the instruction to observe that the law is done, than by the jury, meant (and presumed) to represent the current mood and common sense of the public.

The practitioners of a life sliced into episodes, each with its new beginning and abrupt ending, have little use for an education that aims to equip its objects for an unchanging world (or at least for a world moving at a slower pace than the knowledge required to grasp and reveal its momentum). Hunters live from one hunting escapade to another, moving from one forest to another; we all live, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (1999) convincingly demonstrated, through projects and by projects, moving from one project to another, to the projects-yet-to-come, undetermined by the projects already passed through. Don't mind the breath-taking speed with which knowledge is changing tack, old knowledge is ageing,

and new knowledge is born only to start aging right away; the volatility of the disjointed, poorly integrated, and multi-centred liquid-modern world makes it certain that each successive episode of a life-through-projects will call for another set of skills and information, invalidating the skills already acquired and the information already memorized (as it will surely be shown to no avail). Loading oneself with information, absorbing and retaining information, struggling for a completeness and cohesion of the information stored—it all looks suspiciously like offering oneself as a dumping site for prospective waste, and thus like an outrageous waste of time.

Images of the world in general, and of human consciousness in particular, tend to be *praxeomorphic*: it is *what we can do* thanks to the technology we use, and particularly to the newest, 'state-of-the-art,' 'cutting edge' technology; this most recently acquired technology works surreptitiously as a metaphorical frame for the understanding of human mind. It is when (and because) the freshly invented, adopted, and mastered technology is applied to the description of the mind's working that we experience the gratifying revelation of 'eureka!'—'now we understand!' Since the beginning of modern science (that is, the beginning of the technology-run era), the progress of philosophical and scientific models of human consciousness ran parallel with the progress of technology, following closely the successive breakthroughs in technologically framed praxis. In the position of 'the last words of science,' mechanical models were succeeded by chemical, electric, cybernetic, and electronic models.

It is no wonder therefore that the latest model offered today for scientific acceptance and quickly gaining wide recognition is Daniel C. Dennett's idea that the 'mind's unloading' (first elaborated in *Kinds of Minds Towards an Understanding of Consciousness*, 1997) is the prime moving force in the historical development of the human mind and its capacity. As could be expected in the era of computers, Dennett's version downplays the role of the 'hardware' (that is, of the human brain, already fully formed well before the mind's explosion started) while assigning the principal role to the 'software' (that is, to the socio-cultural uses to which humans have managed to put their brains). The most symptomatic innovation in Dennett's story is, however, the role imputed to the ways and means of storing information *outside* the brain (let us note that this is precisely the function for which the advent of computers brought a genuinely revolutionary advance). In Dennett's version of the rise

of human intelligence and mental capacity, it is not the production, assimilation, and retention of knowledge by 'biological humans' that has marked the progress of human mental powers, but the *un-burdening of brains* through the expedient of storing information in technological artifices, from the most primitive stone tools up to the most capacious servers and worldwide web of computers.

Dennett's model implies that human intelligence is improved, and the human brain's potential is better used, for the vacation of the brain's contents and the squeezing-out of information away from the 'natural' warehouse made of brain cells. Having dislodged knowledge that otherwise would clog it and severely constrain its processing powers (the volume of knowledge which the brain can absorb, just like the volume which a single PC can accommodate, is at any rate irrevocably limited by the capacity, respectively, of the brain's tissues or hard drive), the human brain needs to retain only a relatively small set of 'indices' and 'clues'; this would be enough to allow humans access to the virtually unlimited amounts of information lodged away from the brain in the artifices scattered all over the human-made world. With the help of indices and clues, small and manageable samples of information, appropriate to the current problem which the mind is aiming to tackle, can be time and again retrieved—only to be returned to the external storage devices once the problem in question has been solved, thereby freeing the brain's capacity again for another batch of information required by the next problem or task.

One cannot vouch for Dennett's scheme to be the final, incontrovertible, and incontestable version of the history of human mind (prudence would advise to suspend the verdict until another technological revolution in human praxis takes shape, as it most probably will, sooner or later). What is however highly credible is the guess that Dennett's scheme faithfully reflects contemporary knowledge handling-and-deploying practices, and for that same reason its suggestions seem at the moment to most of us quite convincing, perhaps even self-evident.

A number of other credible implications follow. Instead of an image of an edifice erected floor by floor, from the foundations up to the roof, signalling the completion of building, it is better to think of knowledge as offered and consumed in small bites, each one separately cooked and quickly chewed and digested, and then just as quickly vacated from the digestive track, clearing the space for further portions. It is better as well not to think of the whole

intake as ordered in any specific menu-like sequence (for instance, the main course preceded by hors d'oeuvres and followed by dessert), but of the successive morsels consumed in a random succession, each time improvised anew according to the needs of the moment. Further, it is better to think of knowledge production and consumption after the pattern of fast food, prepared rapidly and eaten fresh, hot, and on the spot, rather than in terms of haute cuisine's meticulous composition and laborious cooking of dishes that need a long time of rest and settle before being fit for consumption. Finally, it is currently better to think of every food on offer as a product with an admittedly short shelf-life and a clearly printed 'use-by' date. Expeditious removal from shop shelves of the pieces that have 'expired' is equally important as, perhaps even more important than, their timely inclusion in the assortment of foods on offer.

All this militates against the very essence of school-centred education, known for its predilection for a stiff curriculum and predetermined succession of learning. In a liquid-modern setting, centres of teaching and learning are subjected to a 'de-institutionalizing' pressure and prompted to surrender their loyalty to 'canons of knowledge' (whose very existence, not to mention utility, is increasingly cast in doubt), thus putting the value of flexibility above the surmised inner logic of scholarly disciplines. Pressures come from above (from the governments eager to catch up with the volatile and capricious shifts in 'business needs') as much as from below (from prospective students exposed to the equally capricious demands of labour markets and bewildered by their apparently haphazard and unpredictable nature). Another factor, the loss by teaching establishments of their past monopoly on the office of gatekeepers of knowledge and the subsequent sharing of that office (or competing for it) with market suppliers of computer software, adds force to the above mentioned pressures.

A most prominent effect of the above pressures on the theorists and practitioners of education is the marked shift of emphasis from 'teaching' to 'learning.' Transferring to individual students the responsibility for the composition of the teaching/learning trajectory (and, obliquely, for its pragmatic consequences) reflects the growing unwillingness of learners to make long-term commitments that constrain the range of future options and limit the field of manoeuvre. Among the conspicuous effects of de-institutionalizing pressures are the 'privatization' and 'individualization' of the

teaching-learning settings and situations, as well as a gradual yet relentless replacement of the orthodox teacher-student relationship with the supplier-client, or shopping-mall-shopper pattern.

This is the social setting in which today's educators find themselves bound to operate. Their responses, and the effectiveness of the strategies deployed to promote them, are likely to remain a paramount concern of pedagogical science for a long time to come.

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