

Depressed teachers, neoliberal commodification and coffee



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I attended a lively symposium yesterday with speakers from various universities and nationalities: Ireland, Sweden, Cyprus, Malta, Canada, UK. The title was “Rethinking Teaching” and essentially was about educational philosophy, theory and practice. The usual suspects featured: commodification, standardisation, KPIs, uniformity, absence of pluralism, neoliberal top down marketisation, efficiency, and more unusually and deeply, the being of teaching.

We met in one of the fancier lecture halls, a modern and well lit environment, airy and spacious, with comfortable seats. The large screens loomed before us, a stereo vision experience. It was fairly well attended, perhaps around 80 people, so a good spread of faces, ages, gender, nationalities (though not many PoC). I mention these aspects, the type of environment and person, to indicate the general feeling I had of elitism, of rarified atmosphere. I was **lucky** to be there. Because of this, I noted that some of the argument offered about depressed teachers, ways of combating the marketisation of education and the lack of ‘downtime’ for academics seemed to be rendered at least partially meaningless. How much are we privileged to be in these places? With these kinds of jobs and roles? How much can society be expected to contribute to these kinds of existences? And in these thoughts, of course, the whole question of the societal value of knowledge is starkly highlighted.

Maybe a society is measured by how much it is prepared to support the thinkers, the philosophers, the planners and schemers, the outliers, the oddball inventors. Not the simple-minded *‘if you can do, if you can’t, teach’*, but rather *‘I think, therefore I am’*. Essentially, the battle of a society is between these two perspectives. Higher thinking and consequent teaching is not about skilling up your workforce to be good at their job in the machine of profit generation, surely it must be more than that? Yes, we all need to live in society, but society must strive for more than profit at its heart. If America is the richest nation in the world, then surely to strive relentlessly for profit is to hurtle towards a nightmarish dystopian decay? Greed does not offer hope, in the end I think it’s all about greed or hope.

I caught the bus home. On the bus there was an interesting mix of people – the Indian sub-continent tech guy, here because of the burgeoning online gaming and fintech boom. The German guy, probably here on student exchange. The (possibly) Sri Lankan woman (she looked Sri Lankan to me) perhaps doing a tourism job. Then the Maltese, poor, working class. Only the poor Maltese tend to use the bus, or the young students. Us who are not Maltese are quite happy to use public transport. We all use it in our home nations. I think this is related to my point above. Everything is either about the individual, or about the common good, about the sense of ‘the public space’ (as mentioned by one of the speakers at the seminar), about being willing to be a part of society. Or, about wishing to be somehow separate from it, better than the hoi poloi.

And yet, university is so elite.

[*Img: University of Malta Lecture Theatre 2.*]