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# Against Capitalist Education: What is education for?

By Nadim Bakshov, Zero Books, 2015

Peter Howland

**P** : HEY, WATCHYA reading?

P°: Umm, it's a book by Nadim Bakshov critiquing contemporary university education from an anti-capitalist perspective.

P: Oh okay, so another rant about the 'burgeoning managerialism' of universities? Or, no don't tell me, he is complaining about how universities are finally being held to account for their spending of taxpayers' money, and even being made to make small profits?

P°: A little, although Bakshov's concerns are far more fundamental and insidious.

P: How so?

P°: Well, Bakhshov argues that university education primarily exists to hegemonically entrench and reproduce capitalism.

P: You what?

P°: Basically he argues that university education—which for the most part is state-sponsored and funded—exists to produce the next generation of competent yet compliant workers and consumers, not to mention a gullible, trusting citizenry that has an almost pathological faith in the farce of representational democracy. Meaning university education ultimately serves the interests of the economic and political elite, and as such is wholly complicit in reproducing all manner of stratifications, inequities and injustices—social, economic, political, gendered, ethnic, generational, etc—you know, all the usual suspects.

P: Oh okaaay (P rolls his eyes in mock horror).

P°: Yes indeed ... (P° pauses momentarily and straightens his reading glasses) ... To quote the man himself: ‘Capitalist education is a corrupted form of education that actively breeds violence, alienation and discontent into the fabric of the world’.

P: So not a lightweight read then? (P smirks drily).

P°: No, not in its focus, although it is a little lightweight in terms of the historical origins and trends of university education, and about the origin and development of state-sponsored education per se. It is also a little thin in terms of detailing the vested interests in university education and in outlining possible radical alternatives to capitalism. In fact, every argument in the book, including pleas and modeling for a reformed university system, is still situated within the logics and practices of capitalism. As such, discussion of who is going to pay for, and who is going to politically support or resist, such a radical departure are a constant concern and are neither satisfactorily addressed nor answered.

P: I would have thought that a radical university system would require an equally radical break from capitalism.

P°: Yeah, same here ... (P° pauses again, this time to briefly clear his throat) ... though, ummm, I think that these problems with Bakshov's argument are in part due to the way the book is written and probably also due to its intended audience.

P: Oh yeah and who is that?

P°: Well most probably people like you, you know, who are essentially new to notions that university education, which is for the most part state-sponsored and so, by default, necessarily conservative, is and has always been geared toward reproducing generations of biddable citizens—although now mostly of the white-collar, buttoned-down, beige middle-class variety...

P: Okaaay (P rolls his eyes again) ... and how is the book written?

P°: Pretty much the way we are communicating now, in dialogue form. The book takes its cue from the Socratic dialogues and is divided into seven acts and fifty-five scenes where two university professors—John Thoreau and George R Wells (no prizes for guessing who these names reference)—discuss the pros and cons of the current university system and also the possibility of a comparatively radical university in the near future. Their dialogues take place in various quiet, unused corners of a university library, although this is a little ironic as the library is criticized by John and George as an exemplar of the 'museum of thought' and, as such, reflective of the much-maligned silo-ing or hyper-differentiation of contemporary science, academia, of knowledge and thinking per se. Although on reflection, perhaps these quiet corners of the university library are instead exemplars of Žižek's subversive spandrels ...

P: Who's that now?

P°: Ohhh it doesn't matter, I was just speculating .... The key point is the book is written in dialogue form and the protagonists are surrounded by a passive audience of witnessing, attentive and, I suspect, adulatory students. One of the audience, who

stands unseen to the back or to the side, and who is possibly a contemporary of John and George's as this un-named character talks of them being 'my friends', provides the reader with intermittent access to his or her internal monologue as a member of the witnessing audience while the dialogues unfold.

P: Hang on a minute. I thought universities everywhere were hot-beds of Marxist, feminist, eco-warrior, and other forms of radical, pie-in-sky thinking ... at least that's what I hear you ranting on about to your students ad infinitum.

P°: Hmm ... yes they are in part, but it is this 'in part' bit which is the most significant consideration as it is truly tiny, miniscule even .... Basically critical enquiry and radical thinking, or enlightened thinking as I like to call it (P° smiles self-deprecatingly), is restricted to small, marginalized enclaves of the university, and exists like glowing mold in murky corners.

P: Oh yeah?

P°: Yes, radical, critical thinking is patchily found in minor disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and Karl forbid, even media, film, and literary studies, or now and then in even murkier corners of mainstream disciplines like education, and health. Whereas the majority of university disciplines—the ones that attract the majority of students and which are given the big shiny office blocks, the comfy lecture theatres and the hi-spec laboratories—the 'big earners' of the university system, such as commerce, management, science, law and psychology—are fundamentally conservative and accept, either implicitly or explicitly, capitalism as status quo. Not only that, they think it is some kind of naturalized expression of the human condition or the apex of human achievement.

P: And does the book address this?

P°: Yes ... again in part, but also rather guilelessly, as though this is some new revelation—though again I think this naïvety is in part due to the dialogic structure of the book.

P: How so, specifically?

P°: Well the dialogic method of teaching in its ideal form avoids directly telling the student, or in this case the reader, what to think. Instead, through a series of questions and answers, it encourages the student or reader to unfold their own informed ideas.

P: And?

P°: Well that's the ideal, but in practice the answers or the 'correct thinking' is often all worked out in advance and as such the dialogues are framed so that they strategically propel students or readers toward these foregone conclusions. This is clearly the case in Bakshov's book, so much so that the first half of the book—which is dedicated to critiquing the complicity of university systems in reproducing dysfunctional capitalism—is an unnecessarily slow, and at times naïve, reveal. Although it could be that I am now thoroughly habituated to the type of direct, every-word-counts, writing found in academic articles. Or, on the other hand it could be that Bakshov's dialogues are a bit clunky and obvious. But whatever the case I found the book—especially the first half—frustrating to read.

P: But as you said, you are probably not the intended audience.

P°: Yes and no .... True I have read more cogent and robust histories of state-sponsored, universalizing education—from Ernest Gellner through to John Taylor Gatto—and how it is dedicated to enshrining and enhancing the interests of the economic and political elite. However, the second-half of Bakshov's book, where he begins to outline a new, radical university—which he calls 'Westhampton'—does appear to go a long way toward promoting critical, yet neutral, understandings of the human condition in all its vitality and diversity. The type of teaching and research Westhampton is based on is what Bashshov calls 'human science'. I hadn't heard of this before and I found it very

intriguing and well worth considering, even though here we are given little more than a ‘movie trailer’ of forthcoming highlights and attractions.

P: Explain ... (P folds his arms expectantly)

P°: Well ‘human science’ is a project that Bakhshov has been working on for 30 years and it seeks to re-engage ‘the human sense of wonder’ using a holistic mix of pure mathematics, art and spirituality, completely free from any ideological, political, economic, or any other form of concern or interest, to map the multitudes, upon multitudes, of context—and of phenomenologically-specific constructions, flows and enactments—of human meaning that routinely manifest in our actions, interactions, material objects, symbols, and so on. In some ways I am reminded of Gregory Bateson’s cybernetics and his quest to discover the ‘truth’ of nature, although in this work Bakhshov focuses mostly on aspiration and is essentially mute on detail or demonstration—hence the second half of the book is like a movie trailer and is mostly tease and little substance.

P: Well hopefully Bakhshov’s work is an indie movie, because if the book is a mainstream trailer, all the best bits, along with the whole plot, will have already been revealed.

P°: I’m fairly confident Bakhshov is an indie and that there is a lot more to his work than is revealed in this book. Here, let me read you a passage or two:

Art is at the heart of its (Westhampton’s) education .... It is an art that takes conceptual art to a new level. They call it a post-conceptual art to situate it in the relevant history. It is built through contemplation and discussion of these ontological skeletons ... [which] are generated from a mathematical language ... [that] founds an idea of a human science .... The shapes and forms it generates—using a strict grammar—give skeletal pathways through meaning flows. The basic vocabulary of this mathematics constitutes the basic operations

and junctions of this flow ... [and it] combines both intense precision, while at the same time expressing a spiritual reality.

P: Okay, he is definitely an indie, and potentially quite an exciting one.

P°: The aim of Bakshov's human science as stated in the book, however, is not to furnish answers or to make predictions but, rather, to develop an alternative mathematics that can produce these 'skeletal artworks' that neutrally map what is or what has been. These skeletal artworks, when compared to each, will effectively reveal the deep patterns of human meaning making and consequent action—that is, the ontology of humanity—which is both potentially contextually specific and universal. Furthermore, it is from this comparative, impartial knowledge of meaning and action, that humanity can then choose what ought to be and to end injustice in the world. However, in this I think Bakshov is again being a little too optimistic.

P: How so?

P°: Well the capacity to freely or neutrally map what has been or what is, while theoretically possible, will always be tainted by the ultimate aim of Bakshov's human science, which is to willfully choose what ought to be. Clearly what ought to be is inescapably a moral quest and thus always involves intent, interest and choice. The greatest good for the greatest number? The greatest good for the greatest one? Or every permutation of justice or injustice—social to individual—in-between? No matter how pure the mathematics or art used to arrive at a consideration of what ought to be, they will always be framed in anticipation of an ultimate outcome and engaged as being somehow predictive of the future and, what is more, being as righteous or errant depending on the moralities applied post-computation. On this basis alone, considerations of what 'ought to be' will always be vested, or 'impure' in Bakshov's terms, whatever the



mathematical, ontological, artistic or spiritual knowledge used beforehand. And this is without consideration being given to how different values or moralities might also influence the identification of the contributing variables to be computed, or how they might influence the computational weighting or sequencing of their intersectionality.

P: So a no-goer then?

P°: No, not all. Firstly, I have no doubt that someone like Bakhshov can generate an alternative, pure mathematics, and can also harness the computational power of contemporary and future computers, to plot the seemingly infinite variables, influences and intersectionalities of meaning-making and, in so doing, reveal the broad—no the vast—spectrum and the immense artistry and spirituality, of human meaning-making and acting. Secondly, generating and deploying such pure mathematics, art and spirituality—free from the influence and tyranny of vested interests—is truly an aim worthy of any ‘human science’ or indeed of any enlightened science of humanity and would surely surpass the biases and limitations of all current academic enquiry—both hard and soft. And just as importantly, such a human science would, as Bakhshov claims, encourage the imaginative, or even absurdist, ‘pataphysical’, inversion of the natural sciences and humanism as they stand.

P: So what you are saying is that you are on board with Bakhshov’s goal of mapping human meaning making and action using mathematics, art, and spirituality free from ideology or any form of vested interest that determines the findings and outcomes in advance. But, in using this human science to both plot and choose between the many ways of how humans have or could live, vested notions of morality and justice will inevitably come to the fore and essentially ‘taint’ the original quest and its ultimate outcomes.

P°: Yep exactly, and in much the same way that the moral

conclusions of Bakshov's dialogues—especially those concerning the dysfunction and injustice of contemporary capitalism and the accordant complicity of university education—were obvious from the title page onwards.

P: So, overall, worth a read or not?

P°: Definitely worth a read, and especially if you want to be introduced to the notion of a value-free, mathematical computation of human meaning-making and how this throws into sharp relief the value-laden nature of our current analyses and theorizing; and then, secondly, how important it is to be mindful of which moral ideologists should, or should not be, put in charge of Bakshov's human science and any future universities it inspires.

P: Hmm, for sure .... Someone like you perhaps?

P°: Maybe ... and then again, maybe not. (P° smiles conspiratorially)

(P pauses reflectively)

P: Fancy a beer?

P°: Hell yes.

P and P° stand up from where they had been seated in a quiet corner of the university library and exit stage left.

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