

FROM OBSESSIVE EGALITARIANISM TO PLURALIST UNIVERSALISM?

OPTIONS FOR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY EDUCATION

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I deeply regret that I am standing before you today. The reason is, as you would have discovered by now, that I am not Zygmunt Bauman, whom you had been looking forward to hear. His reasons for not being here are perfectly legitimate, and we shall doubtless hear him on another occasion. However, I had the pleasure of reading Professor Bauman's keynote speech some days ago, a powerful talk about conditions of education in an era of liquid modernity. My own keynote speech was originally going to deal with the Nordic dimension in education – egalitarianism and its flip side, the pressure to conform – which may fare less well in a pluralist era than it did under the solid modernity characterising the greater part of the twentieth century.

However, given the fact that this will, due to the circumstances, be the opening lecture of this conference, I have altered my topic somewhat, and I will address some pressing issues of pluralism and liquid modernity rather than trying to grapple with cumbersome and ultimately dubious notions about national and regional identities. In fact, what I'm going to try to do is to give a speech in the spirit of Zygmunt Bauman. It should not be impossible to do so, since his work has been an important source of inspiration for me for many years.

The Nordic countries, as we know, are world famous for their egalitarian ideologies and practices. If there is a Nordic identity charged with positive qualities, it must arguably be connected to some idea of democracy, welfare and egalitarianism. It is an open question whether such a characterisation

remains valid. As Bauman shows in the keynote he wrote for this conference, 'it has been recently discovered [in Finland] that about half a million adults in employment need cannot afford the education they need'. Deregulation of markets has proceeded at great speed in this region like elsewhere in the world, and regarding the educational system, values and principles of market economics are making their impact felt there in several ways. In the same way as 'Hindu fundamentalism' feels like an oxymoron, a conceptual impossibility, 'market run schools' sound distinctly un-Nordic. It says something about our time that both of these strange anomalies exist and thrive.

Although there are important, sometimes disturbing, connections between neoliberalism and certain forms of knowledge pluralism, I do not propose to explore them here. Instead, I shall focus on conditions for the transmission of knowledge in our time, arguing that it is necessary to find a third way between the Scylla of fixed, authoritarian knowledge and the Charybdis of relativist confusion.

Newness

The transition from industrial to informational society makes it necessary to think and act in novel ways in very many areas. Suddenly, society's shared institutions no longer function the way we have been used to, and time and again, it turns out that the experts, who should have been close at hand to solve our problems, in the space of a few years have become experts on a society that no longer exists.

Our day and age is that after the postwar era. That period was characterised by optimistic nation-building and a widespread belief in progress, and it took place entirely in the shadow of the cold war and decolonisation. This period is familiar for all our intellectuals and 'experts'. The period after the postwar era is characterised by the fact that the political space which used to exist between the USA and the Soviet Union has collapsed; the world's conflicts have attained an ethnic expression rather than an ideological one; the Internet and satellite television lead to a democratic and chaotic surplus of fast information, and international migration has resulted in the obsolescence of

most of whatever it was we learnt by way of cultural geography in school. Briefly put: Our era can only be understood if we recognise that both the electronic revolution and international migration are now important dimensions of our society, *and* that they are two sides of the same coin. This fact is laden with consequences for our thinking about the organisation and purpose of the educational system.

The new electronic technologies, most of them computer based, have during the last couple of decades given information a very different place in society from what it had in the old industrial society. At the time, there was still scarcity of information, people thirsted for knowledge and appropriated it whenever they could, convinced that as much knowledge as possible would give them the best possible understanding. Today, the situation is almost turned on its head in our part of the world. There is too much information in the world; it presses itself onto us from all directions – over the mobile phone, via the Web, on a growing number of tv channels and so on – and, for example, it is perfectly possible to surf the Web for weeks and months without ever encountering the same website twice (or for that matter, encountering anything remotely relevant to one's needs and interests). The problem confronting us is, briefly, that there is too much information, not too little. The surplus of information has a powerful democratising effect since it makes it impossible for the State or self-appointed élites to dictate which knowledge each of us should appropriate; at the same time, it has – for the exact same reason – fragmenting effects. A new scarce resource is coherence. Whoever is able to filter and sort the information at his or her disposal, and is thereby able to discard ninety-nine per cent as irrelevant, wins this game – not whoever is able to remember the names of Russian rivers or African heads of state.

The new, multiethnic situation creates comparable challenges. While identity, culture and values were for decades practically non-issues in our European public spheres, questions to do with community and cultural plurality have in the space of a few years become some of the most central issues – and some of the most difficult ones to handle in a defensible manner.

The relatively homogeneous industrial society, where there was broad, tacit agreement about what kind of people the inhabitants were and what kind of knowledge was valuable, has eroded away. In what ways informational society will manage its collective identities and its distribution of knowledge remains to be seen. In periods characterised by rapid change, there will always be struggles between competing world-views. The most important arena of this struggle is arguably the school, our most important formal institution of socialisation.

Which knowledge?

A general problem associated with socialisation in societies of our kind, 'hot societies' as Lévi-Strauss called them, is that knowledge is rendered obsolete. Culture is often defined as that knowledge, those values and skills that are transmitted, often in a slightly modified form, from one generation to the next. When society changes quickly, both generations – both the teachers and the learners – discover that the last generation's knowledge, in extreme cases their entire world-view, become irrelevant. Uncertainty arises as to what is to be valid as relevant knowledge. When computer skills began to be taught in schools in the late 1970s, it was seen as prudent and forward-thinking to teach the pupils a programming language called BASIC. By now, it is already many years ago that anyone last used BASIC for anything whatsoever. Besides, teaching secondary schoolchildren a programming language was a result of a misguided view of relevant knowledge. Nobody who needs to make a phone call has to disassemble a telephone to find out how it works, and it is not necessary to be a mechanic in order to drive a car.

The problems of transition are also evident, if somewhat more easily grasped, in a subject such as international politics. Whereas most teachers, from primary school to university level, have received their training in an era when the world was defined through the cold war and the conflict between the USA and the Soviet Union, the conflicts of the last decade and a half have followed other lines. Suddenly, *ethnic conflict*, which was virtually unknown in the schools of the 1980s, have become central. After the nine-eleven shock,

textbooks had to be re-written once again, now introducing fundamentalist terrorism as a global force to be reckoned with. Regarding social studies in our own societies, it is also easy to see that major changes have rendered it difficult to state exactly what we should teach about society. The welfare society of the postwar era, where politics followed easily understood right–left dividing lines, where the stable nuclear family was still the most common household form, and where there were obvious differences between the working class and the bourgeoisie, no longer exists in the way it is still described in many textbooks.

Still, the most excruciatingly difficult problems of transition can arguably be identified in the subject areas to do with cultural heritage and value outlooks – history, literature and religious/ethical instruction. Among school subjects, history is the most important source of collective identification in our kinds of society, and to take Norway as an example, the historians have composed a thick and often monolithic pillar in Norwegian nation-building generally. It is only through knowing the past that one can know oneself, it is often said; and there may be some truth in this kind of statement, but it is no less true that history, the way it is being narrated, is tantamount to a series of *stories* about the past, which might have been exchanged for others. As Orwell puts it in *1984*: Whoever controls the past, controls the present.

Even if the past does not change, the stories about the past do. National histories always contain important mythical elements – they are partly allegorical stories about good and evil, they are structured as narratives, and they contain a carefully selected sample of facts woven together so as to fit the present self-imagery of the nation-state. This does not mean that they are false and fictional, but that history can be narrated in many different ways. In a society which becomes ever more pluralistic, not least thanks to the information revolution and immigration, alternative interpretations of the past and new facts which shed new light on the present, will continuously be on offer. The massive support of eugenics in the Nordic societies of the interwar years, to mention an example, has only recently been documented and described by historians; reinterpretations of the Second World War,

where Bauman's analysis of the Holocaust as a product of bureaucratic rationality is one of the major contributions, continue to create waves and controversies which illuminate the identity-formative aspect of history: History is no more about the past than about the present, and any reevaluation or touch-up added to past events do nothing to change the past (it has already taken place), but contribute to changing the present. Regarding religion and world-views, which are taught in Nordic schools in quite different ways, it is an obvious and banal fact that immigrants and their children are not necessarily Lutherans. It is moreover hardly controversial to state that quite a few ethnic Scandinavians and Sami also don't have a very active and passionate relationship to Lutheranism. As we are now witnessing the total collapse of Lutheran religious hegemony in our societies – in spite of aggressive attempts from certain Christian politicians to revitalise it – it is an open, and difficult, question what kinds of values and cosmologies schoolchildren ought to be indoctrinated with – if any. If schools become non-confessional, it is said, the risk is that they may also become valueless, that is to say amoral. (Yet, one might look to other countries to see how they deal with this!) If, on the other hand, schools are not going to be non-confessional, they are bound to brainwash defenceless children who, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are entitled not to be subjected to religious indoctrination.

The educational system's dilemmas associated with the identity-formative subjects are formidable, perhaps especially so in the Nordic countries, which have in the past been basking in the mixed blessing of egalitarianism, homogeneous populations and shared values. Let us now move to the possible solutions. I will look at three. My examples will from now on be Norwegian, since they are the closest at hand.

Cultural hegemony

While still at playschool, Norwegian children are taught how to celebrate Constitution Day (17 May) and other national and Christian holidays. For Muslim children to get a day off to celebrate Eid-ul-fitr, that is the end of the holy month of fasting, Ramadan, extraordinary measures are necessary.

Children of non-nationalist parents are not acquitted of the 17 May celebration. Norway is, briefly, a country where national identity is taken for granted, as part of the air that everybody breathes, and it is intimately tied to the non-religious, that is to say pleasant, aspects of Christianity (Christmas, the long easter holiday etc.). This starting-point makes Norway a difficult country to reform at the level of collective identity. Also, there are also strong indications to the effect that a widespread Norwegian reaction to the major societal changes outlined at the beginning of this talk, consists in withdrawal and nostalgia. The stronger the threats against the hallowed national identity, the stronger it becomes. For example, precious few regarded the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics as a silly and pretentious project, perpetuating a museumlike image of Norway as a rural country of simple peasants. More seriously, a fairly large minority of the population now regularly votes for a political party which believes in a mixture of ethnic cleansing and authoritarian assimilation as the only solution to problems associated with ethnic and cultural pluralism. Such attitudes are also widespread in the more established political parties, whereas the present, Christian-led government sees it as its task to ensure that the schools protect Norwegian traditions and Norwegian values.

A Norwegian school system which sees it as its objective to protect and conserve, must maintain – even strengthen – the popular myths about Norwegianness. From the time when ‘the first Norwegians’ followed the edge of the ice ten thousand years ago, via the Viking era, the Christianisation and the ‘Four hundred year night’ of Danish dominance, the signing of the constitution at Eidsvold in 1814, Nansen, 1905 and the heroic resistance during the War, right up to the oil-rich country spending part of its economic surplus to advertise its national identity in various non-Norwegian lands, pupils will imbibe the true story about that brave and hard-working people which went from victory to victory – from Lindisfarne to the West Bank, so to speak. (Some countries celebrate their defeats. Norway is not one of them.) Official Norway will appear a unique country which treats its new citizens well and turn them into Norwegians efficiently and quickly by making them understand that serial monogamy is better than arranged marriages, that

weekend drinking binges are far superior to constipated teetotalism, and that one mustn't smile to strangers on the tram.

This kind of school would perceive the current tendencies of fragmentation as a threat, and would stick to the old and familiar any time. Norway would still be presented as mainly homogeneous (even if a little bit of exotic ornamentation exists in Finnmark (the Sami) and in Oslo's East End (the Pakistanis)), founded in ideals of equality and similarity as well as a powerful, legitimate State.

In such a school, which is not entirely different from the one we've already got, Christianity is *primus inter pares* among the world's religions. In the new, revised subject of religious instruction in Norwegian schools, which ostensibly accommodates religious minorities, Christianity has the place of honour, while other so-called world religions are also presented. Atheists are not met with anything resembling enthusiasm in this kind of school.

A society which adheres to the old principles of national identity will inevitably stimulate two kinds of attitude towards inhabitants of foreign origin: Either they should be Norwegianised as soon as possible, for their own good and ours; or they should stay away. Since culture is perceived as unitary and limited, there is no place for zones of ambiguity. There is no grey, only black and white. Either you are inside, or you are outside. Being inside requires a high degree of cultural competence. Similarity and community are perceived as central values, and that country which is not Norway, but 'Abroad' (*Utlandet*), is depicted as a fascinating, but dangerous place.

Multiculturalism

Another model, which has been tried out in many countries in recent years – not least in parts of the USA – is that which can be labelled multiculturalist. Now multiculturalism is a difficult and ambiguous concept, and I cannot go into its conceptual intricacies here. Suffice it therefore to say that this ideology takes, as its point of departure, the fact that the world has changed, and that the maps need to be updated in order to give useful descriptions of the

territories. The old map was hegemonic and monolithic, and accounted for culture, identity, history and world-views in the way dictated by the dominant group. In the case of the USA, this meant that *the opening of the West* was depicted as a victory for progress and civilization, not as a series of horrible massacres and cultural genocides; that the great hero of 1865 was President Lincoln, not the millions of slaves who had succeeded in surviving in spite of decades of inhuman treatment; that the population of the USA ought to regard the West European immigrants who arrived on ships with names like *Mayflower* as their ancestors, and that slave-owners like Washington and Jefferson were the greatest heroes of the nation.

Following the growing influence of the civil rights movement, feminism and native American organisations from the 1960s onwards, influential groups in North American society gradually began to revise their myths of origin and the foundation of their collective identity. Opposition against the simplistic hegemonic version of history in fact reached a provisional climax at the time of the bicentennial celebration of the US state in 1976. Exhibitions and shows planned for the celebrations were intended to show the unity and community of the nation, but as it happened, the result was the opposite. Many individuals and organisations protested against the fact that they were either left out or misrepresented. Women's history, black history, native American history and the histories of later immigrants were not given their proper place in the national narratives. Around the same time, the African-American author Alex Haley had a major breakthrough with his novel *Roots*, which retrospectively can be seen to have marked the beginning of a global ethnic revitalisation which surpasses everything this side of *Sturm und Drang*. Members of ethnic minorities became reflexively aware that they did not belong to the dominant segment of society, and that their own cultural identity might in fact be quite different from the one they were taught to believe in school. At the same time they were told, by academics and other intellectuals, that their cultural tradition and their history was neither better nor worse than that of the white man, but different. Soon, action groups were formed to reform everything from history curricula in schools to reading lists in universities (where it was seen as a main goal to get rid of the *dead white*

males). There have since then been reversals and backlashes in the USA, not least under the current presidential regime, but still, multiculturalism is solidly embedded in parts of the US educational system by now.

Multiculturalism, in this version, is – briefly put – the doctrine that (a) everybody belongs to a culture, (b) all cultures are of equal value and deserve their place in the educational system, and (c) this place is not taken but must be demanded, since the ruling classes will no more relinquish their cultural hegemony than their economic dominance.

In a Norwegian context, multiculturalism might, if against all odds it were to be introduced, lead to a fragmentation of classes and courses. Perhaps, special Muslim schools would proliferate, which taught world history as it is seen from Mecca (and not from London, as we are used to hereabouts), who emphasised the national poet Wergeland's weakness for Islam in its lessons on Norwegian history, and which spent many hours exploring the effects of immigration from Muslims countries to Norway. Multiculturalism might also be expressed through the establishment of separate West Norwegian curricula where the three national countercultures (New Norwegian, fundamentalist Christianity and an aversion to alcohol) might be emphasised, and a separate East Norwegian variant, where pupils were exposed to detailed knowledge about the European Union. Gypsy children would not be burdened with formal education, since it is not part of their culture.

Even if a unitary school were retained under multiculturalism, it would have to make many compromises in its bid to satisfy everybody. Coherence would lose to general fragmentation.

Like so many political visions that have developed in the USA over the last two hundred years or so, multiculturalism is based on impeccable democratic premises, but it quickly degenerates into absurdity and parody. According to a strict multiculturalist view, there are, for example, no sound criteria for arguing that Shakespeare's dramas are better than the origin myths of the Bemba, that Beethoven's symphonies somehow are of lasting value, or that the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a terrific idea even for people of non-European origins. To such statements, one may always respond 'It's not my culture'. Not surprisingly, multiculturalism has suffered terrible blows at the hands of many American intellectuals, from the conservative Allan Bloom to the liberal Neil Postman, who point out that every standard, every set of criteria for evaluating quality, is ultimately destroyed by this relativism unbound. Besides, there is little doubt that multiculturalism, in the form presented here, leads to a strengthening of boundaries between groups, and does not in any way stimulate equitable integration into a shared public sphere.

Seen as an identity-formative ideology, multiculturalism can be regarded as nationalism writ small: each and every small or large group whose leaders see it as the inheritor of a cultural tradition, can claim the right to promote its identity internally, but not to convert or offend others. As in the case of hegemonic nationalism, cultures are depicted as homogeneous and limited, and each and every group may appear as a mini-nation with its own customs, its own religion, its own history, its own myths and stories, and even perhaps its own language. Many Norwegians are instinctively positively inclined to multiculturalism, perhaps because they rightly recognise the logic of nationalism in it. Multiculturalism is apartheid with a friendly face.

Pluralist universalism

I have now presented, admittedly in versions verging on caricature, two alternative responses to the new multiethnic and electronic life-world encountered in schools: One may stick stubbornly to notions of roots and similarity, or one may advocate the view that different cultural groups ought to manage their own knowledge systems on a par with everybody else. The first model leads to exclusion or brutal assimilation; the second model leads to segregation and disintegration. Hegemonic nationalism refuses the members of minorities the right to be different, whereas multiculturalism refuses them the right to be similar. If we have to choose between these alternatives, we are in other words faced with a real dilemma, which seems to have no good solution that is faithful to democratic values and human rights principles. The

hegemonic model will not only be accused of perpetuating dated ideas and to create a slightly suffocating, self-sustained national identity, locking it into an airtight room as it were. Within the multiculturalist model, a Gypsy child will soon be old enough to accuse the Norwegian state of not having offered him his constitutional rights of equal opportunities: on the altar of cultural relativism and multiculturalism, they have sacrificed his right to become a literate citizen.

So what must be done? Well, you will not be surprised to hear that my third model amounts to a solution which ensures both equal rights and opportunities, and the right to be different. I propose to call it pluralist universalism. The universalism of this concept entails that it insists on a unitary view of knowledge and a democratic view of education: everyone should have the same opportunities. Its pluralism lies in its recognition of the fact that the world changes depending on where one sees it from, that there are no eternal absolutes and no privileged vantage-point. The challenge for this model consists in avoiding knowledge relativism (anything labelled knowledge is equally good) and unintentional hegemony (one group presumes to represent universalism, and uses various forms of symbolic power to mute the others).

A few aspects of a school based in pluralist universalism, and which thus succeeds in weaving two apparently contradictory ideas together, might look like this:

Let us at the outset accept that Norway is a political community and a territory which has a shared language of communication (with two variants – standard and new Norwegian), except in the Sami areas. The Norwegians have no common religion, although a majority have received some kind of a Lutheran upbringing. The political cohesion of Norway presupposes a range of shared meanings among the inhabitants. One of the primary tasks of the school system consists in enabling the pupils to function as fully-fledged citizens; making them understand their social duties (such as sending in their

tax return in time and following traffic rules), and their rights (of welfare benefits, higher education, equal treatment in the labour market and so on).

The pupils also have to learn about the history of Norway, but the teachings will emphasise that the country is complex and variegated, that there have always existed profound cultural differences as well as differences of interest between town and country, west and east, farmer and worker – and the students are taught that the cultural differences between a North Norwegian Laestadian (conservative Lutheran sect) and an East Norwegian atheist can be just as profound as the differences between an ethnic Norwegian and an immigrant from another continent. This school will, moreover, emphasise that Norway has turned out the way it has because of circumstances intrinsic to the country (climate, geography etc.) and because of contact with others (crucial events in Norwegian history have always involved foreigners). Norwegian history should be taught as a part of world history.

It is not, this kind of school would teach its students, because Norwegians are culturally similar that they have something important in common, but because they are able to understand each other, and because they have a shared State and public sphere. In subjects such as literature, Norwegian literature will have a privileged place, but it will be taught as part of international trends. No pupil shall be allowed not to learn about the greatness of foreigners like Goethe and Shakespeare. Religious studies will either be discarded altogether – religion is, after all, a private matter in any decent society – or become purely descriptive.

The challenge consists in finding a working balance between similarity and difference: The State demands of its citizens that they should be similar in a number of areas (e.g. following an identical set of laws), and the citizens are, for their part, entitled to equal rights and opportunities. This means that a segregation-friendly school system where education is decentralised to the level of the community or minority, is hardly commendable. School is chiefly about sharing – differences belong mainly elsewhere – but the sharing must be equitable and fair.

Concluding remarks

The educational system in our societies is naturally faced with many other problems than the ones I have discussed in this talk. A problem which is probably of enormous significance, is the general *infantilisation* of society, where children and adults alike are encouraged by advertising, television and newspapers to behave like childish teenagers. Another problem is to do with the absence of a sound pedagogic ideology in the school system. Thanks to this vacuum, children are inadvertently taught to become careerists and consumers rather than sensible, mature individuals capable of making critical, independent acts of judgement. A third problem, which I touched upon at the beginning of the talk, is to do with the pace of cultural change, which makes knowledge obsolete. Rather than learning facts by heart, pupils should be encouraged to learn techniques for learning. When children are taught to use computers, they need tools enabling them to confront any computer, not just the ones that can be programmed in BASIC or which are run by Microsoft Windows.

A fourth problem, which in my view is less serious, is to do with 'our cultural heritage'. For what, when all is said and done, is left of it? The answer is: At least as much as in the past. But, and that may be the most significant new insight about the society we have recently entered, our shared heritage does not consist in a single, closed universe. It can be approached from many angles, it contains a wealth of creaky floors and dark corners, and it is continuously on the move. If we were now able, in this secluded, privileged part of the world, to realise that *differences can be a good thing*, that would mark a major step away from the old, static ideologies of identity – where you are either 'entirely Norwegian' or 'entirely something else', that is to say, we would be on our way towards a condition where hybrid forms and grey zones were perceived as uncontroversial and unproblematic, where boundaries between groups (or, for that matter, nations) were not seen as absolute, and where we were able to realise that differences at one level reflect similarities at another. This is what pluralist universalism is about – it resembles Hinduism more than the religions of West Asia: We all live in a shared world, we can understand each other, but we approach this world from different points of

view, and both society and the well-being of the citizen depends on this insight being implemented in school.

Nobody has phrased the gist of this argument better than Zygmunt Bauman, who wrote, about a decade ago, that: 'If the *modern* 'problem of identity' is how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the *postmodern* 'problem of identity' is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open'.