

Idiots rather than persons? The crisis of education in the neoliberal era

*¿Idiotas en lugar de personas? La crisis
de la educación en la era neoliberal*

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To Martín López Calva and Jorge Medina, for the
countless times we have talked about these issues.

ABSTRACT

Once a place for educating citizens, the university is increasingly giving in to the overwhelming weight of neoliberalism. While democracy is giving way to post-democratic and populist regimes wherein democratic forms are preserved while its substance is abandoned, the university is progressively adopting formalistic approaches for the mass-production of useful workers, self-centered individuals incapable of critical and independent thought. These narcissistic individuals (“*idiots*”, in the sense of the Greek ἴδιον) fail to assume their role as tolerant, participative, and emphatic citizens. This work traces the parallels between the political and the academic, asserting that, in the end, both rest on the same rejection of a robust notion of the human person and her dignity, which is at the basis of any democratic experiment.

Keywords: Individual, person, education, neoliberalism, democracy.

RESUMEN

La universidad, otrora lugar de formación de ciudadanos, cede cada vez más ante el peso abrumador del neoliberalismo. Mientras la democracia pierde terreno frente a regímenes posdemocráticos y populistas que conservan las formas democráticas mientras abandonan su esencia, la universidad adopta progresivamente enfoques formalistas para la producción en masa de trabajadores útiles, individuos egocéntricos incapaces de pen-

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samiento crítico e independiente. Estos individuos narcisistas (“idiotas”, en el sentido del griego ἴδιον) no asumen su papel como ciudadanos tolerantes, participativos y activos. Este trabajo traza los paralelismos entre lo político y lo académico, afirmando que, al final, ambos se apoyan en el mismo rechazo a una noción robusta de la persona humana y su dignidad, que está en la base de cualquier experimento democrático.

Palabras clave: Individuo, persona, educación, neoliberalismo, democracia.

Introduction

The third millennium of the Christian era has seen a steady erosion of democracy.² John Milbank pinpoints the beginning of this crisis twelve years after the fall of communism,³ deeming the terrorist attacks on New York as the inflection point between democratic hegemony and its degeneration. Many scholars have discussed this shift, considering it either a middle-age crisis,⁴ a consequence of the erosion of the norms that used to govern access to power,⁵ the becoming hubristic of the two pillars of liberal democracy, namely, its liberal and popular elements,⁶ or a mutation caused by the encroachment of the economic sphere upon the other spheres of human experience.⁷

In a similar way, universities are increasingly yielding to the overwhelming weight of economic mentality. It is not just that research, funded by big corporations, has been privatized,⁸ thus leaving aside the university’s social responsibility. The university has adopted the economic logic as its guiding principle, transforming itself into a business the goal of which is described in terms of *gain*.⁹ The economic principle has transformed the university, turning students into customers, teachers into providers of a service, and academic programs into career paths that promise economic success to those holding

² FREEDOM HOUSE, *Freedom in the World 2022*, p. 2. Available at <https://bit.ly/3P1vinL>.

³ MILBANK, J., and OLIVER, S. (Eds.), *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 353. Cf. WOLIN, SH., *Democracy Incorporated. Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 5-12.

⁴ RUNCIMAN, D., *How Democracy Ends*, London: Profile Books, 2018.

⁵ LEVITSKY, S., and ZIBLATT, D., *How Democracies Die*, New York: Crown, 2018.

⁶ MOUNK, Y., *The PEOPLE vs. Democracy: Why our freedom is in danger and how to save it*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.

⁷ BROWN, W., *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019; CROUCH, C., *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2004; CROUCH, C., *Post-Democracy After the Crisis*, Cambridge: Polity, 2020.

⁸ GIROUX, H., “Democracy’s Nemesis. The Rise of the Corporate University”, *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, vol. 9, núm. 5, 2009, pp. 1-27.

⁹ NUSSBAUM, M., *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 9.

a degree. The university has adopted the language of the market (e.g., “best practices”) as well as its profit-oriented mentality, introducing a multiplicity of indicators that hinder, rather than advance, the goals of education.¹⁰

From its inception, the university was imagined as a privileged place for critical thinking, and it is today a key ingredient in the democratic mix. The ability to think right is, to be sure, synonymous with neither democracy nor even civility, but it is nonetheless a precondition for the existence of both. As Martha Nussbaum points out, “[k]nowledge is no guarantee of good behavior, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behavior”.¹¹ According to her, only the model of liberal arts education can provide students with the skills that are proper to active, tolerant, and accountable citizens in a healthy democracy.

There is, thus, an intimate relationship between democracy and the humanities. The liberal arts model is indebted to a robust conception of the human person, a notion that goes beyond the liberal individual, postulating that the self is ontologically incomplete and thus necessitated of others, of a life in community.

In this work I assert that the notion of the person is the only idea fully compatible with the democratic ideal, and thus our best alternative to counter the current anti-democratic wave. Consequently, education must be understood as *education of persons* rather than as the mass-production of workers or even the education of individual monads incapable of engaging with others in a robust way.

Bringing this notion back to the arena of public discussion, however, necessary raises the question of its Christian origins, of whether bringing the person back in would violate the democratic principle of secularity. In incorporating the notion of the person, I am borrowing from Christianity, although as a *tradition of thought* rather than as a revealed religion. As Alasdair MacIntyre asserts, thinking and speaking are impossible outside a tradition of thought.¹² Since every thought is framed by one of such traditions, neutrality of the kind the Enlightenment dreamed is a futile attempt. As a tradition of thought, Christianity is a central companion of Western political thought, and thus its importance should not be underestimated when discussing the crisis of Western liberal democracies. Far from closing the door to any reasonable dialogue, acknowledging the specific place *from which* we engage others

¹⁰ ERIKSON, M., and ERIKSON, M., “Learning outcomes and critical thinking—good intentions in conflict”, *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 44, núm. 12, 2019, pp. 2293-2303.

¹¹ NUSSBAUM, M., *Not for Profit*, p. 81.

¹² MACINTYRE, A., *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?*, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, p. 7.

is the condition of possibility of any respectful exchange between reasonable individuals. This is precisely what I understand by a *secular public arena*, namely, a place wherein individuals, belonging to a diversity of traditions of thought, engage with others in an open, tolerant, free, and respectful dialogue regarding issues affecting the community.

1. The hyperplasia of the economic

I

The becoming hegemonic of the economic principle has been one of the most widely discussed topics in the last decades. In 1944, Karl Polanyi identified a dangerous pulsion in the liberal market: "Instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system".¹³ Once an auxiliary system for providing to human needs, the relative weight of the economic sphere on human existence grew up to a point that it encroached upon other spheres, progressively transforming society into a means for its own goal. Just as a tumor needs to expand throughout the body it feeds upon, the economic mentality went beyond its own orbit, dominating human existence.

Neoliberalism is but the name we give today to this hyperplasia, to the disordered growth of the economic principle inside the body politic, to the point that, eventually, everything is codified, measured, and evaluated in terms of the economic principle, which, in Schmittian terms, is defined by the distinction between the profitable and the unprofitable.¹⁴ By "neoliberalism", moreover, we must understand not an economic system but a fully developed Foucauldian *dispositif*, as Adam Kotsko asserts:

Neoliberalism is a social order, which means that it is an order of family and sexuality and an order of racial hierarchy and subordination. It is a political order, which means that it is an order of law and punishment and an order of war and international relations. And it is above all a remarkably cohesive moral order, deploying the same logic of constrained agency (demonization), competition (in which there must be both winners and losers), and conformity ("best practices") at every level: from

¹³ POLANYI, K., *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1957, p. 60.

¹⁴ SCHMITT, C., *The Concept of the Political*. Translated by George Schwab, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 26.

the individual to the household to the racial grouping to the region to the country to the world.¹⁵

Neoliberalism promotes a narcissistic individualism, to the point of claiming that society is but the sum of individuals and therefore there are no social or common goals.¹⁶ Narcissism, in turn, does not imply the disappearance of all kinds of collectivity, but it means that groups will become atomized and “collectively narcissistic”, such that “we gather because we are alike, because we are directly sensitized by the same existential goals”.¹⁷

Neoliberalism is also characterized for its contempt for democratic politics.¹⁸ For liberal theory, the “stark utopia” of the unregulated market¹⁹ that asserted that markets work better and yield their best results when state action is limited to the role of silent referee,²⁰ gave a bad name to politics, blaming any disfunction of the economy to the clumsy interventions of the government on the economy. The neoliberal order abandoned the principle of non-intervention, turning the equation on its head: from the mid-1970s on, many legal restrictions that had been established after the Great Depression in order to prevent “irresponsible behaviour in the banking system”²¹ were relaxed by governments the allegiance of which rested on the big capitals rather than on their constituencies. This irresponsible behavior reached a climax in the financial crisis of 2007-2008, which would end with the government rescuing the banking system, proving beyond any doubt that the principle of the “unregulated markets” was an illusion, if not purely hypocritical.²²

The *economic* outcome, finally, of the neoliberal wave, from the 1970s to our days, is a world where inequality is rising virtually everywhere.²³ Inequality is, however, not just an economic matter: it hurts the social order,

¹⁵ KOTSKO, A., *Neoliberalism's Demons. On the Political Theology of Late Capital*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018, pp. 94-95.

¹⁶ BROWN, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, pp. 23-53.

¹⁷ LIPOVETSKY, G., *La Era del Vacío*, translated by J.V. Sastre and M. Pendancx, Barcelona: Anagrama, 2000, p. 14. Translation is mine; Cf. PARISER, E., *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*, New York: Penguin, 2011.

¹⁸ BROWN, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, p. 57.

¹⁹ POLANYI, K., *The Great Transformation*, p. 3.

²⁰ FRIEDMAN, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 25.

²¹ CROUCH, *Post-Democracy after the crisis*, p. 42; STIGLITZ, J., *The Great Divide. Unequal Societies and What We Can Do About Them*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, pp. 42-44.

²² SINGER, J., *No Freedom Without Regulation. The Hidden Lessons of the Subprime Crisis*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, pp. 26-57.

²³ PIKETTY, TH., *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, translated by A. Goldhammer, London: Harvard University Press, 2014, pp. 237-270.

creating internal divisions in the city²⁴ and establishing structures of servitude which erode the foundations of a democratic society.²⁵

II

Hans-Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes* depicts a king falling into a ruse: two robbers present themselves at the palace, offering to knit him new clothes made with a special material only smart people can see. The king eagerly agrees. The burglars return empty-handed but pretending that on their extended arms lie the magical clothes. Unable to see the clothes, the king realizes his own stupidity, but decides to play along. Everybody else in the kingdom plays the part, admiring what is not there, fearful to betray their own stupidity. At the end, the simplicity of a child puts an end to the regrettable spectacle of a king parading naked among his people.

What Colin Crouch calls *post-democracy* and Sheldon Wolin labels *inverted totalitarianism* bears a striking similarity with Andersen's tale. It is a regime wherein everything seems to be working as usual, where institutions (the king's new clothes) are assumed to be there when they are not. Only the two robbers retain their power: dressed as merchants, they co-opt the government for their own interests. The tacit agreement between political power and the citizenry regarding the fundamental lie that mediates their relationship is, notwithstanding, necessary for keeping the state alive. In Žižek's scathing words: "nobody takes democracy or justice seriously, we are all aware of their corrupted nature, but we participate in them, we display our belief in them, because we assume that they work even if we do not believe in them".²⁶

Crouch identifies post-democracy with the capture of the government by big corporations and, specifically, by transnational financial interests. Wolin, on his part, defines inverted totalitarianism as a conservative *étatisme* that "while it is hostile toward social spending, is eager to intervene in the most personal of affairs".²⁷ Contrary to the twentieth-century totalitarian experiments, characterized by its ability to energize and mobilize their populations while taking away their status as citizens—"a politicalization without politics"²⁸—inverted totalitarianism works with lethargic, apathetic publics:

²⁴ PLATO, *Republic*, translated by G. M. A. Grube, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992, 422e-423a, p. 98.

²⁵ ROUSSEAU, J.J., "The Social Contract", *The Basic Political Writings*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011, bk. II, ch. 11, p. 189.

²⁶ ŽIŽEK, S., *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, New York: Verso, 2009, p. 51.

²⁷ WOLIN, *Democracy Incorporated*, p. 45.

²⁸ WOLIN, *Democracy Incorporated*, p. 65.

Citizens are reduced to voters called every now and then to cast an unreflective ballot, immediately returning to their private life oblivious of public life.

While democracy places an almost overwhelming weight on the citizenry, demanding each one to act both as a critical, engaged person as well as an integral part of the sovereign body, in our post-democratic regimes individuals abandon the public sphere in order to devote themselves fully to their private existence. This is what Alexis de Tocqueville called *individualism*: “a reflective and peaceable sentiment that disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of those like him and to withdraw to one side with his family and friends, so that after having thus created a little society for his own use, he willingly abandons society at large to itself”.²⁹ When the citizen succumbs to individualism, however, a power void is created that is immediately filled by the government. Tocqueville therefore insists, in the last note of his book, that democracy’s most lethal enemy is *general apathy*, which is at the origin of both “license or tyranny, anarchy or despotism”.³⁰

The person who, turning her back to public affairs, takes refuge in her private life (“idiot”), was considered useless in ancient Greece. In his famous funeral oration, Pericles declares: “We are unique in the way we regard anyone who takes no part in public affairs: we do not call that a quiet life, we call it a useless life”.³¹ This tradition was furthered by Cicero and Seneca in the Roman Republic, as well as for Machiavelli and, some centuries later, by Rousseau. Following this tradition, we should say that post-democracy, or inverted totalitarianism, transform their populations into a kingdom of idiots, that is, into a mass of privatized individuals who, having abandoned the public arena, are seduced by the numbing song of the economic mermaids, only to be eventually lured to shipwreck.

III

The rekindling of the populist spark can hardly be considered a return to democratic practice. In fact, new populist experiments are but the obverse of the kingdom of idiots. Claude Lefort characterizes democracy as the political regime at the antipodes of totalitarianism: while a totalitarian regime pursues the fantasy of the People-as-One, that is, of the absolute homogeneous

²⁹ TOCQUEVILLE, A., *Democracy in America*, translated by Mansfield, H., and Winthrop, D. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002, II.II.2, p. 482.

³⁰ TOCQUEVILLE, A., *Democracy in America*, p. 704.

³¹ THUCYDIDES, *The Peloponnesian War*, translated by Martin Hammond, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 92.

society transparent to itself, democracy is characterized by the dissolution of the markers of certainty, and thus as the political regime wherein the locus of power remains empty, symbolically construed as a place of permanent contestation.³² Democracy is the political regime which rejects any attempt by a faction to capture the political once and for all. Seen in this light, democracy can only be understood as an *essentially* pluralistic political regime. Diversity is not a flaw, but the natural consequence of a free society.

In a Lefordian key, Nadia Urbinati suggests that “[p]opulism attempts to resolve the ‘paradox’ of the ‘empty space’ of politics by reifying the will of the people, and by condensing state power into some homogeneous actor (the ‘right’ people and their leader), in order to ‘determin[e] who constitutes the people’. The formula *pars pro toto* is thus replaced by the facticity of the *pars pro parte*”.³³ Populism emerges out of a weariness regarding democracy. “When power appears to have sunk to the level of reality”, Lefort explains, “and to be no more than an instrument for the promotion of the interests and appetites of vulgar ambition and when, in a word, it appears *in* society, and when at the same time society appears to be fragmented”, *then* the totalitarian ghost appears.³⁴

As we said, “traditional” totalitarianism—which humanity suffered in the midst of the past century—insofar as it leans on an energetic society ready to mobilize, is a much less plausible substitute to a disintegrating democracy than Wolin’s inverted totalitarianism, which preserves the democratic regalia while emptying it of any real content, leaving it ready for exploitation by factional interests.

Populism shares with post-democracy the weariness with the democratic processes, but, keeping with democratic appearances, it renounces the symbolic order—wherein the “People” is at once the source of all legitimacy and an idea resisting ever to be materialized as an actual political body, insofar as it can never become immanent and active, creating a permanent gulf between the exercise of power and its appropriation³⁵—arbitrarily defining a *private* group or faction as the “true” or “legitimate” people, the one with the right to exercise sovereign power. This private group, furthermore, will remain private, delegating all authority to a charismatic leader who attempts to rebuild the symbolic order by presenting herself as nothing but the voice of the faction that acclaims her.

³² LEFORT, C., *Democracy and Political Theory*, translated by David Macey, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, pp. 9-20.

³³ URBINATI, N., *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019, p. 107.

³⁴ LEFORT, C., *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 20.

³⁵ HAMILTON, A.; MADISON, J. and JAY, J., *The Federalist with Letters of “Brutus”*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, Federalist No. 63, pp. 305-312.

IV

Modern democracy is the child of a twofold tradition, often referred as the distinction between the liberty of the ancients and the liberty of the moderns. We can, I think, reformulate this distinction as that between the individual and the person. The notion of the individual emphasizes authenticity as a moral value, endowing her with liberties and rights so as to protect her against tyranny. Democracy, however, is incomplete unless understood as a social project. The individual imagined by the liberal tradition is, I contend, unable to articulate the life of the community, reducing the social to the sum of its parts. The notion of the person, while acknowledging individual liberties, asserts that the human being is ontologically incomplete, and thus utterly necessitated of others in communion with whom she can flourish.

Post-democracy, understood as a kingdom of idiots, leaves no room for common projects, or for any authentic interrelation between human beings, insofar as every interaction is governed by economic mentality and human beings are thus reduced to useful tools. Populism, on its part, takes a pseudo-communitarian approach, disguising the reduction of the whole to one of its parts—which is but a different kind of individualization—as the becoming political of the “authentic” people. In fact, both projects fail to do justice to democracy: the first, eroding citizenship by the imposition of an individualist mentality; the other, creating a false community by replacing the symbolic whole with a private faction.

In order to bring democracy back, we need to avoid these two dangers, promoting an education able to defend the dignity of the human person against the tyranny of the majority, while avoiding the individualist trap that empties democracy of its social component. Education, as it should be evident, is a core element in this project of democratic recovery.

2. Universities amid the crisis

I

The university developed in the West as a Christian idea in the first centuries of the second millennium. Three great traditions developed in Europe during those years: the philosophical-theological tradition of Paris, the legal tradition of Bologna, and the cosmopolitan tradition of Salerno, Montpellier, and Toledo. It was through the latter that “Greek and Arabic science reached

the Western world, and from which the medieval culture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries derives its knowledge of Aristotle".³⁶

The importance of this cultural encounter can hardly be exaggerated. It marked a cosmopolitan movement wherein "Jews and Arabs and Greeks cooperated with Spaniards and Italians and Englishmen".³⁷ The movement, moreover, "inaugurated a period of intellectual criticism and cultural change"³⁸ which was nonetheless understood as an obvious companion to Christian faith. In his bull, *Quasi lignum vitae* (1255), Alexander IV stated: "It is at Paris that the human race, deformed by original sin and blinded by ignorance, recovers its power of vision and its beauty, by the knowledge of the true light shed forth by divine science".³⁹ It is hard to find a more succinct, clearer statement of the Christian view of the university, as a harmonious blend of faith and reason.

The university shares with Christianity its paradoxical character. From its inception, Christianity understood itself at the same time as a scandal (1 Cor 1:23) and as the religion of the *logos* (Jn 1:14); a religion that "lives from the individual [*einzelne*] and for the individual", while, at that is, the same time, "not an individual but a social charisma".⁴⁰ The university, in turn, held the "ideal of the universal organization of human knowledge and human life by a spiritual principle".⁴¹ In a similar way as the name "Roman Catholicism" betrays the tension between the particular and the universal,⁴² the university sought to achieve *universal* knowledge by means of a spiritual principle which, notwithstanding its been considered universal, insofar as *true* (Jn 14:6), in practice it implied the construction of a particular culture, namely, the Western tradition.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the university's search for the truth was ciphered in Christian language. The crisis of the Middle Ages would push secularity—in many ways a Christian product⁴³—at the doors of the modern era.

This, however, did not mean the end of the university: the Enlightenment reformulated western thought, itself a *particular* tradition of thought, as the

³⁶ DAWSON, CH., *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, New York: Doubleday, 1991, p. 191.

³⁷ DAWSON, CH., *Religion and the Rise...*, p. 192.

³⁸ DAWSON, CH., *Religion and the Rise...*, p. 198.

³⁹ DAWSON, CH., *Religion and the Rise...*, p. 197.

⁴⁰ RATZINGER, J., *Introduction to Christianity*, translated by J. R. Foster, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, p. 249.

⁴¹ DAWSON, CH., *Religion and the Rise...*, p. 197.

⁴² RAHNER, K., and RATZINGER, J., *Episcopate and The Primacy*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1962, p. 62.

⁴³ GAUCHET, M., *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, translated by Oscar Burge, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

peak of human civilization, a project that would also collapse when confronted with the horrors of the two World Wars. From then on, the West's confidence on reason and rationality has been fragile at best, and the university's universalism has receded.

However, truth as a goal has not completely evaporated: If truth is removed, the university would be transformed either into a Babel tower where a multiplicity of incommensurable languages coexist in isolation; or into a giant factory of servile workers, wherein the questions about "what" and "who" have been replaced by questions about "how".

The university starts dying when it gives up on truth as its *horizon*. Robert Hutchins asserts that the university is "a community that thinks".⁴⁴ The university is not, *prima facie*, a utilitarian project; its goal is neither the production of commodities nor the development of technology. The university thinks *not* with the aim of accumulating data for its own sake but rather to educate persons instead of useful machines. Hutchins provides us with a more specific definition: "education is a conversation aimed at truth".⁴⁵ He understands truth philosophically, in the same line of Leo Strauss—who was professor at The University of Chicago when Hutchins served as its president and chancellor—who claims that "philosophy is essentially not *possession* of the truth, but *quest* for the truth".⁴⁶ The university is thus a place of permanent contestability, disruption, and creativity; its main activity is to approach truth asymptotically, through dialogue and rational critique. Insofar as a place governed by freedom of thought, the university is the place where a variety of traditions of thought find themselves in dialogue, aiming at what Gadamer called a "fusion of horizons",⁴⁷ the mutual enrichment and growth caused by an intellectual exchange.

The university, finally, is a fundamental institution of any democratic society. Democratic citizens are not born in the wilderness, they are rather nurtured. As Rousseau recommends, in order to institute a people—and we may stress, a *free* people—one must be ready to change human nature, replacing individual powers with social ones.⁴⁸ Contrary to authoritarian regimes, which fear both education and public gatherings,⁴⁹ democracy places the highest responsibility on its citizens, demanding of them many

⁴⁴ HUTCHINS, R. *The University of Utopia*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 41.

⁴⁵ HUTCHINS, R. *The University of Utopia*, p. 56.

⁴⁶ STRAUSS, L., *What is Political Philosophy? And other Studies*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p. 11, emphasis is mine.

⁴⁷ TAYLOR, CH., *The Language Animal*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 328.

⁴⁸ ROUSSEAU, J.J., "The Social Contract", bk. II, ch. 7, p. 181.

⁴⁹ ARISTOTLE, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, edited by Stephen Everson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, bk. 5, ch. 11, pp. 145-147.

abilities for actively and critically participating in the public arena: public spiritedness, critical thought, tolerance, sympathy, ability to recognize the other as an equal, imagination and creativity, political judgment, and cosmopolitan thought,⁵⁰ all of which are necessary if democracy is to work properly as a social ordering where equal and free persons cooperate to achieve common goals.

II

In a similar way than contemporary democracies, the university is threatened today by the hyperplasia of the economic. In the United States, for example, the liberal arts model—the heir of the Medieval university—is being progressively replaced by the corporate university, characterized by the primacy of the economic, a factory-like mentality, and the primacy of the formal, which in the end leads to the normalization and levelling of students, which is but an euphemism for the stultification of students, their becoming *idiots*, both in the sense of highly individualistic subjects focused only in their private affairs, and in the sense of individuals lacking the appropriate skills to play their role as citizens in a democratic regime.

Neoliberalism and the university. That the university is constrained by economic factors is a truism. There is no university in the world, public or private, capable of functioning while ignoring its economic needs. In this sense, whenever there was a university formally established, there were economic constraints. The same is true in the political sphere: a political regime which ignores its material needs puts its own survival at risk.

Today, however, something quite different is observed than the mere relationship between an enterprise and its economic restraints. As we said in the previous section, the economic principle has encroached on the other spheres of human existence, to the point that the *only* standard for evaluating the success of a human enterprise is measured in terms of gain, utility, or money. Everyday language confirms this idea. Imagine I tell you that a common friend, Mark, is a “successful” man. The first idea that comes to mind, almost ineluctably, is that Mark has a well-paid job, a stable, comfortable economic position, and that he even enjoys public recognition. If I now add that Mark has been without a job for almost a year *but* that he has a happy marriage, three healthy kids, friends and is surrounded by happiness and love; or that he is today an artist living in a beautiful city where

⁵⁰ NUSSBAUM, M., *Not for Profit*, 25-26.

he paints and enjoys life every day, my use of the term “success” may seem rather odd. If we look at the Cambridge dictionary, however, the word “success” is not defined economically: its first meaning is “the achieving of the results wanted or hoped for”. What our age seems to have accomplished is a normalized definition of the human goal: neoliberalism has successfully imposed its own principle as the hegemonic standard for *all* human activities.

Universities function today as big factories where professors provide services, offering instruction as a product that the student, a client, consumes as a commodity. Naomi Klein reports John V. Lombardi, president of the University of Florida in Gainesville, asserting: “We have taken the great leap forward... ‘Let’s pretend we’re a corporation”.⁵¹ The university’s top authorities are seen as CEOs who manage the university by the same principles of a successful company: promoting “best practices” which can be applied to different epistemic cultures,⁵² making sure that academic programs are responsive to the market’s needs, and developing the university’s ideology into a “brand”.⁵³

Just as neoliberalism has resulted in the widening of the gap between rich and poor—with a tiny minority of billionaires whose wealth grew 1,130% in the last thirty years, compared to an increase of 5.37% of the median household wealth in the same period⁵⁴—the neoliberal university has created different classes of professors: a minority of tenured or tenure-track professors who enjoy the highest wages and the whole set of benefits necessary to live a comfortable life as academics, followed by a mass of part-time professors and lecturers who are forced to live term by term, with no stability, lower wages, and less benefits, and, last *and* least, a swarm of teaching assistants who teach courses and do all the grading that full professors are too busy to take care of, in exchange of Ph.D.’s funding packages that are not nearly enough to cover basic human needs.⁵⁵ In sum, the same game of winners and losers is played in the university as it is in the neoliberal society at large.

The primacy of the formal. As the university resembles more and more a factory, it tends to privilege the formal over the substantial. Universities are increasingly governed by large bureaucracies that codify academic activity into an ever-changing series of formats and indicators that are designed to

⁵¹ KLEIN, N., *No Logo*, New York: Picador, 2009, p. 101.

⁵² WAGNER, E., and NEWELL, S., “‘Best’ for whom?: the tension between ‘best practice’ ERP packages and diverse epistemic cultures in a university context”, *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, núm. 13, 2004, pp. 305-328.

⁵³ KLEIN, N., *No logo*, pp. 87-106.

⁵⁴ COLLINS, CH.; OCAMPO, O. and PASLASKI, S., *Billionaire Bonanza 2020: Wealth Windfalls, Tumbling Taxes, and Pandemic Profiteers*. Available at <https://bit.ly/3fkWjzx>. The data refers to the United States.

⁵⁵ See <https://lat.ms/3hSW8Nu> and <https://tgam.ca/3MLkt7A>.

transform an initially unmeasurable activity, such as the education of a person, into a number. For education to be measurable, so the argument goes, knowledge must be rendered “objective”, which can only be done by establishing well-defined indicators. This is because, as the known mantra claims, “if you can’t measure it, you can’t improve it”. Education thus risks being reduced to checking boxes in a to-do list, after which a satisfaction survey is applied to the customer, as a cross-verification.

Attention to the formal is the obvious consequence of an educational project that has been rendered measurable and replicable. This is the idea behind the implementation of the logic of “best practices” at the university: finding a successful process in one epistemic community that is to be replicated in other environments. What I call here a “process” is evidently nothing but the shell of a complex learning experience, an empty structure that is transposed into a foreign environment. The problem with this perspective lies in thinking that we can import a methodology without taking care of its metaphysical basis. In fact, any methodological approach contains a set of assumptions that deeply affect what is observed or studied. Methodologies are not neutral: the way we approach an object necessarily implies a decision (more often than not, metaphysically charged) regarding what in the object/subject studied counts as worthy and what is not. From this perspective, for instance, it is naïve to think we can approach a phenomenon using a rationalistic approach (i.e., rational choice, social choice theory) without radically conditioning the scope of results we can expect.

The same can be said of the primacy of the formal in the university, to the growing inclusion of managerial tools to its government and the multiplication of measuring and evaluating tools that are foreign to the university’s essence. Consider the case of the *learning outcomes* approach to learning, which were designed to elucidate what is it that the student must learn in a course. Erikson and Erikson discuss two main criticisms that have been raised regarding the learning outcomes approach: it is a managerial tool that “can diminish teachers’ academic freedom and divert academic attention by putting administrative practices at the forefront”, and that “there is a risk in focusing too much on what *can be measured*”.⁵⁶

Every measure sheds light to certain areas of a determinate process while obscuring other aspects. To judge whether our measurement is the one we need, we must make sure that the areas captured by it are, in fact, primary to the process’ goal. Consider, for example, John Henry Newman’s definition of higher education as “the cultivation of the mind effected by the study of lib-

⁵⁶ ERIKSON and ERIKSON, “Learning outcomes and critical reasoning...”, p. 2296, emphasis is mine.

eral Arts”,⁵⁷ Bronson Alcott’s definition of education as “the process by which thought is opened out of the soul... It is self-realization”,⁵⁸ or Hutchins’ definition, discussed above. Is it possible to capture these goals by means of a learning outcome? The answer is a resounding No. In sum, it is *only* if education is reduced to training, specialization, and the production of workers that learning outcomes and other indicators can properly capture what education is for, and whether it is working or not. If, on the other hand, education means cultivating persons, then these measurements at best distract us from, or even worse, eclipse, what is really at stake when we educate.

Normalization and levelling. For them to be effective, formal measurements must disregard every trace of subjectivity, focusing only on “objective” regularities. Before closing this section, I want to criticize this idea, suggesting that by focusing on observable, discrete characteristics that are potentially present in a diversity of individuals, the whole object of education is betrayed, namely, the education of *persons*.

Modern democracy’s tendency towards normalization and levelling has been a recurrent critique for the last couple of centuries. We can distinguish here between anti-democratic and democratic critiques. In the first group we find the radical antiegalitarian critiques of Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. Nietzsche’s aristocratism sees in democracy nothing but the political materialization of Christian resentment and its life-renouncing morality, whereby the morality of the strong, self-assuring, creative, own-masters was replaced by the morality of the weak, the meek, the crippled, who proclaimed universal equality out of fear and hatred of difference itself, resisting “everything that elevates an individual above the herd and intimidates the neighbor”.⁵⁹ Kierkegaard took a similar stance: democracy is characterized by a process of *levelling*, understood as the hateful destruction of individuality by the “monstrous nonentity” of the public.⁶⁰ Levelling occurs when an egalitarian society progressively dumbs down the human element, consequently becoming suspicious of everyone who tries to elevate herself above the mediocrity of the public.

The fear of the tyrannical mass is not, however, exclusive of aristocratic thinkers. The concept of the tyranny of the majority has a long history in the liberal tradition, which seeks to protect the individual against the oppressive

⁵⁷ NEWMAN, J. H., *The Idea of a University*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1986, p. 197.

⁵⁸ NUSSBAUM, M., *Not for profit*, p. 62.

⁵⁹ NIETZSCHE, F., *Beyond Good & Evil*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1989, p. 114.

⁶⁰ KIERKEGAARD, S., *Two Ages. Kierkegaard’s Writings, XIV*, translated by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 91.

power of a majoritarian faction. John Stuart Mill focuses on this problem in the very first pages of *On Liberty*. Around the same time, Tocqueville worried that “[a]s conditions become more equal and each man in particular becomes more like all the others, weaker and smaller, one gets used to no longer viewing citizens so as to consider only the people; one forgets individuals so as to think only of the species”.⁶¹

If we use, say, the learning outcomes approach as an indicator of the *minimum* skills and knowledge that a student should have at the end of a course, then the approach may be helpful for the educational project, but only if it is supplemented by an overarching goal that *justifies* the acquisition of these skills rather than others. But if, as it seems to be the case today, the tyranny of the managerial mentality⁶² succeeds in making its approach a goal in itself—making the approach a component of the accreditation process, which in turn is linked to improving the university’s ranking, and so on—then we end up in Kafka’s *Trial* rather than in a democratic scenario, buried under a pile of formats and indicators that eventually become self-justified. This is why Hutchins asserts that “there are no accrediting agencies in Utopia”.⁶³

While democracy is not distinguished by promoting greatness,⁶⁴ it is not synonymous with levelling or mediocrity. Normalization is an ever-present threat in a democratic society, whereby the radicalization of equality can always lead to the resentful rejection of greatness and difference. But, notwithstanding its popular element, democracy is *also* the political regime that best protects the citizen against the tyrannical impulses of the majorities. As I will defend in the last section of this work, this is only true when democracy works with a robust notion of the “person” rather than the “individual”, for only with the idea of the person can we assert *both* a spirited defense of the human being as an end in herself and the ontological necessity of that person to find herself in and through the other, which makes the community something radically different than the mere sum of individuals.⁶⁵ The education of persons who, in turn, can become high-spirited democrats, is a project that cannot be accomplished without the university.

⁶¹ TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*, II.I.7, p. 426.

⁶² “[O]ne of the most unfortunate consequences of specialization was the production of the specialized educational administrative” (HUTCHINS, *The University of Utopia*, p. 45).

⁶³ HUTCHINS, *The University of Utopia*, p. 65.

⁶⁴ TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*, II.IV.8, pp. 674-675.

⁶⁵ HAYEK, F., *The Collected Works of Friedrich August Hayek. Volume I: The Fatal Conceit*, edited by Bruce Caldwell, London: Routledge, 1988, pp. 106-119.

3. Bringing the Person Back In

I

The liberal tradition was conceived as an effort to protect the individual from tyranny, whether it be the arbitrary power of the sovereign or the oppressive power of the faceless mob. Epistemologically, the liberal individual followed the Cartesian model, according to which ideas are developed *inside* the mind, based on the one and only certainty of the thinking self. Individualism conceives human beings as complete, autonomous units who freely engage with others in the pursuit of their goals. This notion is at the basis of the liberal market, which is understood as a community of agents who exchange goods in conditions of freedom and complete information.

The western notion of the person was developed by Christianity. Rather than an isolated, complete individual capable of thinking for herself, the notion of the “person” assumes that the self is ontologically incomplete. This idea of radical incompleteness is already found in Plato’s *Symposium* (190a-192e), where we are presented with an originally androgynous self that was divided by a jealous Zeus into two parts that will forever look for each other.

Christianity formulated the notion of the human “person” that later become a building block for Western thought. Facing the task of defining the Trinity—which meant pointing out the novelty of the triune God vis-à-vis the Jewish God while rejecting the charge of polytheism—Tertullian defined God as *una substantia—tres personae*.⁶⁶ Joseph Ratzinger explains that the three persons of the Trinity are not different beings but three distinctive relations, which is “a third specific fundamental category between substance and accident, the two great categorical forms of thought in antiquity”.⁶⁷ He goes on describing these relationships as being-for (Father), being-from (Son), and being-with (Holy Spirit). These relationships are reflected, in turn, in the human being, understood as *imago Dei*, as three basic anthropological structures: responsibility (being-for), dependence (being-from), and solidarity (being-with). The human person is thus understood by Christianity as the being essentially dependent to other, responsible for others, and solidary with all, insofar as every human being has a dignity which is not given nor recognized by any authority but responds to the divine filiation of the person (Jn 15:15).

⁶⁶ RATZINGER, J., *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio. Vol. 2: Anthropology and Culture*, edited by D. L. Schindler and N. J. Healy, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013, p. 104.

⁶⁷ RATZINGER, J., *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, p. 108.

Personalism understands the subject as co-constituted by the dynamic exchange between herself and her community. The person thus exists in a permanent tension: on the one hand, the human being is an *individual*, which guarantees the inviolability of her conscience, the impossibility of her being instrumentalized—e.g., one can never be coerced to believe.⁶⁸ This is what Taylor identifies as the ethics of authenticity, which he deems a genuine Christian development that has nonetheless been advanced by modernity.⁶⁹ The notion of the person, in this sense, *contains* the kernel of the liberal individual while suggesting that individual dignity is only half the story.

Emmanuel Mounier, leaning on another personalist, Gabriel Marcel, finds the difference between the “individual” and the “person” in that the latter demands making ourselves “*available*... and thereby more transparent both to himself and to other”.⁷⁰ The human person never flourishes in isolation. In a rather paradoxical way, she must leave herself if she is ever to find herself. This shows personalism’s deep communitarian commitment, which both restores the human being to her social dimension—lost to the liberal individual—and opposes the Hayekian and neoliberal understanding of society as a dangerous, oppressive abstraction. Contrary to neoliberalism, personalism declares that there are some goods that can only be achieved in community. These goods are essentially *social*, which suggests that society is logically more than the sum of the individual projects.

Despite being a product of Christianity, the personalist tradition extends beyond this tradition. Martin Buber, for instance, beautifully describes the self’s opening to the other. Rather than an instrumental relationship (I-It), the encounter by which the “I” opens herself to another “I” (“You”) brings about differentiation, personalization and, eventually, love:

When I confront a human being as my You and speak the basic word I-You to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes or Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in *his* light.⁷¹

Personalism thus conceives the human being as: (a) a creature endowed with an innate and inalienable dignity that demands never to be treated as

⁶⁸ RATZINGER, J., *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, translated by Brian McNeil, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006, p. 52.

⁶⁹ TAYLOR, CH., *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award lecture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 16.

⁷⁰ MOUNIER, E., *Personalism*, translated by Philip Mairet, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1952, p. 19.

⁷¹ BUBER, M., *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Touchstone, 1996, p. 59.

a means but as an end in herself, (2) a being ontologically incomplete, thus in need of others to flourish and be happy; (3) happiness, in turn, can never be experienced in solitude, and is thus closer to the Aristotelian idea of *eudaimonia*, as “human excellence”⁷² which is achieved *with* others in the active search of the common good,⁷³ understood as the articulation of the three anthropological structures of dependence, responsibility, and solidarity.

II

The idea of the human person is a central piece of any strategy aiming at resisting the hyperplasia of the economy, the priority of the form over matter, and normalization. An education based upon the human person is, at the same time, civic education.

The goal of society is not, for personalism, an ever-growing production of skilled professionals accompanied by unrestrained technological progress: “production”, Mounier asserts, “has value only in regard to its highest end, which is the advent of the world of persons”.⁷⁴ Close to the personalist ethos, Hannah Arendt’s masterpiece, *The Human Condition*, proposes an incremental approach to human life, whereby the fugacity and immediacy of the *animal laborans*’ activity is redeemed by the work of the *homo faber*, whom in turn can only counter the “devaluation of all values” by the *vita activa*.⁷⁵ The production of things, be they perishable or not, can only find its authentic meaning in the social process, which is *not* economic but essentially political, that is, centered in the provision of common goods by means of which every person in the community can flourish.

Technology is but a means to an end. A technique is utterly incapable of determining its own goal: its very essence confines it to the realm of the instrumental, and so it must find its goal outside of itself. Joseph Ratzinger warns us about the danger of technology escaping our control by reminding us of the stories of the Golem in Jewish Kabbalism, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Huxley’s *Brave New World*, asserting that “[t]he *ratio technica* must incorporate into itself a *ratio ethica*, so that we would speak of something as truly functioning only when a fully responsible functioning was assured”.⁷⁶ Technological progress is thus not an end in itself, and the university should therefore not pursue it for its

⁷² BALOT, R., *Greek Political Thought*, Malden: Blackwell, 2006, p. 236.

⁷³ VATICAN II, *Apostolic Constitution Gaudium et spes*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965, §26.

⁷⁴ MOUNIER, E., *Personalism*, p. 14.

⁷⁵ ARENDT, H., *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 236-243.

⁷⁶ RATZINGER, J., *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio*, p. 48.

own sake but only insofar as it contributes to the human goals. The university must not, obviously, renounce to the highest standards of technical sophistication; it must make sure its students can use complex tools for measuring and analyzing data. But it must make sure as well that the student understands not only the *how*, but also the *what* and the *why* of things, that she can critically use these tools in the pursuit of human goals. It is by infusing *meaning* into technology that the university humanizes it, making it a powerful companion in the quest for improving human reality. From this perspective, the liberal arts curriculum must be a transversal project touching all the departments and programs, shedding light precisely regarding those human goals that order and structure the skills and techniques learned in each program.

As for human flourishing, it can only be understood pluralistically: the person cannot be reduced to the faceless repetition of a mold since, in exercising her freedom, each one flourishes in her very own way. Here we find liberalism and Christianity in agreement: the healthy development of personality implies freedom, which in turn produces diversity. Liberalism makes a good job promoting the authentic individual but, as we discussed above, finds it difficult to fully acknowledge her social dimension. Following its paradoxical character, Christianity acknowledges that when people “do not want symphony, but rather unison”, freedom is destroyed: “In Platonic terms, this is the tyranny; in modern terms it is totalitarianism”.⁷⁷ On the other hand, Christianity restores diversity to unity in the mystery of Christ as the head of the body (1 Cor 12:4-6), identifying the former with truth (Jn 14:6).

Evidently, we cannot use this metaphysical criterion in a liberal democracy, since that would violate its secular character. Two interrelated strategies are nonetheless available to universities in their effort to educate authentic and free persons. First, we can make comparisons between higher and lower forms of life to go beyond value pluralism.⁷⁸ If we cannot make a case to assert that the life of a person who joins *Médecins sans Frontières* to bring medical attention to the poorest of the world has a higher quality than one who stays at home doing drugs and watching Netflix, then the very possibility of a democratic regime is in peril. The dangers of abandoning the ability to make moral judgments should be obvious in our current crisis. For, is it not that kind of relativism the one which attacks *any* judgment as oppressive? Is not the sorrowful success of the fake-news era enough as a sign of the corruption of our democracies?⁷⁹ Have we not learned yet the danger of a complete re-

⁷⁷ BALTHASAR, H., *Truth is Symphonic. Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987, p. 13.

⁷⁸ TAYLOR, CH., *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 78.

⁷⁹ See KAKUTANI, M., *The Death of Truth. Notes on Falsehood in the age of Trump*, London: William Collins, 2018; McINTYRE, L., *Post-Truth*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018.

jection of truth? The ability to make judgments requires, of course, tolerance, empathy, critical ability, and, perhaps more importantly, temperance but, to be sure, the ability to judge in a rational and sensitive way is a fundamental trait of democratic citizenship. Education—from the crib to the university—should be a school of these virtues, aimed at raising high-spirited citizens able to engage with others in a critical and respectful way.

Second, democracy is the political regime wherein dialogue replaces naked coercion;⁸⁰ it is precisely through dialogue that, as persons, we open ourselves to others, welcoming being impregnated by others' ideas, which in the end will result in the fusion of our horizons, that is, in mutual growth. Liberal arts education privileges the study and discussion of great books, by means of which the student puts herself in another person's shoes: she may understand the maddening remorse of a killer in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*; or the anarchical and even murderous instincts that may arise in a society made by unrestrained kids in Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, and so on. In many ways, human beings are "storytelling animals";⁸¹ we learn through others' experiences, problems, and successes. The retreat of literature, philosophy, theater, painting, dance, poetry, and music from the university should be seen as a crucial indicator of the victory of the economic mentality over the liberal arts model, the victory of the "measurable" and evidently "profitable" over the "ornamental" or even "useless".⁸² We should keep in mind, against today's savagery, that a young John Stuart Mill overcame a mental breakdown by reading poetry, and that, after participating in the construction of the nuclear bomb, Richard Feynman found relief for his episodes of depression and anxiety in playing the bongo. We can also wonder whether the current state of social hysteria, violence, and intolerance is a consequence of the retreat of beauty from human life and space.

The university, we said with Hutchins, is a community that thinks and searches for the truth. Truth is, however, not a possession. It is rather a horizon, a goal. While it is arrogant to think we can ever be in possession of Truth, searching for it is a powerful way for discarding absurdities, fallacies, and arbitrariness. It is through dialogue and critique that human beings have unrooted pernicious ideas, such as slavery, child marriage, or the inferiority of women. The university is the privileged place where this dialogue should take place. This dialogue—that, as we have suggested, is threatened today by

⁸⁰ NUSSBAUM, M., *The Monarchy of Fear. A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 9-10.

⁸¹ BEINER, R., *Political Philosophy. What it is and Why it Matters*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 171.

⁸² See ORDINE, N., *The Usefulness of the Useless*, translated by Alastair McEwen, Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2017.

the hyperplasia of the economic, the primacy of the formal, and levelling—is at the very basis of the education of democratic citizens.

Dialogue cannot take place unless we abandon the formalist approach to education that transforms teachers into providers of pre-packaged services and students into consumers who only care about getting a degree in order to join the job market as mindless gears of a numbing, stultifying machine. Measuring implies, at best, verifying the *minimum* abilities evinced by a student so as to approve a course. As universities are being seized by increasingly powerful bureaucracies, however, it seems prudent to reject these approaches altogether and imagine different and creative ways for evaluating the learning process. Rejecting these measurements would also help counter levelling and the normalization of the students. Since the person is unique, education can only be understood as a radically creative experiment, which ultimately renders any attempt of homogeneous, universally observable indicators restrictive, if not utterly destructive.

Individual creativity and the authentic self are, nonetheless, only half the story. The democratic citizen is a fundamental goal of the educational project. Rather than a self-serving individual, the person is a citizen. As Alasdair MacIntyre asserts, “the virtues of independent rational agency need for their adequate exercise to be accompanied by what I shall call the virtues of acknowledged dependence”.⁸³ Socrates demands from the one who has been released and forced out of the cave to return to the cave—even at the risk of her life—and engage with those whose eyes see only shadows. Replying to Glaucon’s protest, Socrates reminds him that what they seek is not the good of a single class, but that of the whole city.⁸⁴ The democratic citizen understands herself as a person endowed with dignity, implying a set of rights *as well as* responsibilities vis-à-vis other persons. Just as no one can be a son, or a mother, in isolation, because these are all social relationships, the citizen cannot exist in isolation, for she is such only in the company of others with whom the production of social goods is possible.

The democratic citizen, educated as a person, should learn how to resist the primitive impulse to counter fear and injustice with aggression and revenge, seeking to find ways to make sure the injustice suffered will never occur again. As Nussbaum succinctly asserts: “Fear is monarchical, and democratic reciprocity a hard-won achievement”.⁸⁵

⁸³ MACINTYRE, A., *Dependent Rational Animals*, Chicago: Open Court, 1999, p. 8.

⁸⁴ PLATO, *Republic*, 519d-e, p. 191.

⁸⁵ NUSSBAUM, M., *The Monarchy of Fear*, p. 60.

Democracy is in a deep crisis. Its enemies spread like a cancer, turning the cells of the body against itself, maddening the whole system. Education, just like the family and associational life, is a fabric of citizens. It is there where individuals are transformed into persons who acknowledge their need for others and are trained to engage with others in the pursuit of common goods. If the university gives up this fundamental mission, the democratic sky will be filled with dark clouds, announcing perhaps the twilight of the dream of free and equal persons capable of self-government.

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