

BUILDING COMMUNITIES, NOT ONLY LIVES, OF FAITH AND LOVE

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A commentary on “Plato and the Future of Education” by Jamie Crooks

Prof. Jamie Crooks has written a beautiful and timely reflection on the future of education. Reading his account of teachers who helped him distinguish “the world as it is and the world in effigy,” I thought immediately of one of my teachers at Bishop’s, Prof. Robert Forrest. In my case, it wasn’t Plato’s dialogues but a close reading of the Book of Job that brought into question the “fundamental conception of the world (that) determines in advance the way things appear to us, the possibilities they hold out to us...” Ever since, it’s seemed to me that, indeed, “nothing could be more important to education and its future” than providing this experience to young people.

We arrive at university after the seemingly endless slog of high school and the mad sprint of CEGEP. University at last feels like the moment and the space where the intellectual apprenticeship of earlier study might allow something deeper, something richer, something more dangerous. If we’re lucky, we find a teacher who guides us through the archive of great minds who have penetrated the “effigy of the world” and the world, for us, is changed. Without that teacher, we can still graduate of course, better credentialed for life in the matrix, but largely unaware of reality’s disguises.

The particular risk in contemporary life, as Crooks quotes Bugbee, is that we will “take things ‘merely objectively, with the trimmings of subjectivity’” and, thus, “have them ‘emptily’.” I would press the point further and more urgently and say that an inability to see through the effigies of modern, neoliberal, capitalist, consumerist life not only risks existing “emptily” but, with current economic, political, and environmental trends, risks not existing at all.

Compounding the existential challenge and necessity for young people to see that the world can be otherwise, is the threat to the university itself as a place where this kind of study and insight is possible. A recent article on student confrontations with university

administrations in the Netherlands describes well the worldwide fate of universities in neoliberal times with “dramatic tuition hikes and budget cuts, combined with the metastization of a culture of top-down managerialism, *creeping bureaucratization* and the systematic precarization of academic labor.”¹ The only difference in Quebec is the absence of “dramatic tuition hikes” though not for want of trying by the Quebec government (with a consequent demonization of student opposition to such hikes). Public investment in public universities is collapsing. For Bishop’s, the problem is deepened by the Quebec university system’s lack of appreciation for primarily undergraduate, liberal arts inspired education and its refusal to pay adequately for it. If anything, the trends within university life seem designed to avoid at all costs the kind of intellectual encounter that Jamie Crooks prizes and recommends.

I graduated from Bishop’s (Class of ’78) and went to McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, to study with “my teacher’s teacher.” As Jamie Crooks says, there is something particularly exciting about this experience. In my case, it led to a graduate seminar on “Heidegger and the question of technology” with Prof. George Grant, the renowned Red Tory philosopher and critic of the modern “multiversity.” It was the most intellectually stimulating experience of my life but in many ways the most frustrating as well.

Grant was an inspired teacher – his lectures were like stand-up routines of loosely linked anecdotes and insights, improvised riffs on a set text each week. While his conservative, Platonic, Christian, alternative view of the world was not for everyone, he didn’t just cast a revealing light on the “effigy” of how we see the world; he took a flamethrower to it and left a pile of smoking ash. Once, after a particularly scorching analysis of North American life’s discontents and “emptiness,” a fellow graduate student, an earnest, young Presbyterian minister from Detroit whom we all loved for his sweetness and kindness, put up his hand and asked in genuine anguish, “But what are we supposed to do with this insight?”

Grant at that point in his life looked like Jabba the Hutt with a half smoked cigarette hanging from a pendulous lip; he paused, looked his student up and down, and sneered (I loved the man but there’s no other word to describe his tone), “Why ask me? You’re the pastor – that’s your vocation not mine.”

Later that week, I had a regularly scheduled meeting with Grant in his office. His dog, Bertie, was at his slippered feet. There were saucers overflowing with dried-out tea bags and cigarette ashes strewn around the room. I said our colleague had spoken for many of his students in that moment. Grant, who used his time with me to discuss the beauties

of the Eastern Townships where he had family connections and the pleasantries of Church of England systematic theology (perhaps because he recognized that though I wasn't a top drawer student of Heidegger, I had studied Hooker with Bishop's priests), said, "Mr. Orr, get away from the university, go home and be a farmer, and be grateful that you grew up Anglican and not Presbyterian." I took his advice.

All this to say that I think that the ideal situation for students in modern, embattled universities would be to have available some further guidance through the "archive" of great thinkers once the "effigy" of the world is seen for what it is. To be left only with an understanding that "as we take things, so we have them" and that we take things "emptily" as moderns seems inadequate in these times.

For me, something more resistant, more militant, even more apocalyptic is required for a modern student following this Platonic moment of insight – we need encouragement and guidance as students to read Marx or St. Paul or Malcolm X, for example. There is no question in my mind that life is better "if we 'take things' in wonder (and we 'have them' in love," as Jamie Crooks states the Platonic ideal, but in what sort of community, within what sort of institutions, will we live out this wonder and love? This is where the modern student faces a creative and a political challenge for which none of us is well prepared. As we imagine the future of university education, we must recognize the hardship that awaits young people who turn from the effigies of the neoliberal, consumerist world in faith and love with the intent to build a better life together.

ENDNOTE

- 1 Jerome Roos, "In Amsterdam, a revolt against the neoliberal university," in *ROARMAG.org*, <http://roarmag.org/2015/03/occupation-maagdenhuis-university-amsterdam/>