

The University Lecturer

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Why not *to think, without hurry*, about the University? I have written, in a simple sentence, two words that seem to me decisive, and that, taken seriously, would represent a deep innovation; they would almost be revolutionary. On the one hand, *to think*—which is what the man of our age shies away from most; what he constantly evades. On the other hand, *without hurry*—now that everybody rushes, and uses the word “Now!” as a slogan, and maybe that is why everything is desperately slow and it never ends up being done. When people talk about the University—together with the words “crisis”, “problems”, “decadence” and other similar ones-, they talk about laws almost always; otherwise, about statistics, percentages, representations, budgets. Without detriment of approaching different aspects of it another day, today I just want to talk about an ingredient of the University that seems to me essential: the lecturer.

I have been a lecturer many times, in several countries, always in a transitory way; in the Spanish University, only since three years ago. My experience, therefore, far from coming down to our country, includes it only marginally. What I am going to say here should not, therefore, be understood in relation to the Spanish lecturer primarily. And a chronological limitation has to be taken into account, indeed: there is a sensitive difference between those lecturers older than sixty and the younger ones. As I am thinking of the later, I am referring to a variety that is an immensely majority already; within it, its characters are accentuated as the generations pass by.

What it really interests me here is not the knowledge, competence or education of lecturers. All of that seems to me less important than something that comes first: the *human type* of the lecturer. It has always struck me how, as the professions have been multiplied and diversified, the *human types* have been simplified and homogenised.

In the Romantic period, for example, a variety of the *way of being* a man or a woman corresponded to each profession or trade, whereas, as we approach to the end of the XX century, the professions carried out by extremely similar people vary widely. This leads to think that they are embraced for reasons deep inside each person; or, still more disturbing, that they do not influence the person that carries them out; that they do not transform and shape it. It seems, therefore, that there is a *zone of distance*—of indifference, perhaps—between the person and his or her profession.

With many exceptions—many, but always exceptions-, when I come across university lecturers, especially in groups, I get the impression that they belong to a different *human variety* from mine and the one I used to recognise years ago as similar to mine. Why? They do not seem to me strictly “intellectuals”, so to use an inappropriate and embarrassing word, but which has acquired quite a precise meaning in our century. They are, perhaps, very competent, but the word “competence” is not one of the first words that would have been thought of in order to describe a lecturer. They can be efficient, but I still would have to say the same. The intellectual is the man -or woman- who feels an *unselfish interest* for many things, especially those that do not affect him or her. An old German professor friend of mine told me, many years ago, and I still have not forgotten it: “I am interested in the persons who are entirely of this world.” The decisive word is the adverb: entirely, because all of us are entirely of this world.

The intellectual is not *entirely of this world*; he feels attracted by things that lead him nowhere; the intellectual has passion for anything that does not affect him—for anything that only affects him by just *fascinating* him, which is no poor affection-; the intellectual has curiosity for everything that is foreign to his occupation. He asks questions to himself, even though he suspects he is not going to find any answer. Above all, he has a great delight for that estrange world called the *ideas*.

We have come across teachers and lecturers who did not know much; who were untidy, arbitrary, incoherent, and even a little bit nutty. Of some of them, I still have fond memories,

and no little gratitude. I can not say they taught me much; but they taught me, they showed me the discipline they had to teach, and maybe others.

They showed me what the intellectual life is or some of its branches: art, or literature, or biology, or the Classic or foreign culture. I could say that the following consequence emerged from their lectures: "this way is how what I am talking about -what I am putting in front of your eyes- should not be taught." Then we could go further; we could read in the books in which that had been done better; we used to go to the museum to see the pictures with that teacher who had dazzled us without fully explaining them; we sought other teachers in order to fulfill with rigor the conditions that the other one had deficiently made us *wish*.

I think the word I have just written is decisive.

The lecturer has to *arise eagerness*, even though it can not be satisfied. Eagerness for knowledge, no doubt. Even more, eagerness to see, to look at, to wonder, to get impressed, to move around in a magic world, always unknown to young people and discovered by the lecturer, half-opening a door, perhaps without daring to cross it himself.

Transmitting the thought, thinking in front of the students, with them, is the paramount function of the lecturer; the only one that justifies his or her existence. Otherwise, what's the point? There are books, and essays, and articles, and maps, and databases. Everything is in them better and more complete. What it is not there is the enthusiasm, the delight for things, that relish I was talking about before. In those materials there is not respect, nor veneration, nor that sacred shudder produced by a glimpse of truth or the truth just discovered.

This is what seems to me rather infrequent among the new generations of lecturers. Certainly, they have virtues that were lacking before, that older lecturers do not possess. They move with confidence among the most complex and grandest bibliographies; they use statistics and electronic tools; they are aware of the titles of the most recently published articles about their specialty in other countries. But I wonder whether they have as many books at home as the old and poor lecturers of other times; whether they read them with so much pleasure, out of times, instead of going to bed; whether they look at questions, with curiosity, not in their specialty. In some cases, of course they do; but I am afraid that they are not enough to fully carry out that delicate and problematic function which university life consists; which demands, before anything else, *life*.

My fear is that the *human type* of the lecturer is becoming something else, closer to the technical, executive, functional one, without bearing in mind the danger of slipping through the functions of indoctrinating or proselytising. The causes of these variations are quite different, depending on the country and stages of a process initialised about half a century ago. It would be interesting to wonder about them, but the first step is having a clear picture of the *questionable reality*. And I want to add that something of this could be applied to any teacher or lecturer. I had two primary teachers –in a most modest school. I do not know if they knew much; I suspect they did not. But I remember their faces, their gestures, their names: Mr Juan Sánchez, Mr Nemesio Priego. Sixty years have passed by already; there must be a reason.