

FIVE THESES ON STUDYING IN A TIME OF ACCELERATION

Walter Weyns

Prelude

Studying is a lived-through experience; if not, it does not qualify as studying.

Now, a 'lived-through experience' (*Erfahrung*) is not the same as just 'anything you go through or experience' (*Erlebnis*).¹ This is more than a word game. It touches on the very core of our culture. In a culture of continuous acceleration, everyone faces the threat of being left behind.² Perhaps you're still keeping up today, but what about tomorrow? A culture of acceleration does not wait, it cannot wait. Its entire mode of being is geared towards creative destruction, innovation, a generalized proactive attitude. Benjamin Franklin's advice for his pupils is therefore no longer valid. 'Time flies, use it wisely', he urged them (meaning 'don't waste your time, work conscientiously'). These days it comes down to 'being faster than time' and 'beating time' instead (i.e. 'save time, come up with something new, a thing of tomorrow').

I have already mentioned the tense relationship between a 'lived-through experience' (*Erfahrung*) and 'anything you go through or experience' (*Erlebnis*). This tension is tangible in our daily lives, also as far as studying is concerned. Experiencing time is not the same as going through an event. A lived-through experience comes from the inside out. When you experience something, like taking a walk in the park with no particular destination, or sipping a glass of water and actually tasting the glass as well as the water, this does not mean you have gone through an event. But you have experienced something. An experience is often *pianissimo*. Though we have to be careful to generalize things that are hard to objectify, like experiences, it is safe to say that a lived-through experience requires a certain intimacy of the living being with himself and the things around him – an intimacy that is at odds with strong stimuli or outer actions. There's no lived-through experience without innerness. This makes experiencing closely related to abiding and remaining, lazing about and fiddling, pondering and musing, yes, even to being bored – perhaps a lived-through experience has more to do with being bored than with anything else – instead of being active,

getting things done, organizing and planning, managing crises and attaining preset goals.

A mountaineer who only focuses on classification systems, on how many eight-thousand peaks he has conquered, and on making good time, might just abseil his way home again with zero lived-through experiences. He has moved around and across the mountain, but he did not allow the mountain's ancient heaviness and temperament to truly take possession of him. In other words: the mountain didn't get time to settle inside this man. The mountaineer, too busy checking his ascenders and keeping an anxious eye on his stopwatch, forgot to look the mountain in the eye. He'll never know that the mountain, like the moon, shows a different face every day. There is no question that the mountaineer will have gone through a lot of *events*, but these are not lived-through experiences. He'll be able to talk about ravines he nearly tumbled into, about a new and dangerous route that took him to the top even faster, about an approaching thunderstorm that blew him off course. His admiring audience will shudder; his stories will take people's breath away. But the mountain has not entered him.

Events remain on the outside. Lived-through experiences, then, are very different, often contrasting, psychic conditions. Of course one can climb a mountain without, so to speak, meeting that mountain. In the words of the philosopher Frédéric Gros, this will create a friendship with the landscape and the mountain like between Paul Cézanne and his *Mont Sainte-Victoire* – a friendship 'that grows because you see each other regularly', that blossoms because the mountain 'slowly enters your body'. Whenever Cézanne was painting the *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, did he portray the mountain outside of him or the mountain that had taken possession of him? We can't tell anymore, and the difference no longer matters; it has been canceled out in Cézanne's experience of the mountain³. Well then, without such an intimate relationship, without being absorbed by things, lived-through experiences are hard to come by – only events are perhaps within reach.

Beginning students sometimes picture their dreams and nightmares about their future as a mountain they have to get through and across. Indeed, studying is not that different from mountaineering. Like for mountaineers, planning, aiming, managing,

organizing and continually correcting have become so important for students that many of them forget to while away their time, to forget the time and actually turn studying into a lived-through experience.

Five theses

I'll now put these reflections into more concrete terms and zoom in on some Flemish, European and worldwide trends in higher education that are surreptitiously undermining studying as a lived-through experience and free-forming activity (*scholé*). I'll discuss the threat to freedom and at once talk about the role of education in what's left of our democracy today. (After all, some philosophers argue that democracy has been replaced by post-democracy behind our backs, or even by an outright post-political time.) All of this may sound somewhat ominous and pessimistic. But the theses I would like to put forward do have a didactic purpose, if I may call it that. Their aim is to encourage reflection and discussion. This explains the slightly provocative tone in which I would like to present the following statements:

- While education has never been more important, studying has never been more unimportant
- Students are counselled like never before, but individual students have never been more insecure
- The more professionalized their education, the less students seem to care about it
- 'Study orientation' is aimed less at helping the student get his bearings in life than at keeping him moving about in the system
- The democratization of education has not been an education in democracy – on the contrary

The basic idea behind these statements is that our education is tailor-made to individual students, and rightly so, but perhaps this 'student centeredness' is weighted too much towards customer orientation and consumption. Perhaps our education is also geared too much to production and output. Educational institutions

are not companies, students not clients, teachers not salesmen. Education does not produce or consume, but shapes people, including those who fail to graduate.

Let us now consider in more detail the (perhaps somewhat overstated) assertions:

1. While education has never been more important, studying has never been more unimportant

We live in a credential society⁴, a society in which someone's degrees, certificates and attestations are crucial. Degrees are a ticket to the labor market, they determine someone's identity and social integration. Sporting a degree, you count for more. This means that social inequality, and the level of social participation, run parallel to educational inequality in a credential society. Who you are and what you have depend on your educational background. And this seems right; after all, whether or not you obtain a degree is entirely in your own hands. Differences in degrees matter less than the mere fact of having (or lacking) one. The options are *in* or *out* – with a degree, you are in and you are somebody, without one, you are out, a nobody.

The harsh efficiency of a degree (as ruthless as the 'on' or 'off' of a light switch) ensures its value as an instrument, as a key to society's more pleasant regions. One can hardly blame students with an instrumental motivation to study, for whom education is a means to an end rather than an end in itself: it merely serves to get them that most prized possession: the degree. Why study? 'To get a degree, of course.' Who in their right mind would want to lock themselves out?

As a consequence, studying is significantly downgraded in a credential society. Keeping your eyes on the much-desired goal reduces studying to a path you have to take in order to get somewhere else. The point is to leave this path behind as soon as possible. Little remains of the intrinsic value of education, let alone the value of education as a useful activity in and of itself. The idea of studying as the highest and most valuable goal in life has become all but unthinkable. It's an illusion, a delusion, or at best a vague memory of what poetically-minded philosophers have once said about the joys and virtues of education. Like Plato, who called the ecstasy of studying, of red-cheeked immersion in, and almost mystical union with the topic, nothing less than love. Studying as love. One can hardly imagine it anymore. (Though I remind you

in passing of the etymology of 'study', which originally meant 'striving longingly', and point, also in passing, to the Hebrew notion of 'knowing' and 'admitting': 'yada'; the old Hebrews used one and the same word for 'making love' and 'having knowledge'. But enough about eroticism.)

In a credential society, this enthusiastic and passionate relation to the topic of study has dwindled down to almost nothing. Like studying itself, its object – knowledge – has become a means to an end. 'Knowledge is a kind of fuel', Jean-François Lyotard already wrote some forty years ago.⁵ Nothing more, nothing less. You need knowledge in order to use it, but using it actually depletes its value. Knowledge in itself is worthless. And the reason we call our society a 'knowledge society', as we so often do, is not because we attach so much importance to knowledge or because we lovingly internalize that knowledge, but rather because we tend to use massive amounts of it. Not preserving or saving or cherishing, but using. Because knowledge will be outdated before you know it, and then it becomes a hindrance, a cost. Suspicion – 'does this knowledge still suffice or not?' – has therefore become the appropriate attitude towards knowledge. Knowledge is not something to love, but to mistrust.

This radically instrumental stance towards knowledge, our 'radical mediocrity' when it comes to dealing with knowledge, turns knowledge into something consumable, usable, sellable. And the logical counterpart of knowledge-as-fuel is the student-as-client.

Here I could refer to the McDonaldization of higher education, but this description speaks for itself. I will limit myself to remarking that we haven't seen the last of the commercialization of education.

2. Students are counselled like never before, but individual students have never been more insecure

At the 'Study information days' organized by the Flemish government (the so-called SID-ins), large posters advise incoming students to "Choose what you really want". This is a variation on the slogans with which supermarkets try to lure their customers, and the purpose is the same. Nobody likes to be forced or coerced.

Everyone wants to have freedom of choice. This is stimulating and exciting. But the apple of freedom houses a worm.

The name of the worm: choice anxiety. Choosing what you want, as tempting as it sounds, requires knowing what you want. Otherwise that choice becomes a source of frustration, and freedom of choice will turn into worry and insecurity. Especially when faced with important decisions, like the choice of discipline, freedom of choice is more pain than pleasure. A lot of adolescents are scared when they visit study choice platforms only to read “Choose what you really want”, thinking to themselves ‘if only I knew’. Having to choose often does not feel liberating to them. This obligation to choose, masquerading as freedom of choice, is widespread in our society, presenting itself whenever we have to make a decision of any consequence, like in relationships (and ending them), jobs or changing jobs (‘career planning’), housing, and so on. Our societal need for all kinds of counselling and assistance is enormous (coaches, advisors, mentors, lawyers, psychologists, pastors, consultants, tutors, trainers, psychotherapists, study counsellors and so on and so forth). Clearly, not everyone is keen on more freedom of choice.

In higher education too, the obligation to choose has increased dramatically these last decades, and the need for assistance along with it. These observations are not limited to study orientation or the beginning of a school career; they apply to the entire educational trajectory. Adolescents are continually haunted by the ‘choose what you want’ mantra, which triggers a downward spiral of freedom of choice and counselling. The options in higher education are indeed so vast and so flexible that no choice is ever really final. The more ingenious and numerous the options to individualize student trajectories, the more students are invited (or pushed) to discuss their choices (courses, electives, exchange programmes, modules, credits, transfer or preparatory programmes), to consider and reconsider, the more they get caught in the trap of never-ending choices. The arrangement they eventually end up with is often so complex that they do not get through it without help. This is how the range of counsellors and services and decrees actually creates students’ demands for a complex, so-called ‘tailor-made’ educational trajectory, which they would never dare to undertake on their own, without advice from the sideline.

Obviously, such a far-reaching freedom of choice/obligation to choose does not necessarily lead to more autonomy – on the contrary. It only increases the social-psychological dependence on counsellors/experts. And as well-intentioned as (intra- or extracurricular) attempts to better equip students to monitor themselves may be, these lead to a sometimes forced self-objectification and context dependence.

Ironically, this entire evolution sails under the flag of ‘flexibility’.

We live in flexible times. Or so they say. In reality, students are navigating an obstacle course full of rigidities that have little to do with the actual content of their training. They are forced to contemplate every little step of their educational trajectory. They have to become experts at calculating (learning credits, credit points), organizing (modular studying, piecing course and exam schedules together), planning (deadlines for papers and Blackboard tasks, enrolling and signing out, always with an eye to study progress and reorientation), assessing risks (how long will my study programme be left untouched, will they add an extra year?), mediating (between home and guest universities in the context of an exchange programme), negotiating (about partial or complete exemption, the recognition of previous credits), and sometimes outright flattering and haggling (when comparing the admittance requirements for equal, but not identical, transfer and Master’s programmes at various institutions, and playing these off against each other). In all of these, and many other cases, the student finds himself faced with a continually expanding and never-ending universe of decrees, rules, regulations, rules of thumb, criteria, procedures and provisions that are revised every few minutes and that assume proportions that dwarf the student. Getting organized in his studies takes up a disproportionate amount of his time, diverting him from studying itself. Any attempts at leisurely and freely diving into an issue or topic that he cares about are seriously hampered. Just studying seems an inappropriate thing to do. Because while the student is keeping one eye on his study material, his other eye strains to monitor his study progress, like any self-employed businessman worrying about his bookkeeping. In a moment of clarity the student may question the use of this swarm of aggressive rules. But he doesn’t have much time for such thoughts, because he has to push on, on to the next deadline. And that’s what we call *flexible education*.

Today's flexible student is subjected to a massive system of didactic-administrative screening, monitoring and control instruments that serve to keep him on track. He has to go through an unending list of procedures, tasks, tests and feedback loops. All of these preprogrammed learning processes turn studying into a context dependent instead of a free mental activity⁶. Nowadays, the most flexible student is no longer the most free. Flexible rather means that he is able to adapt quickly to the demands of his (learning) environment. Today's student is exposed to an enormous *pressure to adapt*. But adapting and studying are two completely different things. All known forms of life, from single-celled organisms to chimpanzees, use learning processes to adapt to their environment. Yet only human beings have managed to elevate learning to an object of study. What is more, studying is an activity that often gives us mental pleasure, regardless of any adaptive advantage. The studying subject doesn't mind. He appreciates studying in and of itself.

It looks like the much-hyped 'flexible studying attitude' of today has reduced studying to purely adaptive learning, and the entire rhetoric of 'studying to achieve humanization and Bildung' is just that: rhetoric.

3. The more professionalized their education, the less students seem to care about it

The word 'professional' can have all kinds of meanings, sometimes even conflicting ones. But when used in an educational context, the term more or less refers to turning teachers into experts, not experts in their field, but in coaching and tutoring learning processes. To be more precise: they become experts in 'secondary learning', that is to say: 'learning how to learn'. Or rather: tertiary learning, 'teaching about learning how to learn'. (Because it's the students who have to 'learn how to learn'.)

A teacher/coach/trainer who has mastered 'tertiary learning' does not focus primarily on a topic of study. This is, rather, reminiscent of pre-professionalized times, when teachers could talk all they wanted about some subject or other that interested them, without worrying too much about whether the students were making any progress or not. The exam would tell. Students more or less had to work it out for themselves. They were supposed to learn from example or something, who

knew. This ignorance about the learning process abhors the professionalized teacher. After all, what is teaching if not knowing which intermediate learning steps a student can and should take, stimulating him and teaching him how to learn independently? A good teacher does not put himself center stage, but makes himself redundant along the way.

Obviously, no one can object to teachers with an insight into what learning actually is. More problematic, however, is the idea of 'learning' as a predetermined trajectory that has to be completed as efficiently and as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, this idea is quite common. The professionalized teacher is so fixated on the educational trajectory that he loses sight of the metaphor such a 'trajectory' actually is. A predominant metaphor, imposed by the department of education insofar as it rewards those who pass through quickly, but 'only' a metaphor nonetheless. Learning is much more mysterious than following a trajectory. Those who really learn something, and I mean something complex, like mastering a language, or playing an instrument, or programming a computer, or designing a house, they don't follow a trajectory. They metamorphose. They change, and neither they nor their teachers could tell how this happened or what exactly has changed⁷. If learning would be like a trajectory, then everyone would have learned the same things at the end of a term, a module or even a class. Well, they don't. Every student takes other things from exactly the same study material. If learning is like a trajectory, no one takes the same route. No two architects or social workers are the same.

While all this seems as clear as daylight, it is completely at odds with what teachers are told in the context of educational professionalization. They learn that education should serve learning goals and 'year-end goals'. They cherish the illusion that students who have absorbed the same study material have learned the same things. This is a reassuring thought indeed. After all, it means that learning processes can be controlled, and that education can be monitored. Notions like 'year-end goals', 'assessment', 'study counselling', 'study monitoring', and so forth, serve no other end than control. Even those programmes that champion creativity in the end drop all students off at the platform of the same (terminus) station.

Insofar as professionalization serves to monitor what is happening in the world of education, it often takes the form of a preprogrammed and, more generally, technicized, version of learning. This kind of learning can be very efficient and it will lead to the preset goals. Only, the student does not have the feeling that what he learned actually mattered to him. He completed the trajectory and is happy to have reached the end station. He has learned a trick, but he couldn't care less about it.

4. 'Study orientation' is aimed less at helping the student get his bearings in life than at keeping him moving about in the system

Students feel a real need to orient themselves. Or so they say. In fact, orientation is outdated. Not the direction you're heading is what matters, but the fact that you are moving at all, that you show an eagerness to be mobile, to move about.

European higher education has been thoroughly transformed these last decades. Curricula have been reformed. The main goal of these reforms was to align the curricula, which has been more or less successful. They are more compatible, so a student can easily change curricula, schools or countries, or even all three at once.

Before the education reforms, curricula were like fish-traps. Once you were in, it became almost impossible to change direction. The reform resulted in *educational trajectories* rather than *disciplines*. The shift is telling: while a discipline indicates a direction, this is no longer valid for a trajectory-type approach to studying.

A *direction* implies knowing what is ahead of you, or at least having an inkling of an idea about this; in any case, you can safely ignore the side roads that would lead you in another direction. A *trajectory*, by contrast, suggests you no longer have an idea of what lies ahead, and what is more: every side road is a tempting possibility. When following a trajectory, you know what ground you have covered so far, but not necessarily where you're headed. After all, every year – every semester, if need be – you can change your programme, change curricula, or try your luck at transfer or exchange programmes, and who knows which credits you'll gain along the way. There's no way of knowing which steps a 'trajectory student' will take next year. After all, he himself is none the wiser. It all depends on his results, the number of credits, and the options that come with it. Is there no purpose to his education, then? No, he

wants to get a degree, preferably two. Only he doesn't know which one(s) yet. Maybe this, maybe that. He'll see. His trajectory ends the moment he looks back on the road he has taken and realizes he has gathered enough points to get his degree. And then he'll be able to tell his discipline. Seen in retrospect, he could have gotten his degree through a completely different trajectory, taking other modules, another minor, another Erasmus city, another transfer or preparatory programme. But how could he have known in advance? And what does it even matter?

The European and increasingly globalized field of higher education has been transformed to stimulate trajectory education – hence also the kind of education that is subject to reorientation every few moments. Governments and companies think highly of such a flexible educational infrastructure. And indeed it has its merits. In a world where next year's labor market is likely to offer jobs that don't even exist right now, a world where innovation is king, a world where disciplinary boundaries are broken down and most scientific progress is made in interdisciplinary areas that create the most wonderful cross-pollinations – in such a world, it seems rather silly to hold on to 'disciplines'.

The flip side, however, is that those who want to take up a study in such a world are supposed to, even stimulated to, study 'discipline-less'. As Sophie Lefèvre cleverly put it, clear disciplines and curricula *build* students and strengthen their ability for independent thought, while the all-powerful economic system is more in favor of compliant, 'cooperative employees'⁸. What they've been studying doesn't matter. It's impossible to say what the world of tomorrow will look like, let alone the day after that, so there is no point in trying to determine which qualities ('knowledge, skills, abilities') will be required in the future. What may be a shortage occupation today could be an obsolete profession tomorrow – and vice versa, who knows. So indeed it matters little how long someone goes to school. As long as he learns 'something' and completes 'a' trajectory. Study *orientation* is practically a fossil; it's all about study *mobility* these days, movements and circulations. As long as a student is mobile and keeps going along some trajectory or other, everything's fine. One can't ask for more. The best way to prepare future generations for the unpredictable world is by having them study anything and everything. Perhaps some of it might come in handy one day.

Educational infrastructure as it has been established these past few years looks surprisingly like an international airplane or railroad network: a fantastic infrastructure consisting of connections, and connections of connections, leading everywhere and nowhere, conceived in such a way that the traveler can get from any destination to any other destination, which turns these places now into starting points, then into stopovers or destinations, all depending on the route of choice. (Can we even speak of a 'destination' in such a network?) The key to all of this is getting the traveler from one hub to another in the best possible way, well-monitored and assisted by attendants and experts who provide useful, professional advice on price reductions and swift connections, on detours, hindrances and temporary discounts, and who sometimes also support passengers who got a little off course or who fear they are going to miss their connection. The efficiency with which all of this happens makes it seem as if this complex system of connections is kept afloat by a super spirit who knows and supervises everything – though in reality this well-functioning system... functions, while everyone in it is at a loss to see its purpose or destination.

This finally shatters the illusion of a university or college as a shaping or at least an 'orienting' institution. A directionless world has no need of an education that orients. Apparently, it needs an education that delivers students who expect the unexpected, who manage to move along a little, even though they can see no further than their next stopover.

The problem many students face today, is not how to get their bearings, but how to move around in a disoriented world. Whether our current educational system is of any help with that is highly debatable. After all, its only purpose is to mobilize students, streamlining their movements, their circulations, their motions.

5. The democratization of education has not been an education in democracy – on the contrary

Not so long ago, in the sixties and seventies of the past century, 'democratizing (higher) education' still sounded like a rallying cry. After all, large groups in our society had no access to it, if not *de jure*, then certainly in reality. As research by August Hollingshead, Raymond Boudon, Pierre Bourdieu and many other sociologists

and didacticists from that time has shown, the organization of our education was not worthy of a democracy⁹. In contrast to what many believed – especially in the United States – namely that everyone has the same rights in a democracy, that it depends on individual effort and talent if you make something of your life or not, and that education is the key to equal opportunity, the reality turned out to be that the educational system increased rather than decreased social class inequality, or at best perpetuated it. Education actually reproduced class inequality, to general outrage. If passing or failing depended on the parents' social position, then the schoolchild seemed to be punished twice over. Once by the lower social environment he grew up in, with limited means, less stimuli and less potential to grow, as well as with a language and a cultural environment that made him prone to discrimination. And second, by being generally regarded as someone with little talent. Research by Hollingshead and others has exposed 'talent' as an ideological trick to mask class differences. Some, like Bourdieu, even went so far as to say that talent or capabilities don't exist. They regarded these terms, rather, as a smokescreen for social and cultural capital – that is, for things that are basically handed on a silver platter: social and cultural inheritance.

The democratization of education was, and is, about freeing ourselves. Morally, nobody will ever think of letting children bear the burden of their parents' self-imposed sense of guilt. Luckily, we have moved beyond that for a while – even though this burden sometimes reemerges; think for instance of the embarrassment children of hard criminals feel in their parents' place. Now, the democratization of education also does away with socio-economic and cultural burdens. Children should not be the victims of their upbringing. Not in any way. Not morally, socio-economically, or culturally.

This honorable notion is behind any efforts to democratize higher education. Fortunately, the idea is noble and worth striving for, because otherwise it would be impossible to keep our spirits up. After all, the gates to higher education remain closed all too often¹⁰. Belgium is internationally known for the fairly big gap between the decent education children of the middle class receive, and the massive dropout rates among children of the lower classes and from certain ethnic groups. Higher education seems an impossible hurdle for children from low-income families;

statistically, almost no one from the lowest income group enters higher education. It goes without saying that this is a gross injustice. Immigrants' children are also seriously underrepresented. So there is still a lot of work to be done, and it definitely won't hurt to stress the need for, and significance of, student counselling services. Thanks to these services some adolescents manage to turn their future around. These services, at least the services for college and university students, have been around for years and they do an excellent job – from helping students find a room, to study counselling or psychological, social and cultural support. I would like to underline the importance of what they do. Without them, we would just be paying lip service to the democratization of higher education.

The strong emphasis on individuality ('choose what you want'; individual counselling; made-to-measure study programmes) could have the perverse side effect of teaching students to navel-gaze rather than to show an interest in the group they belong to. They have to cope on their own – with the help of professional services, that is. Their individual, very own ability to choose is scrutinized to such an extent that they become convinced life is a lonely journey. Ties to fellow students, let alone to a broader learning community (consisting of both teachers and students), are unraveled and rewoven into flexible networks that can, in turn, be knitted into new alliances overnight, depending on the (individual) needs of the moment. Nobody feels responsible for such a network, be it virtual or in real life. It comes and goes. People join for a while, for as long as it's convenient, and detach themselves once the network stops paying off. These opportunistic relations to others, misleadingly labelled 'social skills', stimulate a narcissistic attitude. The narcissist not only chooses what he wants, he also values only what he chooses. Disciplines, clothes, even friends and partners are only valuable *because* he has chosen them. The narcissist is at the center of the world, bestowing meaning and value on that world. And the more his environment tries to please him, the more he feels strengthened and the more self-centered he will become. Yet we should not take this too far. Narcissism in its radical, psychiatric variant is fortunately rather rare. But as Christopher Lasch so pointedly put it, there is something inherently narcissistic about consumers and clients, and the more ground 'consumer culture' and consumer-centeredness gain in all areas of our lives, the more widespread 'cultural narcissism' will become. The narcissistic student

is easily recognized by the natural air of ownership with which he addresses (via email or otherwise) the teacher, counsellor, mentor or administrative officer, assuming their only purpose in life is to help him.

Without wanting to claim that our flexible schooling system, catering as it does to the individual student/client, is an education in narcissism, it is nevertheless undeniable that notions like the common good, sustained commitment to the community, collective decision-making, in short, the basic principles of a democratic society, are under pressure. As Benjamin Barber rightly pointed out, “in practice, the realization (of a democracy) depends on learning how to be a citizen, on participation in the public sphere and an awareness of collectivity”¹¹. The reorganization of higher education (characterized by an exaggerated freedom of choice, modularization, flexibilization, transfer programmes and so forth) has, no doubt unintentionally, eroded the sense of collectivity. Students no longer experience this collectivity, let alone feel responsible for it. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find students who are willing to act as student representatives in discussion boards and decision-making bodies. Some institutions reward students for such activities with study credits or attendance fees. This degrades even students’ voluntary commitment to the common good to a matter of individual interest. Involuntarily, our flexible schooling system contributes to the erosion of one of the pillars of democracy – the idea of ‘collective decision-making’. It has gone almost unnoticed, but this is how our educational system is adapting to a societal trend it prefers not to name: ‘post-democracy’.

For many years, critics of neoliberalism have been calling attention to the fact that eroding the democratic habitat of students in an educational system that attaches too much importance to individual trajectories only serves the interests of big multinationals who prefer to deal with “technically schooled, obedient employees to carry out the plans of an elite whose sole focus is on foreign investments and technological developments” – as Martha Nussbaum has said about a harmful trend that became evident during the past decades in India, ‘the largest democracy in the world’, and that she has observed in the rest of the world too. Nussbaum points to the ‘danger’ in imbuing students with responsibility and a critical spirit, in encouraging solidarity, critical thinking and true freedom of mind instead of the consumers’

freedom which may look fancy but in reality is debilitating¹². After all, this does not suit the short-sighted interests of an economy that is purely profit and growth oriented. So critical thinking is discouraged, and if there is still democracy at work, it has taken the shape of what Sheldon Wollin has scornfully called *Democracy Incorporated*¹³. This mechanism is sometimes laid bare, especially in those educational institutions that pay students for good grades, thereby teaching them that everything is for sale. *Time Magazine* already splashed with the headline ‘Should Schools Bribe Kids?’. Yet such ‘incentive programmes’ are still rare (and apparently they don’t survive the test of reality – both students and teachers turn out to be less keen on maximizing profits than they should be according to economic dictates)¹⁴. Nevertheless: the more students are encouraged and tempted to follow ‘their personal choice’, the more they focus on themselves and their individual success, the less they are able to change perspectives and to open their hearts and minds – both prerequisites to keeping democracy alive.

Higher education has always been an important entrance to the public sphere. For students from less affluent backgrounds, it is sometimes the only way in. And right at the time when, thanks to the democratization process, more students gain access to it, higher education is losing more and more of its relevance as an education in democracy.

NOTES

¹ Walter Benjamin introduced the notions of ‘Erlebnis’ (‘belevens’ - ‘*immediate sensation*’) versus ‘Erfahrung’ (‘ervaring’ - ‘*meaningful experience*’). The distinction made here between ‘experience’ (‘Erlebnis’, ‘belevens’) and ‘lived-through experience’ (‘*durchlebte Erfahrung*’, ‘beleving’) does not coincide completely with Benjamin’s, though the scope is similar.

² Hartmut Rosa (2015), *Social Acceleration. A New Theory of Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.

³ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964), *L’Œil et l’Esprit*. Gallimard: Paris.

⁴ Randall Collins (1979) *The Credential Society*. New York: Academic Press.

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard (1979), *La Condition postmoderne*. Les Editions de Minuit: Paris.

⁶ The literature on the bureaucratising and the creeping economic colonisation of education is extensive. See for instance: Konrad Adam, *Die deutsche Bildungsmisere*, Ulstein Verlag, München, 2004; Jan Masschelein en Maarten Simons, *Globale immuniteit. Een kleine cartografie van de Europese ruimte voor onderwijs*, Acco, Leuven, 2006.

⁷ The assertion that learning has something mysterious about it isn’t meant to mystify it – as some romantics used to do. It only recognizes that acquiring knowledge has a non-explicite dimension. The core of all knowledge, so one can formulate this paradoxical ground insight from Michael Polanyi, consists of silence. See his *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966). And the same can be said of acquiring skills: see Richard Sennett (2008) *The Craftsman*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁸ ‘Il faut casser les disciplines parce qu’elles apprennent à penser et puis il faut habituer les gens à interagir, à se contrôler mutuellement (ce sont les desiderata de l’industrie)’. Francis Combes, Sophie Lefèvre e.a., *La destruction de la culture. Stratégies du dévervelage en France (1995-2006)*, Editions Delga, Paris, 2005, p. 51.

⁹ August Hollingshead (1949), *Elmtown’s Youth. The Impact of Social Classes on Adolescents*. New York: John Wiley & Sons; Raymond Boudon (1973), *L’Inégalité des chances*. Paris: Armand Colin; Pierre Bourdieu & Jean-Claude Passeron (1964), *Les*

béritiers. Les étudiants et la culture. Paris : Ed. de Minuit ; Pierre Bourdieu & Jean-Claude Passeron (1971), *Le reproduction.* Paris : Ed. de Minuit.

¹⁰ For Flanders, see: Steven Groenez, Inge Van den Brande en Ides Nicaise (2003), *Cijferboek sociale ongelijkheid in het Vlaamse onderwijs.* Leuven: Steunpunt LOA. For the US: Suzanne Mettler (2014), *Degrees of Inequality. How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream.* Philadelphia: Basic Books. From a worldwide comparative perspective: Elaine Unterhalter & Vincent Carpentier, eds. (2010), *Global Inequalities and Higher Education. Whose Interests are we serving?* Basingstroke: Palgrave MacMillan.

¹¹ Benjamin Barber (2008), *Consumed.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

¹² Martha Nussbaum (2010), *Not for Profit.* Princeton University Press.

¹³ Sheldon Wollin (2012), *Democracy Incorporated. Managed Democracy and the Spectre of Inverted Totalitarianism.* Princeton University Press.

¹⁴ Michael Sandel (2012), *What Money can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.