Il Corriere Della Sera

01-09-2021

Pages: 40/41

Foglio: 1/2

Imparare a vivere: Un’ epoca in bilicotra lumi e oscurantismo

Learning to live: An era poised between enlightenment and obscurantism

William John Morgan

Fifty years ago, in his excellent monograph *Gladiators*, Professor Michael Grant, explaining the popularity of the bloodletting of the gladiatorial arena with the Roman masses, said that: ‘In the vast Roman world...Millions of people felt shiftless, unsupported, un-looked after, lost, and above all bored.’ ¹ The familiar *panem et circenses*, described by the poet Juvenal, was the crude ruling class response to this mass alienation. In the following two millennia, enormities against humanity have continued. There is also a growing mass alienation, with its accompanying discontents, similar to that found in the Roman Empire. It is aggravated by the scale and material demands of our global population, and the cultural ambiguities that accompany this.

There is a paradox in that our knowledge and potential capacity for living in a sustainable environment have never been greater. Our common aim should be for human development rather than exploitation. The purpose of intellectual activity should be the understanding of the human condition and how it can flourish. Cultural exchange, both formal and informal, should be seen as integral to the human instinct for society and play. They should be the counters to the darker instincts for sadistic aggression and mass hysteria described by Michael Grant.

The paradox continues in that we now have an unprecedented means of global communication in the World Wide Web and the Internet which is also corrosive and splintering in its effects. A so-called ‘social media’ has emerged marked by enthusiasm for trivialities and sensationalism resulting in a flood of isolated ‘information’ and ‘opinion’. However, this is without meaning as ‘authority’ has not been replaced by ‘rational argument’. It is reinforced by private capital interests that control both the commercial media and the social media platforms, creating an illusion of democratic ‘participation’ or, in their slogan, ‘Get Involved!’ The paradox confronts us in a world of soundbites, of shouts-down of speakers at universities; and in a retreat from discourse based on evidence and reasoned argument. This has damaged humanity’s capacity to find a resolution to the problems it has in common.

If this capacity is to be renewed and strengthened, non-cognitive qualities will be necessary if we are to evaluate the cognitive scientific possibilities that have been and will continue to be made. Such qualities include the capacity for dialogue, teamwork, and for assessing and deciding on the merits of alternative courses of action. In short, reasoned judgement and action by individuals as part of the human community. The contemporary world is characterised by bewildering complexity and multiple contradictions. These generate tensions that can only be resolved peacefully and justly by individuals who have been educated to understand and resolve them. The opportunity for a sound basic education for all is fundamental to this.

This is an humanistic vision of education and development, based on respect for life at all its stages, human dignity, equal rights, social justice, cultural diversity, international solidarity, and shared responsibility for a sustainable future. As humanity moves through a 21st century marked by persistent armed conflict, obscurantism, fundamentalism, and intolerance of other points of view, intellectual and cultural cooperation is essential to our common humanity. In short, a Re-Enlightenment of our global society is overdue. However, it would be a mistake to institutionalize this according to “politically correct” formulae as this would make it an élite ‘we know best’ activity. It is necessary to consider the complexities of history and culture with their normative values and power relations. In practice, dialogue is dependent on disposition and situation and is often difficult to initiate, let alone sustain.

Professor W. John Morgan is Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow, School of Social Sciences, and Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, and Data, Cardiff University, Wales, United Kingdom.

MorganJ74@cardiff.ac.uk