

Critical Universary: 2

Content of the learning situation at York

By YORK STUDENT MOVEMENT

We saw last week how the structure of the learning situation at York corrupts how we learn and relate to people. What we begin to find after a while is that we are also subtly absorbing certain ideas, attitudes and values that determine the kind of life we are experiencing.

The content of courses we are taught every day in the classroom is not "objective" knowledge as many profs. claim. It serves a very real function: to give us certain concepts about ourselves and our relationship to other people and society.

We are taught that the top-down, competitive, individualistic and split relationships that make us feel shitty at university are the only possible relationships people can experience.

So we learn that we really can't separate changing the learning situation from changing the content of what is taught — both reinforce each other. It's not just our bodies that are being fitted into the system. They want our heads too.

Let's have a closer look at what is taught.

Social Sciences

The social sciences at York have an unrelenting commitment to describing superficially the way things appear and devising techniques to make them function better.

Whether the subject matter is the family, the economy or international relations, you can be sure it will be the single family, the capitalist economy or the U.S. view of the cold war that will be the starting and the finishing point.

What is never asked is how things got the way they are, or how they must be changed into something new and different.

This commitment to the status quo is most obvious in economics, where all the courses deal with the "proper" functioning of a capitalist economy. While even businessmen criticize most academic economics for having little relation to the real capitalist world, the real failure of economics is its inability to grasp the dynamics of capitalist development and its human destructiveness.

There are two sides to the capitalist coin — wealth on one side, poverty on the other; development on one side, underdevelopment on the other — and they go hand in hand now as they always have. But you will find the false and destructive assumption (rarely even discussed) in social sciences and economics courses that affluence and development are the good side while poverty and underdevelopment are the accidental bad side of capitalism.

When you look through those glasses at the world, you think all that has to be done is to tear down slums or to give one per cent of our national income to the undeveloped countries.

Well, there are millions of people around the world — is it surprising that most of them are in the undeveloped countries or among the exploited in the capitalist societies? — who are acting on a different assumption: it is the capitalist system which is the problem, and the solution is the destruction of that system and the construction of a socialist society.

Political Science And History

"Well, if things were really that bad, then wouldn't the people responsible for it be forced to change by the government? Canada is a democracy, you know."

This is where political science and history come into the picture, to explain to us how a democratic country like Canada works, and how much better our system is working than any other possible system. Here our fundamental ideas about how we have a say in what goes on around us are formed, as well as our ideas of how political and social change occur. We have our say by voting once every five years, and by belonging to various pressure groups. Government oversees change in everyone's interest by adjudicating the roughly equal demands and desires of business, labour, professionals, etc.

Things are a little more sinister at the world level but still comprehensible. There are two roughly equal world powers with roughly equal power in themselves and with their allies. Both are competing for the allegiance of undeveloped countries, which the United States is attempting to keep "safe for democracy", the U.S.S.R. is trying to "take over".

Canada is on the good side, with the United States, therefore, we "co-operate" with the United States politically, economically, and militarily. We even have a "moderating" influence on the United States, which sometimes gets overzealous in defense of the free world or in defence of Canada's best interests.

Well, a lot of people in this country and around the world — 90,000 Canadian workers on strike this summer, Prairie farmers, 400,000 unemployed, students, blacks, Vietnamese peasants, to name a few — would have something to say about all that.

They might say government — federal, provincial and municipal — serves the needs of corporations, not of people. Private corporations pollute our waters and air, but government-sponsored anti-pollution measures will be paid for by the people, through higher prices or taxation.

Vietnam, Iran, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic are all undeveloped countries where U.S. economic domination, not "democracy", has been maintained by U.S. armed violence. Finally, Canada "co-operates" with the U.S. because it is an economic, political and cultural satellite of that country.

Sociology

Sociology looks at the human and institutional problems created by the capitalist system and tries to understand and solve them without reference to their cause. So sociologists tend to be obsessed by how people adjust to where they are: family, university, ghetto, job, etc.



One York sociologist was recently granted more than \$100,000 to study how immigrants adjust in Toronto, taking up such important questions as whether all immigrants live downtown. Neglected in sociology's view of social problems are such things as the exploitation of immigrants as cheap labour to build Toronto's expressways, prestige office buildings . . . and York University.

Another prof had a whole sociology course do a research project on . . . the adjustment of freshmen to York. The starting point was the various aspects of York — lecture — tutorial system, college system etc. — and how people fitted in; the finishing point was York, untouched by any suspicion that perhaps the structures of York are not adaptable to real human needs and desires.

One of the results of sociology's assumption that all we can study is people's behaviour and attitudes towards the system they live in is the perpetuation of the universal myth that problems — bad study habits, personal relationships, etc. — are just personal problems, to be solved by individual adjustment (counselling, etc.).

Humanities

If nothing else is genuinely concerned about problems, then surely humanities compensates?

At first, it seems so. We talk about freedom, alienation, love, the search for meaning — all the things which the social sciences seem to exclude by their methodology. The trouble we begin to sense after a while, is that freedom, alienation, love and meaning are not just ideas in books, but realities we want to live.

What is the source of my alienation, what can I do to be free and to love? By talking about "man" without talking about the very real context in which he finds himself, humanities serves the function of further obstructing our own struggle to love and be free.

Another obstacle to developing critical awareness is the artificial fragmentation of people's problems and of the functioning of the political-economic system into different "disciplines".

The science student doesn't know how his research is used, because he never studies the capitalist system; the economics student doesn't really know the destructive effects of capitalism because he never studies social and psychological problems. But the ability to be critical is the ability to make connections — between feeling shitty and its social sources, between social problems and their economic roots.

The present fragmentation of knowledge at York is organized against the possibility of making those connections.

Connections

Perhaps we'd better make some of our own connections now. We've seen how the way people learn and relate to each other at York is a direct preparation for the lives that our society forces us to live — lives that are competitive,

individualistic and always subject to grading by someone "above".

We've seen how the ideas taught in the classroom provide a justification for both the lives we lead and for the capitalist system that makes us lead them. If we don't find university or our future jobs creative and satisfying, we begin to feel and think it must somehow be our own fault, because this is a "free society".

Certainly nothing taught in the classroom would lead us to think or act to challenge and change the economic and social system we live in. And we've seen how there are millions of people around the world, and growing numbers in Canada, who are thinking and acting as if that's exactly what has to be done.

Well, if the university doesn't serve our interests to become free, creative and critical persons, if it doesn't serve the interests of the huge majority of people in Canada — working people, teachers, farmers, many professional people, who know something's fundamentally wrong with this country — then whose interests does it serve?

It serves that small minority of people who do benefit from the capitalist organization of Canada. That class includes such people as the owners and managers of the huge corporations that are polluting our water and air for private profit, and then asking us to pay to clean it up; the apartment developers who build luxury apartments for high profits while thousands of ordinary Canadians live in crowded, substandard, and overpriced housing; and people in government and industry who have sold our natural resources, for their profit and that of U.S. corporations, to supply the U.S. military-industrial complex.

No Accident

If we can make this connection about who the university does serve, then we can begin to sense that it's no accident that what happens to our bodies and heads at university is meant to prepare us to serve the interests of that same class. That's what we mean when we say the ideas, attitudes, skills, and values we learn at university are class ideas, attitudes, skills and values: they don't serve us or the vast majority of people in Canada, but they do serve the minority class which benefits from a capitalist Canada.

This is not some plot hatched upon us by an "evil" group of conspirators among the faculty, but rather the logic of capitalism, of which they are often the unwitting, though ferocious apologists.

This logic says we can't build houses unless it's profitable, we can't fight pollution unless corporations maintain profits, we can't be free unless we do what we're told to do. It's that logic or ideology we want to become critically aware of and work to change.

That's what a critical university might be about. Developing a liberating learning situation, course content that talks about people's problems and makes connections, is what a people's university might be about.