

The changing concepts: reconsidering education, learning and knowledge

Pavel Zgaga, University of Ljubljana
pavel.zgaga@guest.arnes.si

1. Introduction

It is an obvious fact that education has enormously changed its character in modern societies. If education used to be in past centuries predominantly an individual or a family concern it is today a concern of national governments as well as trans-national organisations. New words with a high frequency in everyday languages have been invented – ‘*knowledge based society*’, ‘*knowledge based economy*’ – to make this fact more transparent. However, this is not only a concern of a ‘high level’ political discourse. In a life of an individual, education has also become more important than ever. At the threshold to knowledge society, *education is not a privilege any more*; it is not considered any more a specific ‘dimension of freedom’ accessible to few only. It is declared *education for all*. As regards human rights, in particular the right to education, this declaration is crucial. In everyday life, it is recognised as a *social necessity*; with another word – as an *obligation*. It is difficult to believe that a motivation to take education in one or another way always again and learn is an intrinsic one for majority of people today. It is rather an obligation through the whole lifespan of individuals. – Has education lost its ‘genuine romantic’? Has it finally become ‘realistic’?

At this introductory point, a brief remark should be already made. An approach which likes to draw the course of a history as an on-going process toward a progressing ‘emptiness’ is, however, known for centuries but it doesn’t seem to help in reconsidering education today as it has never helped – according to my understanding – in redirecting the ‘wrong’ courses of human history. On the contrary, this approach has been always just a reverse side of the problematic, supposedly ‘empty’ present. Even those paragraphs further in this paper where certain critical observations on the present state of education and/or learning can be found have not been based on this approach. To my understanding, a productive *confrontation with the present* – a confrontation which each generation has to experience – can lie only beyond the dichotomy of ‘realism’ and ‘romanticism’. Today, however, this dichotomy is not characteristic only for policy development; it is characteristic also for academic research.

History of education and the concept of lifelong education

There is another newly invented word in everyday languages to clarify the substantially changed character of education of today – *lifelong education*. At a glance it seems that the concept opposes traditional understanding of education as ‘upbringing’: education has been predominantly understood as a process of ‘bringing up’ – a child, a youngster (a human in a desperately need of nurturance), but not an adult person (a citizen). The following Aristotle’s sentences from *The Politics* have remained the key to this way of understanding for centuries:

“There are two periods of life with reference to which education has to be divided, from seven to the age of puberty, and onwards to the age of one and twenty. The poets who divide ages by sevens are in the main right: but we should observe the divisions actually made by nature; for *the deficiencies of nature are what art and education seek to fill up.*” (Aristotle, 1994/2000, 1336a – 1337a; *italics P.Z.*)¹

The contemporary idea of lifelong education seems to be rather in a sharp opposition with the Aristotle’s claim. – ‘Education from cradle to grave’? Lifelong *education*? However, is it rather lifelong *learning*? On one hand, one or another word has been broadly used in contemporary policy discussions and in documents at national as well as trans-national levels; yet, the later term has been more frequently used in recent years. On the other hand, both terms have resulted in numerous polemics pro and cons. Therefore, the above remark has much to say about the ‘problematic word’ – as well as about its splitting into lifelong education *versus* lifelong learning – and about disputes which have accompanied it in recent times.

Beyond the difference between lifelong education and lifelong learning, the concept has become familiar on various levels and in various contexts. It can be said that it has been popularly accepted and that a common popular understanding has been also agreed in last decade or two. In European on-going discussions on these issues the following description – borrowed from a broadly disseminated and influential policy paper developed by the European Commission – can be easily used as a background of various contemporary popular discourses:

“The knowledge, skills and understanding we learn as children and as young people in the family, at school, during training and at college or university will not last a lifetime. Integrating learning more firmly into adult life is a very important part of putting lifelong learning into practice, but it is, nevertheless, just one part of the whole. Lifelong learning sees all learning as a seamless continuum ‘from cradle to grave.’ *High quality basic education for all, from a child’s youngest days forward, is the essential foundation.* Basic education followed by initial vocational education and training, should equip all young people with the new basic skills required in a knowledge-based economy. It should also ensure that they have ‘learnt to learn’ and that they have a positive attitude towards learning.” (European Commission, 2000, p. 7)

As this (kind of) ‘definition’ is today broadly acceptable and used, it can’t prevent from observing the issue more in depth. On the contrary: it is a result of long-lasting debates and a relative result of ‘*l’esprit du temps*’; therefore, it certainly provokes further discussion with new questions and also considerations about future – but also about history of education.

There is a lot of debate where are the origins of this frequently used but also disputed concept. Various authors have given enough evidence to be sure that it is connected to the education policy studies from already before the Second World War. References are given to British and North American traditions in *adult education*, e.g. to British Ministry of Reconstruction *1919 Report* after the First World War as well as to authors of those times, e.g. to Basil Yeaxlee or Eduard Lindeman. On the other side, a similar branch is growing from the French tradition of *l’éducation permanente*. Most probably, the list of ‘fathers of the concept’ could be easily

¹ This ‘filling up’ of the deficiencies of nature is not a purely family concern but it was clear to Aristotle that “since the whole city has one end”, it is manifest “that education should be one and the same for all, and that it should be public, and not private- not as at present, when every one looks after his own children separately, and gives them separate instruction of the sort which he thinks best; the training in things which are of common interest should be the same for all.” (Aristotle, 1994/2000, 1337a)

broadened and expanded to various languages and cultural traditions as well as beyond boundaries of the modernity.

Indeed, if we start searching the history of ideas, the concept loses its ‘modern’ character and the image as appearing in recent discussions and political documents. Let us take one example only. In his *Utopia*, when describing “their trades and manner of life”, Thomas More (1478-1535) wrote that its inhabitants – let’s make an important remark: “after only six hours of daily work” – *dedicate most of their free time to learning and education*; a large proportion of adults are educated alongside young people, both men and women. He added:

“It is ordinary to have public lectures every morning before daybreak, at which none are obliged to appear but those who are marked out for literature; yet a great many, both men and women, of all ranks, go to hear lectures of one sort or other, according to their inclinations”.

A bit later, when describing “the travelling of Utopians”, More put down very clear that

“their children and a great part of the nation, both men and women, are taught to spend those hours in which they are not obliged to work in reading; and this they do *through the whole progress of life*” (*italics P.Z.*).

Today, it is popular to say ‘*from cradle to grave*’ but expressions are very much the same. Yet, More’s vision is deeper and contains some important social aspects which haven’t lost their relevance until today, e.g.:

“They have all their learning in their own tongue, which is both a copious and pleasant language, and in which a man can fully express his mind.” (More, 2005)

Our intention in this paper, of course, is not to write a broad history of the concept of lifelong education and/or learning. The paragraph above was just to remind us of broad historical contexts and deep roots. When the idea of lifelong education and/or learning was put in the context of societies of the late 20th century, its relevance – as well as its semantics – was very much changed. An old idea with most probably quite a different background from today was ‘rejuvenated’; it became suddenly ‘popular’ and got its vital sap from new, quite different societal circumstances. The modern history of the concept should start most probably in the early 1970s, after a period which is symbolically marked as *May 1968* – a period which is now already 40 years behind us.

The turbulent events on university campuses all over the world in the late 1960s and early 1970s were an external indicator of profound changes that occurred in advanced industrial (or emerging post-industrial) societies. A gradual shift of policy interest from compulsory education – a standard which was already achieved in all industrialized countries until that time – to further, continuous, higher, etc. education was made in that time. Reconsideration of education and its multiple roles and relations within societies became a trend in research and policy analyses: several reports as well as policy recommendations – well echoed in public and with strong impact – occurred in that period. Some of these reports were developed by international organisations. One of them (see Faure, 1972), produced by a UNESCO commission on development of education set up in 1970 and chaired by Edgard Faure, the French Minister of Education in 1968-1969, made *lifelong education* one of the key concepts of the renewed UNESCO position on education. The Faure’s commission report *Learning to be* – with a challenging subtitle ‘The world of education today and tomorrow’ – stressed the right and the necessity of each individual to learn throughout one’s lifespan; greater flexibility of pathways was recommended and a concern over the quality of education was made stronger than the issue of formal development of educational systems.

On the other hand, the 1970s produced also an alternative concept. It originated in an international organisation as well – in this case it was OECD. Its today well-known Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) synthesized discussions of that time in a concept of *recurrent education* as a comprehensive educational strategy for post-compulsory education and which aimed at the distribution of education over the total lifespan of the individual. These two concepts – *lifelong education* vs. *recurrent education* – established a dichotomy which can be still detected also beneath disputes of today. As it was concisely summarized by Kjell Rubenson:

“For the OECD the problem of relevance is primarily reduced to a question of the inability to relate educational planning to labour market forecasting. For UNESCO, relevance becomes an issue of how to respond to process of modernisation. Equality becomes for the OECD a question of equality of opportunity and how to recruit non-traditional students, while UNESCO also considers the need for a broadening of democratic processes in society. Finally, in accordance to their member countries, the OECD is focused on rich industrialised countries while UNESCO has a global approach.” (K. Rubenson; in: Ehlers, 2006, p. 157)

It is not difficult to notice that during this period, the word *lifelong learning* had not been launched yet as a key word; these were *lifelong* and *recurrent education*. At the end of the 1970s, these discussions were slowly calmed down. As Rubenson also pointed out,

“neither recurrent education nor lifelong education was visible on the educational policy scene [at the end of the 1970s] and it would take a new crisis to bring the underlying idea of lifelong learning back onto the policy arena.” (Ibid, p. 160)

It was not necessary to wait for a long time. The 1980s are considered also today as a period of a global crisis – caused by oil crisis in the 1970s and followed by recession and restrictions on public expenditures – which reflected in the mirror of education and learning as well. In Europe, this was in particular obvious in higher education: since European higher education systems were traditionally publicly financed to a substantial level, most of them had experienced painful decreases in funding. Limited and decreasing public funds for (formal) education resulted very soon in ideas which promoted a necessary change of educational management and a control over educational institutions. Parallel to this, a strong focus to institutional effectiveness and their quality output occurred on all policy agendas. Another novelty of this period was, last but not least, the enlargement process of the European Union and, after 1990, a new era of European ‘opening’ and ‘coming together’. This novelty brought an important push towards European cooperation in policy development.

However, the process in the field of education was not easy. Even within EU – in a contrast to ‘other’ parts of Europe – education was jealously kept as the ‘national-state affaire’, that is, as a ‘pure’ responsibility of EU Member States (subsidiarity principle). Nevertheless, in the late 1980s and early 1990s² it became clear that national governments can’t respond effectively to complex and growing developmental challenges without addressing also educational policy issues in a common action (as it is today *Education and Training 2010* in the framework of the Lisbon Process). Probably most widely known result of this trend is the Bologna Process, launched at the end of the 1990s and developed within a context which is today much broader than EU-27: so far, 46 European countries have joined the Process.

² During this period, e.g. *Erasmus programme* of academic mobility was launched and the *Maastricht Treaty* was signed which contains two articles (126, 127) on education and training – an issue which was not a matter of ‘Europeanisation’ before.

In the late 20 century, education policy became a matter of *international policy discourse* and an 'infrastructure' was made ready to implement new concepts in national systems. On a global level UNESCO and OECD are those two actors which were already mentioned; yet an increasing role in this area has gone also to World Bank, in particular in regard to developing countries and the so-called 'countries in transition'. European Commission got a different but a crucial role in encouraging EU Member States to implement new educational policy ideas produced within international forums. Among main international players the Council of Europe should be also mentioned which has developed a specialised education policy agenda: it 'mediates' among countries of different European regions (e.g. the so-called 'old' and 'new' democracies) and is particularly active in the area of democratic values and human rights.

In comparison to discussions of the 1970s, a crucial conceptual shift occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was mainly about how to transform the concept of lifelong education and/or learning into an *operational* concept. The UNESCO humanistic approach, renewed and strengthened in the mid-1990s as the *Delors Report* (Delors, 1996), very well echoed but rather philosophical, seems to be much less influential in concrete policy developments than the OECD report *Lifelong learning for all* (OECD, 1996). At the first sight, we can see a terminological shift in this report: a shift from previous *recurrent education* to *lifelong learning*. This term became now a key word and it has only increased its frequency and impact in contemporary policy discussions until today.

The key issue was recognised as how to connect institutional output and needs of economy, that is, how to interlink educational performance (e.g. graduates with their specific knowledge and skills) with economic performance. Parallel to this, the focus shifted from *education* to *learning*: from a *system* of (national) educational institutions to an *individual* and his or her motivation to engage in active learning. Previous, long-lasting discussions on knowledge, education and/or learning (regardless the exact term which was used at individual phases) were definitively put in the context of the global knowledge economy. *Learning* was discovered as *most important lever of economic progress* in the period of the transition to 'knowledge society'. This has been a far-reaching conceptual shift which hasn't exhausted its potential yet.

Education and economy: an ambiguous equilibrium

It looks easy to mobilize decisive actors as well as broad public on bases of this new concept of lifelong learning. It is a concept which can be easily used in popular discourses and which efficiently addresses individuals living in advanced or growing economies. It is repeated again and again: economies of today depend more and more on concrete, instrumental knowledge and skills, on 'human capital', and less and less on 'rough human power'. Of course, this is why they are named 'knowledge-based' economies. However, the life in advanced societies is far from being untroubled, relaxed; individual positions in economy are always uncertain, employment patterns are unpredictable and, therefore, specific abilities which support flexible adaptation to permanent changes are of vital importance.

These abilities – their invention and constant reproduction – are based on a permanent learning, lifelong learning. A comprehensive system of lifelong learning is therefore vital as for an individual as well as for the economy and society as a whole. From a 'practical' point of view, the stress given to lifelong learning today is obviously well grounded one. It is argued, last but not least, by individual as well as common wealth and better future.

At today's level of development, education *is* a serious issue from economy point of view: what profiles are needed, what competences and qualifications; how many educated and/or

trained individuals; how to design programmes and qualifications to be more flexible and easy 'adaptable' to the 'changing needs of labour market', etc.? There are further questions which knock against employment, family life, broad social and health policy issues, etc. Education – as a social subsystem as well as a social value – has found itself surrounded with so many difficult questions which had not been heard before, at least not on this intensity, frequency and urgency.

This should not be a surprise: knowledge economy and knowledge society decisively depend on education! They need new knowledge and skills and even more: knowledge and skills which can effectively respond to an increasing dynamism in economy and society. In our times, it is very often argued that people are able to keep on with changes in economy and society most efficiently by *learning* – continuous learning, lifelong learning etc. Individual educational institutions are not able any more to compete with this challenge. The centre of gravity devolves to on an individual; educational institutions and their professionals seem to become mere tools to support him or her, a lifelong learner. They are not here any more *to mould individuals*. A feeling of new freedom? Not necessary; probably the moulding process only transferred to another point.

It seems that learning is returning – on a much higher level, like in a spiral – to its original and elementary form: *an individual ability to adapt to changing circumstances*. We said at the beginning that until industrial age education and learning used to be predominantly an individual or a family concern but it is today a concern of governments and even transnational organisations. In fact, it is education policy what concerns governments and transnational organisations. New policy guidelines make education again an individual and/or a family concern – at least they bring *more responsibility to an individual*; more money is expected from private (family) sources and less from public sector than before.

Of course, a concise concept of lifelong learning couldn't be – and shouldn't be – understood only as economically relevant concept neither it could be atomised into individual abilities only. Complex systems – e.g. the educational system – can grow up from the elementary form of learning; this is a part of what we usually call a *progress of civilisation*. There have been a lot of arguments in favour of understanding the essence of lifelong learning in a much broader way. Indeed, it seems totally impossible to overlook that strategies of learning 'from cradle to grave' can importantly broaden access to education (formal, non-formal as well as informal education, as we often can read in recent policy documents), they can create alternative, more flexible routes to acquiring knowledge and skills, they can help non-traditional learners, minorities and marginal groups and can contribute to reducing social exclusion, etc. A concise concept of lifelong learning comprises a *democratic, even emancipatory potential*.

Being increasingly aware of this point, policy documents often search for equilibrium and stress that there are "*two equally important aims for lifelong learning: promoting active citizenship and promoting employability*" (European Commission, 2000, p. 5). Nevertheless, in discursive practices of today lifelong learning visions usually oscillate between an emphasis on economic performance and concerns for democracy and humanism.

Why is it so? Quite often, remarks can be found in literature that the concept of lifelong learning and/or education is rather vague and ambiguous. It is not only a matter of interpretative dispute; probably, it is simply too much loaded in one word at the same time. The term should cover both dimensions: it should be philosophical as well as operational concept at the same time. As often in human life, 'pragmatic pressures' and '*Realpolitik*' cause that operationalism and reductionism finally prevail over philosophy which is 'postponed for better future'. However, this is not an argument to abandon reconsiderations

on knowledge, learning and education. On the contrary! This is exactly one of the central points which mark the essence of conceptual educational investigations of today.

Peter Jarvis, a distinguished academic and researcher of education, explains this ambiguity in a condensed and clear way. The explanation is based on his differentiation between two dimensions (definitions) of lifelong learning: existential and social.

“Lifelong learning is certainly an ambiguous concept: both a casual factor in change and a response to social change; a policy and a practice; something that can sustain and enrich the lives of many and yet undermine and contribute to the decline of other societies and the break up of families; both valuable and threatening and controlling; both societal and existential. [...] The ambiguity lies in the fact that in the first definition of learning we place value in the learning itself because it is existential and fundamental to our living but in the second definition we place value on some of the perceived outcomes of learning but we have not yet learned to place social value on learning itself.” (Jarvis, in: Ehlers, 2006, p. 227)

Yet, how successful lifelong learning strategies are if the concept itself is charged by genuine ambiguity? There are repeated complaints about lack of data; data collections in this area seem to be still rather scarce. Anyhow, this argument doesn't seem crucial. As always in research it should be asked first: what do we measure at all? A Eurydice survey from the very beginning of this decade did this in a very sincere way: when presenting *results* of a survey across 15 EU Member States one of subheadings was entitled “Lifelong learning: the matter of definition” (Eurydice, 2000). Even in empirical research the awareness of ambiguity is unavoidable; therefore, it should be everywhere taken into account seriously.

There are various surveys about ‘effectiveness of education’ or ‘learning achievements’ etc. on a global scale today. The OECD PISA study³ is one of most known and most important as for educational research as well as for educational policy development. There are also surveys of another kind as e.g. global ‘league tables’ of universities and higher education institutions.⁴ Again, there are several – as legitimate as well as ‘purely academic’ and, last but not least, phantasmal – criticisms on this trend, mostly about methodology and interpretation of results. As doubtful these surveys sometimes seem to be to somebody, it is obvious that they glide on a spirit of our times – and they have a good wind and no intention to land soon. However, any of these doubts – if they are adhered to advancement of knowledge – should not be and could not be a reason to stop such surveys. On one hand, continuing this way, methodology and interpretation can be improved, on the other, these discussions and disputes open important new horizons.

What we can often easily see from statistical tables related to various countries of the world (or very diverse educational institutions put on the same axis) it is relatively sharp distinction between ‘good achievers’ and ‘failures’. *What, in fact, these pictures present?* It is not difficult to see that they are produced on a reductionist base: certain dimension is taken as a perspective and than everything is measured through this one perspective only. If we observe how much learning achievements in different societal (and cultural) environments fit to labour market demands than we can only expect sharp distinctions as we know that these environments and markets are substantially different.

Nevertheless, these findings could be of important help for policy makers in particular countries or institutions – as in those which belong to ‘good achievers’ as well as in ‘failure ones’. On the other hand, an old epistemological truth should not be ignored and forgotten –

³ See http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en_32252351_32235731_1_1_1_1_1,00.html .

⁴ See e.g. Academic Ranking of World Universities, <http://www.arwu.org:80/rank2008/EN2008.htm> .

namely that any kind of reductionism can never aim at the ‘total picture’. Civilisations are much more complex systems and shouldn’t be reduced to one dimension only if we aim at addressing (some of) the key questions of a given civilisation. The ‘soft’ societal material – as e.g. culture in general, languages, religions, all kinds of traditions etc. – has an invaluable impact to ‘hard’ processes in society as e.g. economy is. If this relationship is broken – for whatever reason – than people usually find themselves in serious troubles. Learning – as well as education as its most organized and civilised form – is not only about skills to feet labour market needs.

There are several cases of such troubles in today’s world which need an enhanced set of specific knowledge and skills. These troubles should be addressed in a proper way in order to provide workable solutions. Let check some of them from a perspective of education and learning.

Older people find themselves in almost all advanced societies in various kinds of troubles; ‘learning for the third age’ is a known and well spread approach how to address these troubles and help people – without a naïve belief that their labour market skills will be totally renewed but with an aim to upgrade their quality of life. A very serious example is the deterioration of health in certain poor world regions or even among certain disadvantaged social groups in the most advanced societies of today. One of most striking cases is the impact of AIDS in Africa; organised actions have been established to fight it. This actions show that education and learning – mainly in non-traditional, non-formal ways, as lifelong learning – can be a very effective means for fight with the phenomenon. This is an area where UNESCO is very much engaged (‘HIV/AIDS and Education’).⁵ Another case of extreme consequences are violent ethnic conflicts and wars, as for example in South-east Europe in the previous decade; here, “education should be treated as the most important investment in the future” (Zgaga, 2005, p. 94). Many developed countries as well as all trans-national institutions mentioned above have engaged in reconstructing educational systems since the end of wars. This case is connected to a global issue of intercultural as well as inter-religious understanding as well as to a phenomenon of fundamentalist ideologies and attitudes which can be identified worldwide – West and East, North and South – and which can be and should be responded through *sapere aude* learning perspective and which can counterbalance various prejudices of today’s world.⁶

In this perspective, the concept of lifelong learning becomes broader and broader; learning outcomes appear not only instrumental but also essential and existential. Probably, a debate on differentiation between *knowledge* and *wisdom* (reminding the famous ancient concept of *phronesis*, 'practical wisdom' or 'prudence') could be meaningful from this point on. It could be also helpful in reconnecting the concepts of learning and education.

However, another brief remark on the *knowledge society* seems to be more needed at the end of this point. We use it here again and again. It is one of those ‘modern’ terms which originate in an understandable human endeavour to *name* (i.e. to make known, to own and to control) the direction of our immediate progress. Historically observed, it hasn’t been so rare that such attempts concluded in most paradoxical ways.⁷ As we can, of course, use this term in today’s discussions and as it can also serve us well in delineating with the previous societal period which we just left behind, we can, nevertheless, express some necessary reservation to it.

⁵ See <http://www.education.nairobi-unesco.org/>.

⁶ Palle Rasmussen defines fundamentalism in this sense as “a barrier to learning” (Rasmussen, in: Ehlers, 2006, p. 184). It could be feared that a barrier of this or a similar kind is rather evenly spread around the world today.

⁷ For example: Immanuel Kant's exclamation “*Sapere aude!* - Have courage to use your own understanding!” as “the motto of enlightenment” (Kant, 1974) related to ‘great ideologies’ of the 20th Century. – Not to forget our times!

Knowledge is a key concept of a human civilisation and comprises several dimensions while the (emerging) knowledge society seems to be quite one-dimensional. Does it suggest us to understand all previous societies (or perhaps other timely ‘parallel’ civilisations) as *not-knowledge-based societies*? Could we say that we are living in a transition from ‘ignorance-based’ societies to a ‘knowledge-based’ society, that we are living in a world split into ‘ignorance-based’ and ‘knowledge-based’ parts, etc? Indeed, these are purely rhetoric questions. The fact is, however, that knowledge has become in recent period increasingly instrumental. Knowledge as such, i.e. ‘knowledge for the sake of knowledge’ seems to loose legitimacy in the emerging knowledge society. There has been growing criticism in literature that today’s economy has usurped human knowledge to an unprecedented level. This criticism also addresses a question of education and future.

Education, learning, knowledge and future: ‘eutopia’ vs. ‘dystopia’

Popular discourses of modern times invest a lot in linking *knowledge* and *future*; they have been constantly heard in one or another mode since the Enlightenment.⁸ Knowledge raises hope for a ‘better future’; this is a known pattern. What seems to be quite a new page in these discourses is – from any of European points of view but possibly also from others – that the link between knowledge and future is mediated by – ‘*Europe*’ (whatever is understood by this name). Of course, this detail belongs to *European* discourses; it is not necessarily understood in the same way in other parts of the world. Centuries of conflicts and wars seem to have stopped with the idea of ‘new’ European ‘coming together’, progressing slowly but steady since 1945. Indeed, the 1990s brought wars and disasters to some ‘remote parts of Europe’ again but, at the same time, this period broadened and deepened the faith in ‘Europe’, in particular in the East and South-east Europe.

However, there has been a lot of discussion. For example, what kind of ‘coming together’ – association, integration, unification etc. – is necessary? Predominantly economic? Political? Cultural? All together? As regards education, we have already mentioned above that it remained on the margins of these processes for a long time but persistently within discussions of the emerging ‘Europe of Knowledge’. During the 1980s, many new steps were taken within the ‘small’ EU of that time, inspired and/or simply pressed by the spirit of the times. European co-operation in higher education was in particular growing fast: as in the ‘old’ Europe (e.g. Erasmus) as well as in the ‘new’, much broader one and even across its broadest ‘borders’ (e.g. Tempus which has spread also to Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa).

Thus, knowledge – and in particular higher education as its main generator – entered the centre of these discussions. At the end of the 1990s, on one hand we read “*that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well*” (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998) while, on the other, that there is a “*need to establish a more complete and far-reaching Europe, in particular building upon and strengthening its intellectual, cultural, social and scientific and technological dimensions*” (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Entering the new millennium, an important political message was spread all over Europe and worldwide that “*a new strategic goal*” is needed “*in order to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy*” and that “*an overall strategy*” aimed at “*preparing the transition to a knowledge-based economy and society*” is to be prepared (Council of the European Union, 2000). Education and training found themselves in the centre of striving “*for living and working in the knowledge society*”. During this decade, many concerns have involved the “*concrete future objectives of*

⁸ Here, I lean on argumentation from my recent book on ‘Higher Education in Transition’ (Zgaga, 2007).

education systems” as the European Commission declared in 2001. This trend has not only affected EU Member States and associated countries; directly or indirectly, it has been much broader.

Indeed, a focus on knowledge is clearly a focus on future. It raises, however, a number of difficult questions that popular discourse is often not very aware of. *What knowledge?* ‘European’ or ‘global’ knowledge? Knowledge as an economic instrument? Indirectly contributing to social cohesion as well? Knowledge as a cultural driver? As a critical potential? As a goal in itself; ‘disinterested’ knowledge? – And *what future?* A linear, i.e. a straightforward one – or an enigmatic future, dreams, *utopia*?

Sometimes, new words are born in our languages almost spontaneously which reflect chaotic and conflicting questions, answers and dilemmas of the present time. They could have a similar role in reconsidering the real world as dreams have in psychoanalysis. One of such new words is *eutopia*: a word with (at least) a double meaning – *Eutopia* or *eutopia*? It is not difficult to see that either Europe or European Union can be amalgamated with a famous word from the past – *utopia*. Yet, this is not simple word play. The issue is crying out for an etymological explanation.

Modern textbooks often explain the expression as ‘dreaming about a better society’; sometimes even stating that already Plato had ‘come up with an ideal society’. But the notion itself was created and brought to life only in the early 16th century – two thousand years later – by a writer we quoted from already: Thomas More. *Utopia* very quickly entered the dictionaries of living languages and the expression has to this day become established in varying shades of meaning: from those linking it to *justice* or its *realisation* to those distancing themselves from this due to its *unfeasibility* or even *naivety*. Among these meanings, we can find interesting, mostly indirect connections with the notion of *learning* and *education*. In a certain way, the fundamental idea of European Enlightenment of the 18th century was also a kind of *utopia*.

The term *utopia* is described in modern encyclopaedias as a modern era neologism from the heritage of classical Greek (*ou* + *tópos*). Usually it is translated as a ‘place which does not exist’. Even the first written *utopias* established a pattern which became a rule: representing an ideal fantasy country so as to place a critical mirror in front of the real life of society. The Enlightenment concept of progressing towards the better and the subsequent social movements drew strongly upon the same source: from the dichotomy of the fantastic and the real, whereby the fantastic usually ‘defeats’ reality; in *utopia* it becomes clear that the existing reality is not the ‘real’ reality. The German philosopher Ernst Bloch at the beginning and the end of his creative life, i.e. after the First and the Second World War created two most eminent philosophical monuments to the notion of *utopia*, whereby he linked it to human expectations, to optimistic hopes and to a desire for a *hitherto unrealised possibility*.

The modernist twentieth century dedicated a great deal of energy to the problem of the realisation of unrealised possibilities of humanity, contributing at the same time an original and huge problem that remains unresolved (we could say it has been pushed into the subconscious of the twenty-first century) – that realised *utopias*, some kind of *post-utopic realities* can, in fact, be even more horrible than the criticised ‘un-real’ reality. Although this in no way justifies the ‘un-real’ reality, it actually augments the old human problem of *unrealised possibilities*. We would probably achieve a great degree of consensus if we put forward the thesis that these possibilities should be realised by humankind in the direction of the *good*, the *better*. – However, what is the ‘good’, the ‘better’?

We are back with our etymological dichotomy: *eutopia* vs. *Eutopia* (written sometimes even as *EUtopia*). Irrespective of where, when and how the notion was coined and with what

purpose, it is possible to claim that such word play with the expression *utopia* is by no means unproductive. Namely, the ancient Greek ‘*eû*’ is translated to English as ‘correct’ or ‘good’, in contrast to ‘*dys*’ in the sense of a negative prefix ‘un’, or ‘without’ or even ‘evil’. We have borrowed from classical Greek both *euphoria* and *dysphoria*, *eustress* and *distress*, *euthanasia* and *dysbulia*. So, why not borrow *eutopia* and *dystopia*, too? – This is a rhetorical question and perhaps the answer is rhetorical, too: we cannot borrow them (at least not from the ancient Greeks) because they were not theirs. They are our problem, not theirs.

That knowledge – and the whole system of education and learning – is the ‘right thing’ and one of the key factors contributing to the appearance of a ‘good’ society (‘knowledge society’?) became especially clear during the Enlightenment. Both the affirmative stress on ‘good’ knowledge and the negative connotation of the lack of knowledge, of ignorance as an ‘evil’ can, to a great extent, be attributed to that period. Notwithstanding all the historical shifts, our era still knows this dichotomy well, uses it and encourages it. If we paraphrase Kant, the “period of Enlightenment” aimed at the construction of an “enlightened period” (Kant, 1974): the future goal of the methods of constant creation and in particular dissemination – we could even refer to it as the democratisation – of knowledge was a ‘better society’. The knowledge society – are *we* living in an enlightened period today?

There are quite a number of reasons stopping us from simply giving a positive answer to this question. The exponential growth and accumulation of knowledge has started to produce paradoxes that our reflection on this matter must react to, as well as ethical dilemmas and social problems, as was the case with the long known accumulation of political power, financial wealth etc. No serious discussion of modern issues can any longer avoid unpleasant themes connected with the exponential process of the widening of knowledge. On one hand, there is the uncovering of very basic questions about nature, which has long stopped being intended for that which the ancient cultures valued most, that is *theoretical knowledge*, ‘disinterested knowledge’, ‘knowledge for the sake of knowledge’, with which ‘wisdom’ is reached, but for direct, unstoppable technical use and abuse of knowledge about nature and people in the modern economy, on the margins of which and beyond there are – and keep persevering – wide expanses of elementary hunger. On the other hand, the widening of knowledge also shows in the deepening of ethical and social doubts about genetic engineering, climate change, the use of food for the production of a so-called ‘alternative’ fuel, about the building of walls between the world of wealth and the world of hunger etc.

Let us alongside these generally known and discussed issues add a small comment that will perhaps seem cynical to some, which is not connected with these great modern issues but with the routine of everyday life that slides past us, unnoticed in its immense importance: *general literacy*, this big idea of the Enlightenment period and the ambitious goal of nineteenth and twentieth century policies, now gives an equal opportunity to everybody to be able to follow, for example, *tabloid newspapers*.

Education, its purposes, goals and, of course, results and knowledge as such at the beginning of the new millennium need to be seriously weighed up. The demand for such reflection in no way wishes to idolise the ‘good old ways’ in contrast to the supposedly ‘empty’ contemporary time. We have stressed this point already in an introductory remark. Education is not just that which has been and brought us to the ‘realised utopia’. On behalf of the best cultural traditions of humankind and on behalf of influences of this or that sort all over the world, it is today necessary to pose a serious question about *knowledge being torn between eutopia and dystopia*. The life long learning concept which underpins the acquisition of knowledge today makes this question even more urgent.

Reaffirming the *eutopic* dimension of knowledge

One of the big civilisational problems *of the past* lay in the fact that one of the dimensions of knowledge – applicable knowledge, knowledge which can improve quality of everyday life – remained marginal. Knowledge was traditionally a privilege in a similar way that educated circles are considered to form a social elite. The basic ideas at the foundations of the development of civilisations found neither encouraging circumstances nor effective ways to 'eutopise' – i.e. to contribute towards 'the good' realisation of the possibilities dormant in theoretical ideas. On the other hand, one of the greatest civilisational problems *of our time* is the fact that knowledge is increasingly valued, created and usually also understood through only one of its dimensions: as *applicable knowledge*, knowledge which has improved quality of everyday life but has also produced a large number of new troubles. (It should be stressed that there is no 'applicable knowledge' to solve these troubles; first of all, they request critical reflection based on theoretical ideas.)

Knowledge seen in this way in present times is not a *privilege*; instead we could say it is a *social necessity* with which we have learnt to live and which we can master fairly well. The mastery of basic literacy has for a long time now no longer constituted a privileged class, elevated and separated from the wider classes, as was the case in the remote past. It is no longer primary school, but completed secondary school education that has become a general standard. The share of the population with a tertiary education among younger population segments is moving towards one-half in developed countries. One of the central characteristics of educational policy in modern democratic societies is the widening of the access to (higher) education and the improvement of the population's education structure. No doubts: the lifelong learning strategy can contribute a lot to this goal.

Today, there is a consensus that people need applicable knowledge; we can also hear that schools should not teach anything that is not applicable, not useful. If this conceals criticism of the long ago obsolete school methods or the hindered access to education and learning, such standpoints must be accepted. However, they become problematic the moment they are interpreted to say that there can be nothing in the school curriculum and nothing important for non-formal ways of learning which is not directly 'useable' and which does not make my most individual, private interest satisfied. This approach would affirm the *dystopic* dimension of knowledge.

The complex goals of education cannot be reduced to individual learning, to individual interests only or to instrumentality without endangering the very foundations of education. Education in its very nature is not just functional strength, but the power of the analytical (i.e. critical) recognition and transcending the reality. Further, it is not only about individual survival (where "everyone looks after his own children separately", as Aristotle said) but also vulnerable cultural and societal entity we are all depend on. At this point it is connected with utopianism, or with eutopianism – regardless the difference between Eutopianism and EUtopianism – as we described it above. From this point we should also enhance the process of creating a vision of lifelong education and/or learning for all within a eutopic perspective

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