Being human in the world

"Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world."  

We are witnessing the emergence of neo-liberal universities and a rationalisation of programs and departments of humanities and humanistic social sciences. Disciplines fostering humanistic knowledge are increasingly being disavowed under charges of elitism or arcaism even as economic expediency is driving universities to push for their consolidation and/or dissolution. In Japan, for instance, more than fifty universities attempted to downsize their humanities programs following an official dictum in 2013 to focus on disciplines that “better meet society’s needs”. In a statement made to the NY Times in 2013, Homi K. Bhabha, director of the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University, announced that “The humanities are facing serious challenges in both developed and developing countries. In India for example the humanities are more or less dead, and professional schools and the study of business and technology are in the ascendant.”

Aarti Kawlra and Françoise Vergès

AMONG ACADEMIA, however, the concern is not merely about shrinking job-opportunities or redundancy, but about the rescue of the humanities from itself, namely from traditionally disciplinary emphases on canonical texts and territorially defined area studies. A growing body of scholars, interested in rethinking Asian studies from a de-bordered or de-nationalised perspective, has called for expanding the vocabularies and epistemic breadth of the humanities to take cognisance of the commonalities and connections that cut rather than divide humans. This would mean investigating human vulnerabilities and versatility as part of wider mechanisms of comparison within a global context. Such an expanded humanities has the potential to contribute to contemporary social life by building, supporting and validating humanistic acts (and communities) of interpretation, performance and sustenance regardless of the weight of their antecedence or provenance.

In this reflective essay, we attempt to go past bounded disciplinary, institutional and national prescriptions in the exploration of humanistic learning methodologies that are otherwise overlooked, or sometimes deliberately silenced, within conventional curricula and pedagogic practices. Even though we come from vastly different backgrounds, we share a deep awareness for embodied practices as sites of knowledge and cultural transmission. We are both interested in the politics of circulation – in the mobilities of people around objects, techniques and recipes – and in tracing routes that surpass the frame of national and international relations. Indeed, a search for alternative spaces and methodologies of teaching and learning has been the substratum of our individual perspectives.

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Working together in the platforms promoting South-South exchanges offered by the IAS-Mellon program “Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context” (2013-2015) has yielded a mutual attentiveness to the pedagogical value of alternative sites of knowledge. At the IAS Summer School titled “Reading Craft: Itineraries of Culture, Knowledge and Power in the Global Ecumene”; held in August 2014 in Chiang Mai, for instance, we articulated the need for an alternate cartography that re-centred craft-worlds in the exploration of subaltern micro-histories and ethnographies. The IAS international conference “Asia/Africa: A New Axis of Knowledge”; held in September 2015 at the University of Accra, further validated our shared interest in exhuming erased links and contributions of anonymous slaves, artisans and refugees in finding new connections and comparisons between Asia and Africa and other parts of the world. Pursuing trajectories of cloth, our shared passion, has been especially rewarding as an immediate point of identity and difference. Indigo dyed and printed textiles, for example, have animated many of our meetings and united scholars and practitioners from vastly divergent disciplines and geographies. Our aim is to interrogate the widening gap between everyday (common sense knowledge practices and discursive/textual knowledge about being human in the world and to share some thoughts on what we are calling ‘humanistic pedagogies’.

Second wave of decolonisation? Movements for restitutive justice across the Global South have highlighted the importance of recovering varied cosmologies and cultures of humanity that reunite people, lands, pasts, that had been torn asunder or ruptured by colonial rule. We know that for interlocutors of imperialism, such as Gandhi, Tagore, Césaire, Cabral, and DuBois, the anti-colonial struggle had already ceased to be defined by the nationalist project and was recast as a humanist struggle for political justice, cultural (non-acadical) dignity. Even though many of their projects either failed or remain unfinished, it is their search for a liberative education – one that is free from ‘walled segregation in the particular or … [from] a dilution in the universal’ – as Césaire wrote in 1956 – which interests us.

We suggest that a second wave of decolonisation is afoot and must be predicated upon the ‘decolonial’ as method instead of limiting ourselves to ‘Asia as method’ and viewing civilisationism and the discourse of Asian (or African) unity as a “shared resentment vis-a-vis the West,” we propose “decolonial ways of thinking and doing” through the exploration of humanistic pedagogies.

The recovery of humanist pedagogies is grounded in a long history of disenchantment that can be found in Asian and African thought and among indigenous peoples who conceive the world as interconnected as well as within European craft and peasant cultures and writers and thinkers (Tolstoy for instance). In the world of the ‘Black Atlantic’, created by the transatlantic slave trade, it emerged as the political-philosophical issue in the anti-slavery struggle of the 18th and 19th century. What does it mean to be human when a cultural, social and economic system has declared that humanity was divided into human and non-human beings, between lives that mattered and lives that did not matter? It is ironic that slave trade reached its apex during the 18th century when thinkers of the Enlightenment promoted the idea that “all men are created equal.” It is worth recalling that this was also the century featuring revolts of slaves, among them the 1791 insurrection in the French colony of Saint-Domingue that led to the creation of the Republic of Haiti. It also inspired the rallying cry of the European anti-slavery struggle, “Am I not a man and your brother?” Later, in the period of post-colonial colonisation and imperialism, struggles of resistance stirred poetry, songs, oral literature, manifestos, and educational projects in the South. The idea re-emerged in the 1920s with the anti-colonial movements for civil rights worldwide. In the 1940s, the belief that colonised peoples or ‘coloured peoples’ should unite and create strong truth histories, came to be associated to the organisation of congresses and the publication of manifestos and journals. All underlined the necessity of being emancipated from the ‘pedagogy of silence’, the participation and recuperation of Eurocentric representations of non-Europeans, whether inspired by Orientalist7 or by other discourses that instituted a global hierarchy of peoples according to the degree of scientific and civilisation.

Pedagogical projects became strongly associated not only with emancipation from elitist European domination but also with the rehabilitation of vernacular knowledge, practices and voices of the forgotten and the marginalised, together with a rediscovery of art and culture, and their creolised and hybrid forms. This ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’, to borrow Paulo Freire’s expression, was particularly strong in Asia and inspired the first wave of decolonisation. The newly founded nation-states devised pedagogical programmes to promote a national consciousness and sense of cultural identity as a means of self-representation and assertion. The idea culminated in the first African-Asian conference held in Bandung in 1955. Though, according to historians, the final resolution remained tepid, reflecting the difficulty of reaching a transnational common goal, most recent analyses have sought to recover the historical dimension of the event. In revisiting Bandung and its ‘spirit’ here, we are not embracing its intended and unintended outcomes but re-appropriating a history and a genealogy of critical, conscious and collective thinking of the West and the rest of the world for its value in reinvigorating the teaching and learning of the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

More than sixty years ago, anthropologist Lévi-Strauss and the historian Fernand Braudel, writing in 1958, proposed the idea of a methodological unity of the exact sciences with the humanities: “technological civilization is not a separate civilization, it requires the invention of which the world can be an object of improvement: the humanization of social life is not the task of one profession.”9 We believe, as he did, that any thinking (or judgement) about human beings is an act of humanity, it humanizes it, as the emergence of a criticism is already a change.11 We are therefore proposing an educational agenda that is neither theory-centred nor centred on a particular concern – the West, industrialised world, global region, or even the global. Rather, we would like to see theory emerge from inquiries into forms of knowledge-practice that inhabit the interstices and are found in vernacular, tacit, embodied and sensorial. In other words, we are seeking decolonial readings of being-in-the-world. These conditions include the use of histories, economics, politics, education, art, architecture, craft, design, magic, science and religion; in the past and in the present; in Asia and Africa in the world; de-spacialised, quotidian and individual; those of selves capable of engaging the highest goals and truths; ways of being in the world by ‘not alienating ourselves from it and living it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves.”10

Above: A group of students at the IAS Summer School in Chiangmai (2014).
Towards alternative pedagogies

We wish to explore the different arenas where knowledge about being human is creatively and collectively released, while being attentive to communities that have demarcated these spaces of cultural expression and transmission. Masking the conditions of production, distancing producers from their consumers and accumulating capital, the human and extra-human nature has been a requirement of capitalist economy in the era of the Capitalocene or ‘age of capital’, creating the desire to overpower the subject. An industrial-minded civilisation has widened the epistemic divide between the human, social and natural sciences by stripping knowledge of its alienating and productive alternative values and beliefs of human existence in the world. According to Amitav Ghosh, a collective ‘crisis of culture’ underlies climate change on earth, invading even the public and human understanding and expression of bourgeois stability. Our aim is to make visible these contradictions and call for the inculation of a spirit of ‘solidarity without borders’ within curricula that are oriented towards the integration of humanistic imaginations, vocabularies, performances and practices in contemporary pedagogical practice.

Spaces of humanistic knowledge

The proximity of humanistic knowledge production in our minds is an opportunity to bring to the dialogue and socially interrogate the real knowledge of being human. The cultural interferences of artists, writers, poets, artisans, migrants and refugees are relevant for example, just as we have taken up knowledge in the humanities, but remain in simple juxtaposition as ‘disjunctures’ or absorbed as commodities in the global economy. Humanistic knowledge inhabits the tensions around grand narratives of development and decline. It resides in the interstices of spatialised polarities constructed by the global, the national, the regional and the urban. It is an alternative method of carrying the lost human knowledge that creatively and critically interpret historical and contemporary contingencies across borders. Re-instating the humanistic pedagogical project is to bring back the methods of the artist, the writer, the linguist, the field anthropologist, historian and the scientist, to work together in defence of their engagements with the world.

A further turn towards humanistic forms of knowledge can produce original work if it rests on a new pedagogy, on new ways of reproducing knowledge and thinking about it, support that rather than dis-allocate or appropriate alternative ways of being and doing. They are alternative because they defend an ecologically and pedagogically grown, yet eco-psycho pedagogy of imagining (and cooperating) the self in relationship, both to human and non-human nature. At the IAS Summer School on alternative readings of craft practices, for instance, our encounter to backstrap loom weaving in a village north of Chiang Mai was especially instructive in using craft as a pedagogical tool and lens for humanistic knowledge. It drew our attention to weaving as an embodied knowledge practice; the significance of the senses in grasping tacit knowledge outside the classroom; and the artisanal household as a site for the inscription of micro-human knowledge and knowledge transmission where gender asymmetries in productive arrangements occur within a milieu of ‘cooperative conflicts’.

Humanistic pedagogy challenges and questions the ‘culture of speed’ in the academy to promote ‘sentience (sensing/thinking) pedagogy’ in educational practice. It is a methodological tool that recognises the value of an extended grounding in critical thinking and doing in order that learning “encompasses wholeness...helps students transcend limiting views about themselves.” Humanistic knowledge encourages active reflection, of stepping back and thinking about one’s own thinking, to halt the pursuit of a solution, and ponder interventions upon the multiple paths to comprehension, and estimating whether the framing of the problem itself is limited or skewed. Most importantly, humanistic pedagogies do not disturb the human and the folk, the formal and the performative, and the abstract and the physical, the political/economic and the commonsensical for critical insights and practices of working with ‘tools of conviviality’ – the methodologies that relate insights. We propose a pedagogic practice working with the political/economic and the commonsensical for critical active reflection, of stepping back and thinking about one’s arrangements occur within a milieu of ‘cooperative conflicts’. A true pedagogy for the people, between ‘high’ and ‘low’ education, and between technical and humanistic education. Ecological humanistic pedagogy challenges all forms of dehumanised work in favour of shared life-affirming practices of work, it refutes the marginalisation of the humanists; it is attentive to the ways power circulates; it recognises experience and talent; it acknowledges the relation between matter and apprentice through its recognition; it resists the economy of speed for efficiency and rehabilitates the fact that time is needed to nourish knowledge. It advocates a pedagogically grown, yet eco-psycho pedagogy, a pedagogy that is built on the virtues of comparison and the recovery of creative knowledge to be found, not only through “caught” or “stolen with the eyes”, that continues to be the display of coffee as a product of imperialism, but also of one’s own history; viewing of biographical photos and a film on contemporary urban isolation; browsing through a participant’s personal antecolitical, feminist library. The pedagogic exercise or ‘show’ where the tangible and the tacit were interwoven was undone on the same evening.

Any epistemic rethinking in a global context is therefore not only about discovering forgotten chapters of history or adding marginalised narratives to the master narrative, but also about recovering hidden histories and practices of cooperation. Our references to cooperative alliances are to be found in alternative workshops, in practices of sustenance, and spaces of collaborative work, all the while seeking to eschew the view that individual interest and accumulation, together with its intractable configuration of conflict, is inherently human. Arguably, notions of cooperation and learning are developed in the human space work configuration both of the artisinal workshop and the rational factory. But it is the mutuality of relations between the master and the apprentice in the context of the craft workshop, where knowledge is ‘caught’ or ‘stolen with the eyes’ that continues to be the basis for the survival of craft in the South and deployed as a panacea for development and post-conflict/post-disaster rehabilitation at a global scale.

We are interested in challenging the division between pedagogy for higher education and pedagogy for the people, between ‘high’ and ‘low’ education, and between technical and humanistic education. Ecological humanistic pedagogy challenges all forms of dehumanised work in favour of shared life-affirming practices of work, it refutes the marginalisation of the humanists; it is attentive to the ways power circulates; it recognises experience and talent; it acknowledges the relation between matter and apprentice through its recognition; it resists the economy of speed for efficiency and rehabilitates the fact that time is needed to nourish knowledge. It advocates a pedagogically grown, yet eco-psycho pedagogy, a pedagogy that is built on the virtues of comparison and the recovery of creative knowledge to be found, not only through a dialogue across disciplines, but also from outside the academy, in conversation and collaboration with civil society practitioners, activists and other social agents and actors. We consider work and livelihood, visual and performative practice, language and translation, food and health, and memory practices as sites of humanistic knowledge. These sites gesture to the convivial alliances forged in non-prescriptive environments of practices, it refutes the marginalisation of the humanists; it is attentive to the ways power circulates; it recognises experience and talent; it acknowledges the relation between matter and apprentice through its recognition; it resists the economy of speed for efficiency and rehabilitates the fact that time is needed to nourish knowledge. It advocates a pedagogically grown, yet eco-psycho pedagogy, a pedagogy that is built on the virtues of comparison and the recovery of creative knowledge to be found, not only through a dialogue across disciplines, but also from outside the academy, in conversation and collaboration with civil society practitioners, activists and other social agents and actors.

References

3 The project (www.rethinking.asia) contributed to the breaking down of artificial boundaries of region, nation and discipline in re-contexting theory and method in Asian studies along five discrete forums and to make visible otherwise marginalised or hidden actors, genealogies, networks and circulations in the web.
4 http://asia.mastersclass.reading-crafts/itineraries-culture-knowledge-and-power-glocal-ecumen
12 ibid., p.25.