

Review of: "Intellectualism without Humanism is more Dangerous than Illiteracy"

Palle Rasmussen¹

¹ Aalborg University

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The main claim of the paper is stated by the title but also repeated several times in the paper, in statements such as:

- “Scholars today are unfortunately more logical and critical than human” (p 9).
- “Being educated is being educated for human beings fundamentally though human welfarism; it is not being educated for ideas, logical principles (...) and then being wicked and inhuman under the cloak of being an educated or a scholar with principle and discipline” (p 8).

The paper operates with a holistic concept of knowledge that does not recognize the differentiated types and uses of knowledge in the modern world. Much of the scientific knowledge that the paper characterizes as intellectual is in fact also practical; it is used for a multitude of practical purposes such as industrial production, social work, communication, environmental regulation etc. Here scholarly logic and criticality is not something distinct from practical knowledge and involvement.

The authors claim that the humanistic or ethical dimension should be present in all types of knowledge. For instance put like this: “A scholarly professionally is one with the intellectual capacity to not only cure intellectual sickness- ignorance, but also direct people to the right way to the good” (p 6). This is a position held by many, and it can be argued for. However, it should be recognized that the scientific division of labour and the differentiated character and use of knowledge makes it difficult to say how scholars can live up to this in many situations. In discussing the expectations from scholarship and scholars, the authors tend to present normative statements without considering the forms and conditions of scholarship.

The argument that scholarly scientific knowledge should not be separated from what the authors call the “natural state perspective” is in fact in line with many Western scholars. Examples are John Dewey who emphasized the importance of experience in education, and Oskar Negt who has analysed experience as a key component in education as well as in dimensions of societal change. A further example is Jürgen Habermas, for whom the life-world and the communicative rationality anchored in it are fundamental resources of human societies. In the work of these scholars, logical and critical argument often interacts constructively with experience-based knowledge.

The authors tend to assume that scientific scholarship is the main cause of colonialism and neo-colonialist principles. For instance, they write:

- “...scholarship or show of intellectualism among African families is the real cause of the evil bedevilling many African communities today” (p 4).
- “For Ozemena, intellectualism (...) is the fundamental cause of social inequality, discrimination, economic subjugation and suppression of some groups by another ...” (p 5).

I find it plausible that that intellectualism has had a role in these historical developments, but surely social inequality, discrimination etc. is the product of a combination of factors, also including economic dependency, nationalism, inter-group rivalry, political authoritarianism and militarism.

The paper presents many general statements but few more specific arguments or examples. However, two examples are given on p 10. One is official protocol for a scholar’s office stipulating that other persons must not rest in the scholar’s chair, even if they are dying. This sound extreme, and it would be good to know if this is a real-life example, and if so, to specify where. The other example is a law court where the judge asks a witness how he is doing and then ignores the witness’ question how the judge is doing. This does show the different positions of judge and witness and the power differential between them in the court setting; but I find it hard to see it as a result of the judge being learned, logical and critical.

A further example from a court setting is given in the conclusion, in a quote from Udo Etuk. A person is to be fined for cutting another person's palm fruits. However, because of ‘the status of the person’ he/she does not have to pay the fine. The status is that the person is “a grandchild of this community”. The authors interpret this as an expression of humanism and feeling; but the example leaves open the question of general principles of justice. What if the status of the person is that he/she is a member of the local power elite?

In the example concerning the judge and the witness, the authors write that the witness answers the judge “in the spirit of Africanism”. Throughout the paper, the limits of logicity and criticality are briefly contrasted with African approaches or perspectives. I do not know enough about African history, traditions and cultures to comment substantially on this this, but it seems to me that the paper presents a very idealized picture of “Africanism”.