

Teaching literature, teaching change - How dystopias can initiate and support value-based education

Although scientists have been demanding to rethink our consumer behavior and although politics and society in industrialized countries know about the issues connected to climate change, progress has been at best moderate.

Are Immanuel Kant's suggested factors "laziness and cowardice"¹ today still the reasons why hardly anybody dares to peek out of the established system of capitalism, even though the first report for the *Club of Rome* has been published 40 years ago? This means, in other words, that our pursuit of convenience, which is directly related to our excessive consumptive lifestyle, stands in our way to aspire for not more but something better. It also means that the majority of seemingly enlightened people are lacking the courage or will to defy the madness of the current system.

This is where the author of the paper sees potential for change. One key to success lies in value oriented education and this paper will illustrate how literature (exemplarily Suzanne Collins' "The Hunger Games") is particularly suited for the construction of "enlightened" values. Teaching literature offers a great advantage as values cannot only be negotiated in an argumentative way but value discourse can and may also be initiated through emotions.²

A substantial reason why our materially saturated society leads such a dull existence is their missing farsightedness. "Thinking in short terms lies in the nature of human beings"³, states Jorgen Randers, publisher of the latest report for the *Club of Rome*. Most people primarily deal with issues

1 Immanuel Kant "What is Enlightenment" (1784); accessible on <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html#note1>

2 Something similar has been postulated by the late French diplomat Stéphane Hessel in his famous tract "Time for Outrage!" (2010)

which are foreseeable in terms of time and space. This, however, does not mean that they aren't aware of negative future scenarios. Their individual focus just does not concentrate directly on them because they, and I mean particularly economically saturated societies in the so-called first world, are not immediately affected by any consequences. Also, as beneficiaries of the system, these societies simply have had no urgent reason for a drastic change. "Thus it is very difficult for the individual to work himself out of the nonage which has become almost second nature to him."⁴

Kant continues that „laziness and cowardice“ must be stimulating new ways of thinking and in my interpretation of the text it is the responsibility of our schools to inspire young people to start thinking in new categories. Schools were to some extent given the assignment (particularly by all unborn generations) to encourage today's students to dare a mental break-out of this system and to pull them out of their consumption-caused lethargy and nonage.

"It is more nearly possible, however, for the public to enlighten itself; indeed, if it is only given freedom, enlightenment is almost inevitable. There will always be a few independent thinkers, even among the self-appointed guardians of the multitude. Once such men have thrown off the yoke of nonage, they will spread about them the spirit of a reasonable appreciation of man's value and of his duty to think for himself. It is especially to be noted that the public which was earlier brought under the yoke by these men afterwards forces these very guardians to remain in submission, if it is so incited by some of its guardians who are themselves incapable of any enlightenment. That shows how pernicious it is to implant prejudices: they will eventually revenge themselves upon their authors or their authors' descendants. Therefore, a public can achieve enlightenment only slowly. A revolution may bring about the end of a personal despotism or of avaricious tyrannical oppression, but never a true reform of modes of thought. New

³ The quote has been translated from the documentary "Last warning" on ARTE; accessible on <http://future.arte.tv/de/die-grenzen-des-wachstums>

prejudices will serve, in place of the old, as guide lines for the unthinking multitude.”⁵

For people working in the field of education this means that a renunciation of consumption and growth will not happen over night. It also means that a moderate and slow change is not unlikely at all, as long as there are enough idealistic pioneers who spark and accompany this process. Schools have to be part of this process, have to provide such people as teachers and actively support them. Furthermore, this means that some sort of “neo-enlightened” teaching must form with teachers who carry corresponding values in them. All this would be necessary to enforce rethinking in society as a whole.

As intoxicating these thoughts may sound, they are programmatic and normative at the same time and this is the crux of the value-oriented teaching. Many experts agree to discuss values at school but they must not become norms which are being forced on students, otherwise values like “dignity of man” or “justice” will wither to meaningless words and will not ripen to ideals worth fighting for.

In my opinion, a genuine process of rethinking needs two components as guidelines in education: a cognitive-argumentative and an emotionally affected line. The conventional perspective on teaching has usually been focused on cognitive learning processes, which are indeed essential to recognize and understand the connections between the worlds and realities from yesterday till the day after tomorrow. Among those cognitive approaches is also one by Armin Reller who is holding the Chair of Resource Strategy at the University of Augsburg. His aim is to raise awareness concerning our consumption with the help of recent scientific data, for example about the used materials for one cell phone.

These considerations are commendable but do not suffice from a pedagogic point of view because one has to appeal to a student’s emotional side to enable an enduring change in thinking. The social

⁵ Kant (1784)

philosopher Hans Joas explains the fact why emotions are so crucial for the construction of values with their attractive nature. According to him a value is something that internally touches us, that evokes indignation inside us and that makes us catch fire for an issue.

This is where teaching literature comes into play as it offers the opportunity to move students emotionally in literary reading experiences. I particularly plead for the use of dystopias, whose merits shall be presented using the example of Suzanne Collins' "The Hunger Games".

In a post-apocalyptic society which is spread over the North-American continent (Panem) the reader finds a separation into twelve districts which are controlled by the *Capitol* and forced to sacrifice two contestants between twelve and 17 for the annual Hunger Games, in which the children have to kill each other. Right from the beginning the reader becomes accustomed to the dark atmosphere in the oppressed parts of *Panem*, which are suffering from poverty, extreme lack of necessities, complete surveillance through military forces, exploitation of resources etc. In contrast to that appears the perverted life-style of the "higher castes" in the *Capitol* which is described as a community attributed with extreme luxury, exploitation (every district has to provide certain resources for the *Capitol*), the latest technical developments, prevalent surveillance, capitalism, hedonism, fashion trends etc. Consequences of their life-style are competition-based structures, consumption, destruction of the environment, disorientation and dubious values within a prosperous society.

Without mentioning the rest of the plot, the multitude of analogies to the real world can be detected easily, also by younger students. The story is being told by 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen from District 12, one of the poorest districts in *Panem*. This results in a strong emotional effect on the reader and the differences between the presented societies appear even more radical. It is no surprise that this state of things evokes consternation, indignation or even rage in the reader.

Regarding the material difference between societies, this dystopian novel offers the chance to reflect prevalent values in *Panem* (ideally on the basis of an emotional consternation originating in the reader) and to find parallels to the real world. It may, however, not stop there, the novel can rather serve as an impulse to the following questions, which of course have to be answered argumentatively:

- How are values like justice, intergenerational equity, dignity of man, frugality, sustainability and prosperity being negotiated? Can these values still be found in our world or have they lost their meaning?
- Which concrete analogies can be found (neo-colonialism, exploitation of threshold and developing countries, outgrowths of uncontrollable growth, extreme material consumption etc.)?
- Is the novel dystopian at all or does it rather have to be regarded as a parable to our present world?
- Are there ways to avert such a future?