

We, older people, are not just a herd of sheep

A Ljubljana Questionnaire: IRENA ŠTIRN: *Lamenting won't stop the caravan from moving on....*

Ljubljana: There is not enough space for open and socially critical thought. This is one of the reasons why the movement “We are the University” have occupied the premises of the Faculty of Philosophy. Our colleague Irena Štirn from the Third Age University has not joined them, which, however, does not mean she does not agree with them.

In what circumstances would you occupy your lecture hall?

I see the possibility to study as an advantage, and don't really demand any additional rights.

In what circumstances would you join the young on Aškerčeva?

As far as I understand the educational system, I believe they have quite a few motifs for action. I myself am most concerned about the degradation of education. I would think the Bologna system has many flaws, many of its ideas have not been thoroughly considered or expressed.

Have our younger colleagues made you think?

Certainly. Any social agitation does. I'm thinking, for instance, about their view that there is not enough space for critical thought. I may be naive to believe that we can express what we would like to convey; the question, however, is whether we are heard. Sometimes it seems as if we were crying things out to ourselves in a desert. We can lament and give vent to our inner preoccupations, but the caravan will move on. The young at the Faculty of Philosophy want to stop it.

What about the older people?

In general, one does not act if one does not need to. The necessity is the incentive. We look for food when we are hungry; it is less likely we'll do it if we are not. Speaking about action, I imagine a group of fighters and one of lackeys; they may both get a beating, but there is an essential difference: a lackey does not contribute anything, the fighter, on the other hand, knows how to stand up and persist with dignity... , well, there are not enough of these. There is a legend about a saintly man who walked around soliciting alms for the poor. On entering a pub he begged for help and somebody spat in his face. The man wiped the spit from his face and said: this was for me, and now your contribution for the poor, please.

Are the civil initiatives in Ljubljana run by the right people?

I am rather critical about our civil initiatives. Here I suspect a kind of dictatorship of democracy. Take, for instance, the windmill electricity issue. Since such groups are too powerful, we are the only nation in Europe without windmill energy. I understand it in a way, the society is restless - as has been man since conception. It is actually good that restlessness has been made possible.

When you were a student, it was not?

There was no time to think about it. To pursue my studies while working and having a family, required an enormous effort. On the other hand, I must admit I don't see much difference between the students' life of my children and that of my generation...

Do you notice a difference in the relationship between the generations?

Of course. Parents used to be the authority. What they said was sacred, even if deep inside you may have objected. Today children can say anything. For me at least, they are a critical mirror. I think it over, reconsider it and then try to change - myself, not my children. Neither of us is a deity, standing above the other, we are equal.

You have no problem discarding the myth about the big generation gap?

The elderly should get rid of it and stop pressurizing the young with their loneliness and unjustified helplessness. It's the society's pathology that the elderly have stopped being rolling stones, letting moss overgrow them.

Has the intellectual future changed for older people?

The Third Age University has made a revolutionary move. Being active makes us full members of the society, which we couldn't be if we got stuck at home. There is no feebleness among the people attending the Third Age University.

What motivates you - good marks, curiosity, becoming competitive on the labour market?

Six years ago, when I received the highest level of education, my motivation was bringing fresh knowledge into the institution in which I worked. It was an investment. Now I am redundant, I hope, only temporarily. What is driving me forward? There is a Russian saying: to reach a sweet apple, one has to climb high, sour apples only hang on the low branches. I need to reach higher. Knowledge is the device that will push you up to reach those sweet apples.

What in particular have you learnt now that you are a student again?

We, older people, can become more visible and stop being just a herd of sheep that, with a word, can be moved to where they wish us to be. This can easily happen unless you

have firm stands. I am observing my peers - they have somehow fallen asleep intellectually. It's a shame.

And it's harmful for the society as a whole?

Of course. That's why when registering with the »university for the young in heart« - it made me actually happy to see that there were hardly any vacancies in the study programme groups. The need for education is really great. It can certainly have a positive effect on the State Budget, since it alleviates the burden of the care for the elderly.

Are you also an eager participant in the students' entertainment programmes?

As a freshman I haven't been to any parties yet. But there are plenty of possibilities for entertainment in town now, sometimes there just isn't room enough for everybody. I guess my colleagues at the University and myself will not miss out on all the joys of the merry December. It's true, however, that I don't tend to go to parties relying on champagne-induced merriment.

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