

Training Students in Responsibility and Social Commitment: Fragments of a Concept for an “Oriental University”

by
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Introduction

It is not easy to express my deep gratitude to Professor Gerhold K. Becker, who has been a dear friend and faithful ally in various challenging projects. For many years we have been cooperating on the level of research as well as in reaching out to the business world, especially in a demanding research project on business ethics in the Chinese context.

I would like to focus my homage to this truly outstanding intellectual on a particular facet of his life story: the fact that he spent most of his productive time (in fact almost twenty years) in Hong Kong, working in the area of Applied Ethics. He is the founder of the Center for Applied Ethics at Hong Kong Baptist University. Due to his extended contacts with academics and government officials not only in Asia but all over the world, many colleagues have felt encouraged to create institutes of research at their home institutions inspired by the example of Gerhold Becker's center. The Institute for Applied Sciences, integrated within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, currently headed by Prof. Gan Shaoping and one of the most prestigious institutions in China, is just one among several new academic units that grew out of the contact with the Hong Kong Center for Applied Ethics.

In offering just a few fragments, I would like to explore the profound symbolism marking the life history of this accomplished scholar. Gerhold Becker could have continued in the conventional tracks in well-established European, American, or Australian institutions dwelling in the reputable fields of fundamental ethics and philosophy. Instead, he chose to be immersed, to contribute to the field of Applied Ethics which still does not seem to attract the attention it truly deserves. Gerhold Becker worked in a

region of Asia that is famous as a financial hub and window to China but not well-known in terms of established academic traditions. In the eyes of some colleagues, a promising researcher got wasted in a context where only the language of business and money seem to have a strong appeal. Instead of building his academic reputation within the framework of established institutions, a true talent and genius threatened to get drowned under the capricious waves of applied sciences, apparently cut off from the inspiring dialogue with colleagues embarked in similar types of research.

I would need to question my intuition if there is not a profound symbolism in the urgently needed new approach to research and teaching that lies at the heart of Gerhold Becker's turn in Hong Kong. I seize this special moment to pay homage to him, taking the challenge to reflect on the mission of an academic institution working within a context that (seemingly) does not value the academic rigor of research and teaching.

I The Concept of an "Oriental University"

Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet, social scientist, Nobel prize winner in literature, and all-round genius, was convinced that there is one symptom of vital promise in the present state of the world: "Asia is awakening. This great event, if it be but directed along the right lines, is full of hope, not only for Asia herself, but for the whole world." (Tagore 2004, 72) As he dwells on the different conflicts and misunderstandings between the East and the West, Tagore concludes that the meeting of the East and the West has remained incomplete, "because the occasions of it have not been disinterested."

It must be noted that the hope Tagore places on the awakening of Asia as well as on the development of an "Eastern university" (with a strong trust in moral guidance and the common pursuit of truth) has nothing to do with the nationalistic drive advocated by political leaders in Asia. This political drive to use the so-called "Asian values" as a weapon against Western values perceived as decadent was especially pronounced in the 1990s, before the outbreak of the Financial Crisis in 1997.

Tagore's thinking is deeply rooted in the universal notion that humankind must realize a unity, "wider in range, deeper in sentiment, stronger in power than ever before" (73). His concern about the "moral alienation" that is so deeply injurious to the West and the East (72) resonates also in the work of Gerhold Becker, who wrote that "the general disorientation in

matters of ethics is particularly significant in the rapidly developing societies of East Asia and their coming economies” (Becker 1996,1). As Becker observes, the advocacy of Asian values serves to a large extent the strategic and understandable purpose of protecting aspiring Asian societies from the socio-political problems rampant in the West. And, one could add, the advocacy of Asian values justifies the lack of reform in sociological systems that are built upon hierarchical, feudalistic structures without being legitimized by democratic procedures.

The original concept of an “Oriental University” was not born out of the supposed uniqueness of Asian values or the claim that they are superior to their Western counterparts; it was conceived as the idea of an institution of higher learning where people can work together in a common pursuit of truth and share their common heritage (Tagore 2004, 73). Tagore argues that before Asia will be in a position to cooperate with the culture of Europe, she must base her own structure on a synthesis of all the different cultures she has. “When taking her stand on such a culture, she turns toward the West, she must base her own structure on a synthesis of all the different cultures which she has.”(75).

Rabindranath Tagore has never fallen into the trap of nationalism. He always succeeded in clearly distinguishing between the injustice of a serious asymmetry of power (colonialism being a prime example of this) and the importance of Western cultures in colonial and post-colonial territories, which, he insisted, needed to be appraised in an open-minded way so that one might see what uses could be made of Western culture (Sen 2005, 119). Tagore regarded Japanese militarism as an example illustrating the way in which nationalism can mislead even a nation of great achievement and promise (Sen 2005, 111).

II Obstacles to a More Appropriate Synthesis between the East and the West

As the response to the idea of creating an “Oriental university” has not been very positive in the last couple of decades, it is certainly appropriate to call to mind a number of obstacles hampering this urgently-needed new synthesis between Eastern and Western values. With few exceptions at some outstanding universities, the academic situation of research institutions in Asia is still rather insufficiently developed or at least—and I say this with

all due respect to great achievements by individuals or institutions—not yet able to compete with their counterparts in the United States or Europe. The reason is not simply a lack of finances, although the fact that an academic career might offer just a fraction of the compensation earned in business or banking is an obvious and serious obstacle. Even more threatening to the flourishing of an academic culture are the infringements on the freedom of research. Educational institutions are sometimes deliberately abused as instruments of indoctrination and brainwashing.

A sensitive area of infringements of academic liberty is the way Asian countries deal with their history. Granted that there are many conflicting views about historical facts, depending on the perceived experiences of each country involved. However, it is striking how divisive and deeply contradictory the contents of history textbooks are, running along narrowly defined nationalistic lines. Students are often still brainwashed and directed to a very specific view on historic events. For example, a repeated irritation all over Asia is caused by Japanese textbooks owing to their continued denial of the extent of wartime atrocities during the Japanese occupation in China.

The resulting brain drain of promising students and scholars from Asia to the prestigious institutions in the West, particularly the Ivy-League institutions in the United States and prominent counterparts in Europe and Australia, is deeply disturbing. Only recently, owing not least to a better economic environment, has an increasing number of scholars from Asia begun to decide to return to their home countries, at least for some limited commitment. Yet attractive institutions of academic excellence that could offer a sufficient research environment are still scarce. This is all the more deplorable as there has been a shift in terms of who the main drivers of economic development are, a shift away from Western countries towards Asia, especially China and India. Regrettably, this dynamic is still not yet sufficiently followed by an equivalent shift and appropriate development in academic institutions in Asia. The common feature remains that the leading scholars (those who are capable of winning Nobel prizes) just show up for a couple of days in the Far East and, after surviving a program usually overly loaded by their host institutions, are glad to head home to the safe haven of their College or University.

III The Vision of an Oriental University

The present article seeks to argue that “The Hour of Asia” Tagore is evoking has indeed come, albeit with some regrettable delays, and that it is now appropriate to draw the necessary consequences also on the academic level.

There is enough empirical evidence that Asian countries, especially China and India, have become major players on the economic and financial scene, counterbalancing in a healthy way what was previously an almost exclusive focus on the economy of the United States. Yet the true hour of Asia will have arrived only when there is an equivalent dynamic in the way Asian colleges and educational institutions counterbalance the monopoly of the brain power in Western academic institutions.

To establish prominent academic institutions in Asia that may one day be equal to the leading Ivy-League universities will certainly require a strong vision—a vision of an entirely new and much-needed academic culture inspiring both teachers and students to grow in their commitment to the whole society.

Tagore comments on the link between “an unnatural craving for success” and the “disloyalty to truth” in the academic culture of his time (Tagore 2004, 74). It is certainly worrying if the purpose of studies is reduced to satisfying one’s needs for material well-being and success. An academic culture should above all stimulate intellectual curiosity and a drive to gain a better understanding of the truth. While all the improvements of information technology should come into play, it is important to note that the access to an abundance of different information by no means implies that one knows “the truth.” In other words, one may struggle to understand “the truth,” or a comprehensive and coherent insight on what is going on below the surface. In order to reach this level it is necessary for educational institutions to provide a thorough training, first of all in the area of social analysis. Due to a specific sociological background, one’s own world view may be narrow and may need to be enlarged.

An exclusive theoretical view is no longer sufficient. There should be a full range of community service or other exposure programs, especially among marginalized people, providing experiences that could be evaluated and deepened in the light of social theories. Such insight into a specific social reality would need to be supplemented with different ways of exploring and understanding local cultures in Asia.

A necessary frame of reference must always be the updated research of the so-called hard sciences. The specific challenge of an Oriental university is to explore the ethical implications of the hard sciences. One of the key ethical implications is the profound impact science has on everybody's life as well as on society and the globalized world as a whole.

Therefore, it is crucial to Tagore's concept of an "Oriental university" (and certainly very much in line with the life achievements of Gerhold Becker) to suggest that the purpose of such a projected institution would lie not just in providing a few tools for the success of individuals, but to open the eyes of both professors and students for their specific commitment and contribution to their society.

Conclusion

In just a few fragments, the present essay seeks to highlight innovative aspects of an urgently-needed new academic culture as inspired by the life achievements of Professor Gerhold K. Becker. Although well-connected in the academic and business milieu in Hong Kong and other major countries in Asia, Europe and the States, Professor Becker has been well ahead of his time.

In reference to the concept of an "Oriental university" by R. Tagore, I argue that impressive economic developments are not sufficient to bring about the "Hour of Asia." This stage will only be accomplished when Asia's educational institutions are able to offer Ivy-League-equivalent formation, inspiring students and teachers to grow in their commitment to society.

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