



Education of and for the ‘post-apocalyptic’: How Britain discarded women technologists and lost its edge in computing

Toni Ruuska

review of

Allen, A. (2017). *The Cynical Educator*. Leicester: MayflyBooks. (PB, pp. 251. \$16,65, ISBN 978-1-906948-35-1, available online: http://mayflybooks.org/?page_id=131)

[...] our problem is *not that we are fools* in need of enlightenment. Rather our problem is that *we lack the power not to be fooled*. (Allen, 2017: 103)

Ansgar Allen's (2017) *The Cynical Educator* is something different. Relying heavily on Nietzsche and Foucault, Allen writes fiercely but of stylistic fashion. No hope is given, nor is it longed for. The book ‘was not written for applause’ [8]. While it is not an easy read, the reader is not left stranded to wallow in postmodern ambiguity, and while no systematic or definitive answers are provided [7], one is able to find at least some foothold.

Allen asks, why the belief in progress – if not the belief in the entire modern Western culture – is faltering, and still the belief in education, as a redeemer, remains so strong and pervasive among educators? However, this is not quite the case, as Allen is keen to reveal. Quite on the contrary, educators have become cynics, rebels without a cause [123]. Yet, if contemporary cynicism is widespread, and not only among educators, it is hard to detect [103]. Allen argues that this is because modern cynicism lacks conviction, and accommodates itself to the status quo it at the same rejects [105].

Instead the present-day apathy, cynicism with a lower case ‘c’, Allen is calling for a militant Cynicism, hoping to revitalise the legacy of Diogenes and his followers from historical damnation. Allen writes:

This book takes aim at you and me, at our cynical attachments to education and the educated person. It unearths the teacher within us. It confronts us with our disavowed cynicism only to affirm them. It traces the origins of everyday cynicism by locating the rise of cynicism in the fall of Western education. The romantic educator – the last bastion of the Western educational experience – is now falling from grace, though with a death rattle that may last decades still. Education is under attack more than ever for failing to deliver on its promises, but rarely doubted itself [4].

In some cases in *The Cynical Educator*, it is the usual story. Modern education has been knocked down, and corrupted by various powers raging from all-round commodification, instrumentality and ‘neoliberalism’, but unlike most would claim, for Allen, the situation is already ‘post-apocalyptic’ [91]. In this sense, it seems that Allen is trying to grasp his own sense of bewilderment, which he thinks is widely shared among educators: ‘there is a suspicion I believe educators feel, if only fleetingly, that the educational endeavour which occupies and exhausts them could itself be rather absurd’ [177]. Despite of this, it is peculiar why the belief in educational good is not renounced as well. Indeed, this seems to be one of the reasons why this book has been written. In Allen’s own words:

This book takes aim at the conceit of educated people, in particular those educated educators in the business of educating others. They believe an educational good to exist and defend it against attack. Despite all corruptions the inherent goodness of education is believed incorruptible. This conviction will not be abandoned however much education is debased, reduced to the status of commodity, or instrument for ‘getting ahead’ [12-13].

Allen traces the roots of the belief in educational good to Socrates, and then follows the evolution of this belief from Plato to Aristotle, and then to Rome and to the breakthrough of Christianity. Among other things, Allen claims that our schools are still today bothered by the educational figure and scheme of Socrates, in which the meaning of one’s existence is tied to an experience of doubt and promise that education would be its overcoming [19]. The ‘belief in the promise of education’, is to Allen, ‘a prerequisite for one’s subordination to it’ [19]. Moreover, Allen remarks [20] that ‘the best pupil in such a scheme is he who is most easily seduced by education, he who already believes in the educational good promised by the educational encounter’

In Platos’s dialogues education is also modelled by Allen as a relationship that demands trust and deferred gratification [20]. Interestingly, Allen argues that because of this trust and because of deferred gratification, education has

functioned so well as a belief system, not because it actually delivers in the end, but because it does not. For Allen, education is not based on a promise of success, but on a promise of failure. For one to succeed, most have to fail. As he writes:

As we forever attack schools for failing to come up with the goods, for failing to deliver the salvation they promise, we refuse to see how the school has been more catastrophically successful than any cathedral; not in offering us salvation, but making us forever beholden to that offer [71-72].

In contrast to ancient Greek, in Rome the 'philosopher educator' is turned to 'educator philosopher', meanwhile educators 'offered counsel from positions directly subservient to power being dependent upon their patrons for support' [34]. After this, the next great educational turnover occurs when the educator philosopher is replaced by the Christian bishop, as the Western 'soul' becomes the property of Christian theology [41]. Allen argues that we, in fact, owe a lot to the Christian pastorate, because its logic of power (shepherd-flock) still defines the subjectivity of Western educators, as 'it binds the educator to his pupils by committing the educator to a project of mutual redemption' [64].

Concerning the belief in educational good overall, Allen claims paraphrasing Nietzsche that the 'educational beast' in us wants to be lied to. We want to believe that education 'can be genuine and morally pure [...] where good intentions become synonymous with good deeds' [22]. Because without this belief, Allen confesses, the mundane violence of education would be too hard to bear.

Allen believes that our modern cynicism is the result of our inability to change our ways: 'we have been schooled too well and too long to unlearn our lessons without struggle' [19]. As a way forward from our current impasse, Allen thinks Diogenes and Cynics are to be consulted. Allen reminds us that Cynics were once eccentrics, who made fool of social convention and attacked the values and aspirations of civilised life [86]. This type of Cynicism has left only tiny fragments to our modern cynic attitude. From pre-modern to late modern, there has been a transformation from scandal to submission, and from ascetics and animality to general sense of disenchantment and apathy [120-121].

As we learn from the book, although it is likely that ancient Cynics would have denounced Western education, they were not antagonistic to the idea that one tries to understand the world in which one lives. Like Allen remarks, Cynics were merely 'suspicious of the common prejudice that the world is best understood by adopting the conventions of rationality endorsed by a particular philosophical school' [111]. More generally, the Cynics criticised the culture surrounding themselves by stripping life to its bare essentials, this way questioning the worth

of refined customs and conventional attitudes surrounding civilised beings [120-121].

The most amusing if not troubling section of the book is the part where Diogenes, the headmaster of Cynics, is brought back to our times. Allen writes:

He [Diogenes] gets caught up in two world wars and numerous other conflagrations, genocides and massacres. He strolls through the principal sites of capitalism and communism watching the former expand through a series of aggressive cycles and the latter undergo the most brutal implosions. He eventually stumbles forth into the political apathy of our present that no longer dreams of changing its conditions of existence. He witnesses how our most progressive contemporaries confront their own century of ecological and social catastrophe by purchasing ethical beans and aspiring to pious reservations of 'carbon neutrality' as they, and we, befoul the rest of the planet. And in the midst of this cynical disorder Diogenes finally encounters education, and is surprised to hear a repeated promise, that through education 'all can achieve success'. Whilst Diogenes had taught: 'Be ready for everything', what he now sees goes beyond comprehension [125].

The quest of Diogenes gets even trickier, as he inevitably must face the tyranny of capital. With resignation, Allen points out that the embodied practices and ascetic way of life of the Cynic would be most certainly interpreted as just another lifestyle choice within the boundaries of our liberal and individualist culture [126]. Allen writes:

Feverishly promoted by capital: To Be Yourself, to the exclusion of all others, authentic to the point of nothing, to the point of destruction in the face of such impossible responsibilities, is the modern ultimatum. [...] Our bodies, our tastes and inclination, have become objects of training, therapy, adornment and 'free' expression. These bodies exist as cultural and counter-cultural projects, requiring continual inspection, adjustment and readjustment. Our lives have been invested with a quest of enrichment, alteration, for new experiences, new trends [126].

The dilemma of Diogenes is of course the same dilemma that we encounter everyday. How to resist a culture that is able to absorb and accommodate everything? Indeed, the only real choice appears to be its abandonment. Allen brings this issue up, but is not eager to follow the lead. Though, he mentions Paulo Freire and makes the case that critical pedagogy must get rid of his/her bourgeois existence, he maintains that a Cynic has always operated 'within' rather than 'outside'. This seems curious considering the general tone and argument of the book. For Allen, Western education is evidently beyond redemption, but he is nonetheless committed on staying on board and advising other Cynical educators to do the same. The question is why the Cynical educator has to sink with the ship, or rather why the Cynical educator is committed to sink the ship differently, and not getting ready to abandon it instead? Or might the Cynic's fate be more tragic? Is the fate of the Cynic to stay on board and convince others to leave? If it

is, Allen does not explicitly say so, for the final third of the book is rather ambiguous and at times even arcane.

On the whole, *The Cynical Educator's* message is serious and urgent. However, the book is less a wake-up call than an exercise of self-reflection. It brings up contemporary educator's pains and sufferings, as well as contradictions and self-deception. If anything, one is drawn out to question one's convictions regarding education, and yes, whether one believes in the goodness of education or not. Allen's guidance on these matters is not gentle, but why should it be? After all, it is the task of the Cynic to shock and interrupt so the rest of us can recover from our slumber.

the author

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