

Incubators of Thought: Harvard P.Z. at 50

Remarks by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

It turns out that knowledge is not evenly distributed on the surface of the planet, but has always been concentrated in a few small places surrounded by much larger areas where credulity, superstition, and a thoughtless -- but comfortable -- reliance on traditions prevailed. In Western Europe, the Druids living near the celestial observatories they built over centuries from the rocks of England and Ireland were such centers of learning, as were the caves where Sybils had drug-induced visions; later, the followers of Euclid and Pythagoras lived in small enclaves out in the countryside, finding inspiration in the regularities of nature which they then tried to codify in thought and in language. After the adoption of Christianity, most of the thinking took place in the chain of monasteries that slowly spread from one corner of the continent to the other -- from Sicily to Ireland and then back to Switzerland, up to Sweden and East to Constantinople and beyond.

On a smaller scale, one can still find relics of this uneven concentration of thought and learning when traveling from one village in Southern Italy to another; in the small villages and towns of Apulia and Calabria time seems to have stopped

centuries ago; yet here and there, in some decrepit ancient house hiding among the olive trees and laurel bushes, one finds an old gentleman -- a retired physician, or college teacher -- who lives among walls lined with leather-bound old tomes and turns out to know more about the history of the Goths, or of the Cartagenians; or of Pindar's poetry; or about Heraclitus' philosophy, than any one person is likely to know in a radius of thousands of miles around his fragrant garden.

In our days this geography of knowledge should surely have changed, as information moves with the speed of light across the map from one television screen to the next. Yet while the speed by which information travels has surely increased a thousandfold -- it took the better part of a year for a letter Marco Polo sent from China to reach his home in Venice -- information does not necessarily result in knowledge. The evaluation of information, its integration with what is already known, and its diffusion into the culture are processes best achieved through the critical application of different, but complementary individual perspectives.

This is why institutions of learning -- laboratories, university departments, research centers -- have become essential to the preservation, the growth, and the transmission of knowledge in every corner of the world. These institutions, however, are

often slowed down in their mission by financial, political, and ideological barriers, and by internal conflicts and disputes. Just as medieval monasteries and Eastern ashrams, the contemporary university department also reflects in its internal processes the tensions of the society of which is part. Very often, even in our times, the creative achievement -- and even the continuity -- in the domains of knowledge occur when scholars in an institution who share some intellectual curiosity reach a critical mass that allows them to build on each others' passion and knowledge that then results in a fundamental change in a given domain. One example in physics would be Niels Bohr's laboratory in the decades between the two World Wars, which became a magnet for every able-bodied physicist in the world who could afford to visit Copenhagen.

While it is not too difficult to find examples of such creative centers in physics, or chemistry, or biology, there are only a few in the social sciences. It is for this reason that Project Zero has been such an important beacon in the intellectual landscape. Prior to the establishment of PZ there have been outstanding psychologists -- like Freud or Jung -- who attracted scholars eager to visit them; and so did anthropologists like Levy-Strauss, or sociologists like Vilfredo Pareto. But has there ever been a group of social scientists

working in the same place on similar problems, and teaching at the same time? The New School for Social Research in Manhattan that became such a powerful intellectual influence in the 'Forties and 'Fifties could be cited as another example, but I would argue that the motivation to establish the New School was more to escape from Hitler's dictatorship than to join an intellectual movement. If there have been other examples, I apologize for my ignorance.

So, at this juncture, 50 years after Nelson Goodman and his young disciples started PZ, I would claim that this semi-formal intellectual institution has played a unique and important role in the evolution of psychology. When the discipline was running the risk of becoming what some critics called an "arid wasteland" dominated by a simplistic, mechanical understanding of human life, Project Zero stood as one of the few bastions where the hordes of behaviorism found a resistance.

In my own career, the presence of this lonely outpost of a broader conception of humanity has been essential. In Europe, my first exposure to psychology had been through hearing a lecture by Karl Gustav Jung, and then reading a dozen or so books by him and his disciples.

Later, after having come to the US to study psychology, I was shocked to learn that Jung's vision was considered to be something of a marginal literary contribution lacking any scientific value. Instead, in the psychology courses at the university they told us about the time it took rats to learn turns in a maze, or for chimps to open a locked door. After a couple of years I was ready to abandon my quest to become a psychologist. One of the main reasons I continued my academic work was the discovery that places like Project Zero existed. At a small conference in New Orleans I heard Howard Gardner gave a talk on creativity, and the experience was comparable to discovering a well of fresh water after years of licking the dew from plants and rocks at the edges of the desert. After that, I became familiar with the work of Feldman, and Perkins, and the existence of Project Zero, and this oasis in the wilderness was like a promise that one could be a scholar, and a psychologist, without having to leave one's heart, and one's mind, at the threshold of one's office. For this, my gratitude for the existence of PZ is hard to overstate. May the next 50 years be as influential and as creative as the first 50 have been.