



*Broken Road to an Uncertain Future* / R. Kowalczyk / Otsu, Japan February, 2012

# DIALOGUE ON EDUCATION

*Part Two: Academia in the Midst of Crisis*

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and  
Robert Kowalczyk**

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Prologue by Robert Kowalczyk

Attraction to conducting a second “Dialogue on Education” with

Susumu Nishitani (*see Konton* vol. 3, 2006) was sparked by the initially proposed theme of this edition of *Konton*, "Academia in the Midst of Crisis". Although the theme was later changed, for this writer it continued to hang suspended in a thick cloud of lingering questions and thoughts.

The key word, of course, was "crisis". Exactly what "crisis" was the proposed title referring to? This was a word that was ambiguous, highly intriguing, and full of possibility.

The first definition that came to mind was the Great East Japan Earthquake, with the subsequent tsunami and nuclear accidents of March 11th, 2011. Quickly following that as a strong possibility was the global economic situation. Another closely connected issue was the lack of jobs for graduating university students in Japan, and in many other countries.

Beyond these potential meanings was the deteriorating environment (including global warming) accompanied by a rapid rise in world population. Thoughts also turned to Japan's ageing society and the depopulation of the countryside. The crisis of a declining college-age population and the problems this presents for university administrators and faculty members was also taken into consideration. One could not dismiss the overvaluation of the Japanese yen with its varied consequences in an export-driven economy. Nor could one rule out the continuing conflicts, revolutions, and anti-government protests in a variety of regions, coupled with the persistent existence and potential spread of nuclear weaponry.

The list of possible interpretations appeared endless.

Upon reflection, that single word - crisis - seemed to be a metaphor

for our times. We live in an *Age of Crisis*. Why? And what connection did this have with academia? It is with these thoughts in mind that the following dialogue was conducted in Kamakura in early 2012.

### ***Reasons for the Crisis***

Kowalczyk: I am very happy to be with you again to continue our dialogue on education. This will be the second and final part of this series, however I'm sure our conversations will continue into the future.

Nishitani: Yes, they will. When did we conduct that first dialogue?

Kowalczyk: That was at the end of 2005. It was published in *Konton* in March of 2006.

Nishitani: Oh, yes. We held that discussion in Pusan, Korea.

Kowalczyk: That's right. And we spoke about the importance of communication in education. And now we are meeting in Kamakura to discuss the theme of "Academia in the Midst of Crisis".

First, we must address the question: What crisis?

Nishitani: The world has greatly changed in those seven years since our first dialogue. For example, in 2008 we had the economic shock that started with the Lehman Brothers collapse. Something that was not a complete surprise, but the shock was felt around the world. Of course, when one looks back and evaluates why that occurred, we find three main causes: accelerated globalization, advances in technology, and the

worldwide economic-social model of neo-liberal capitalism. A metaphor for this trio might be a global casino in which all of us are in the game and the risks are beyond our comprehension.

Kowalczyk: Yes, that's true. This is the game the world finds itself locked into. And the question that naturally follows is: who will be the winners and who will be the losers, both among the countries and the individuals. The troika of causes you mentioned is a central element in the crisis. And this question goes beyond the economic to the political, as we can see in the recent storm of protests in the Arab world, the United States, Europe, Russia, and many other countries.

Nishitani: Including Japan, particularly after the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake and the following nuclear meltdowns.

Kowalczyk: Which has led people throughout the world to look at the use of nuclear energy with fresh eyes, such as the scheduled closing of all nuclear power plants in Germany.

Nishitani: Yes, this is scheduled to happen by 2023.

Kowalczyk: Going back to the issue at hand, what do you believe has brought us to this point in history, this global crisis?

Nishitani: That's a very difficult question. It appears to be more of a human problem than a problem in a "system". This is because we *should* have the power to change the system. But due to the onslaught of globalization, it may be unstoppable.

For an example of what is happening, we can turn to the lesson of Goethe's *Ballad of The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, which Disney filmed in the movie *Fantasia*. As you may remember, the magician leaves his apprentice alone and goes to take a nap. Finding a chance to try out the magician's powers, the apprentice commands a stack of brooms to do his work for him. The brooms soon learn how to multiply themselves and work harder and harder, eventually leading to a catastrophe. This is modern globalization. Unstoppable and highly dangerous. Even worse than the story by Goethe, our current situation has no one in control, no magician to reenter the story and prevent the disaster. Lacking an authority with such power, what we need is some kind of international agreement, such as the Tobin Tax on monetary transactions, to stop, or at least control, the madness. But no such agreement is in sight. Perhaps the only thing that can stop the ongoing situation is a true catastrophe.

Kowalczyk: Something like the tragedy of Fukushima?

Nishitani: Perhaps much greater and widespread than that. Fukushima was a natural calamity leading to a terrible human accident.

Kowalczyk: What, in your thinking, was the cause of the "human accident"?

Nishitani: Two things come to mind, lack of foresight and lack of open public information. Many experts warned of the risk of putting a nuclear power plant in such a vulnerable location, right next to an earthquake-prone seacoast. None of these warnings were taken seriously. No one took the caution to look deeper into that possibility. To make matters worse, even now the public is not sure how far the radiation has truly spread. The public is blind as to the extent of the damage. This is due to both

governmental caution and journalistic muting, perhaps due to the fear of panic. Both of these, inadequate foresight and subsequent lack of openness, are human failings.

Kowalczyk: Modern technology can take us only so far. We live in a technologically advanced world but also one that is still full of both technical and human frailties. You spoke of advances in technology. In what other ways has this led to the current crisis?

Nishitani: As you know, modern corporations, which are not in any way human but rather systems, one might say “machines”, to gain profit, are mostly concerned with making greater and greater amounts of money. When such entities look at their balance sheets, labor costs are a main concern. Therefore, large companies have divided their work force into three distinct categories: core workers, specialists, and fringe workers. As technology advances, the number of fringe workers increase. And then, with further advances, the number of fringe workers begins to decrease, naturally leading to an increase in unemployment. We can see this in countries throughout the world where the unemployment rate is soaring, such as in Spain where 46% of the young are unemployed. Or as in Britain, where the rate is now 20%. Those who have joined the ranks of the unemployed have been replaced by technology, thereby saving labor costs and increasing profits for the wealthy. Technology is a great ally of an unfair and out-of-balance economic system and greatly contributes to the instability that is now becoming so apparent.

Kowalczyk: Technology coupled with globalization results in a situation where workers in low-wage countries can easily do the work that those in advanced economies were once doing. In this context, Tomas Friedman of

the *New York Times*, recently wrote an interesting and important article with the title, *Average is Over*. In the article, Friedman explained that the days when an average college graduate could get life sustaining work are finished. He went on to say that unless one has a specialty, he or she is no longer necessary for the work force. He was writing about the situation in the U.S., but this of course applies to Europe and Japan as well.

The third factor that you mentioned was the now almost complete global acceptance of the socio-economic system of neo-liberal capitalism. To me this seems to be the core cancer that is being spread further by both globalization and technology, also by the wealthy and powerful. Is there any chance that this cancer can be stricken from our modern stream of thought? Or, alternatively, do you feel that it might be reformed in some way to lead to a saner and more controlled world?

Nishitani: In global neo-liberalism, everything is seen as a commodity, including laborers, teachers, and even students. Almost everyone is obedient to this economic system. Everyone except, of course, those in power who are at the controls and enriching their lives in the process.

Kowalczyk: To me, it appears to have become a modern form of religion more than a socio-economic mode of thought. And, as in orthodox religions, either one is a true believer or is seen as a non-believer who deserves to be ostracized from public view. In the both the United States and Britain, birthplaces of the neo-liberal movement, even the word "socialist" is considered dirty. In these countries, no one dares to cross the line that separates true believers from the apostate. In this sense, neo-liberal capitalism seems to be following communism in its demise.



In early communism, there were two schools of thought known as “scientific communism” and “critical communism”. The difference between the two was that critical communism was open to debate, open to change. Scientific communism, on the other hand was dogma, a code that could not be questioned. In the end the “scientific” school won out. You know, the “Little Red Book”, and all that nonsense. I believe that our current crisis, and the protests it has provoked are because neo-liberal dogma offers no opportunity for open debate. We either take it as pure faith, or we are left out on the street with no opportunity to express a contrary opinion. In other words, neo-liberal capitalism is a system of thought that allows no further questioning, as was clearly shown in Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History*. It is dying due to its own intransigence, its own dogma, without the air of any change being possible. This further accentuates the crisis set before us.

Nishitani: A minority of individuals understands this. And this is where education, personal and active freedom of expression, and democracy become highly essential for our survival.

### ***Academia’s Connection to the Crisis***

Nishitani: I would like to ask you how globalization, advanced technology, and the neo-liberal economic system have affected the university situation?

Kowalczyk: All of these recent developments, and by recent I mean within the last ten years or so, have made a great impact on the universities, not only in Japan but also throughout the world. To begin with, globalization has meant less opportunity for college graduates who now are often

faced with the prospect of being fringe workers. And as fringe workers their jobs are constantly threatened by the prospects of the company moving its labor force overseas. Equally devastating has been the effects of advanced technology where robots and computers are now doing the work that college graduates would have been hired for in the past. Finally, the neo-liberal economic system creates a totally different atmosphere in academia, one that forces both the administration and the faculty to adjust their goals to those of the consumerist culture that the students will be graduating into. In many cases, preparing students for employment has become the background motivating force of education, rather than an enriching of their minds. If a university cannot find jobs for its graduating classes, its reputation suffers. And in a situation where the number of potential students is constantly decreasing, the battle for student numbers creates a distorted atmosphere at the universities. This approach to education necessarily means that colleges must become an integral part of the economic system, rather than being a space devoted to individual growth, intellectual enlightenment, and humanity-based wisdom.

Nishitani: Yes, recently in Japan, and probably in most other countries, the higher education system has greatly changed. Now we find people from the business world entering into the university to discuss its economic strategy. At least one of the members of the board of most universities is a business manager. In this way, the universities general nature has become one that is business oriented. Universities are now producing human resources, or manpower, in order to contribute to the consumer based machine of global capitalism. I do not believe this should be the main aim of true education. I believe the aim of higher education is human formation. Making humankind more aware of its own true objectives and responsibilities. This is what higher education should be addressing, not

merely the job market.

Kowalczyk: I totally agree. In my forty years of teaching, this has become more and more obvious with every passing year. Much of the time that we educators spend deals with infrastructure, meaning strategy meetings on how to improve the university's "effectiveness". Effectiveness in this case usually equates to student numbers or student jobs. Every year, less and less time is spent on discussing the quality of education, the meaning of education, or the methods of education. It has become more a matter of running the university in a way that will give it a higher rating in the race for more students. That has become the major emphasis.

In Japan, one simple and clear example can be found in the average student's last and most important year spent at college. Normally, this should be the year that all the past 15 years of study have been building up to. This should be the apex of learning, the "Capstone Year". Sadly, this is the year that finds students mostly absent. Aside from writing their graduation thesis, students have very few academic responsibilities and almost no classes. The great majority of them are busy all year looking for jobs. I have never been able to understand that. What is worse, the job hunting and abstentions are now starting in the beginning, or at least the middle, of the third year. This is a clear example of learning in the midst of a crisis.

Nishitani: Many influential people around the world stress the importance of education. For instance, four years ago, the chairman of Nestle Switzerland said at the World Economic Forum in Davos, "For me, the most important thing is education. Learning through one's whole life is vitally important." But I would like to ask, what does he mean by

“education”? Does he mean education for humanity, or education for human resources? I would like all teachers in the world to think about this problem. Is it their responsibility to educate the student in order to cooperate with the global system of neo-liberalism? Or is it to educate those who might try to contribute to a more humanistic and fair society? Or, at the very least, is their responsibility to educate individuals who can, by their own informed and free choice, select between the two?

Kowalczyk: Yes, there now seems to be little choice for our graduates. They are guided in the direction of becoming a human resource, as our current socio-economic system dictates. Of course a few can see where they are being driven and escape from the mechanisms of the market place, the consumer-centered world. But these are just a very fortunate few. And they become fewer with each passing year.

A recent article entitled, *The Value of Teachers* by Nicholas D. Kristoff in the *New York Times* recently caught my eye. I was eager to learn what this respected American journalist felt the value of teachers to be. It turns out that Mr. Kristoff equated educational success and therefore teacher “quality” with the salaries that their students would eventually make. A pure example of what has gone beyond the realm of economic theory into what shockingly appears to be a new kind of religion: unquestioning belief in the capitalistic ethic as the meaning and purpose of life. As Ken Livingstone, the former mayor of London said, “World wide capitalism kills more people everyday than Hitler. And he was crazy.”

Thinking of humans as a “resource” itself is a form of inhumanity, insanity. We need to get our perspectives back in order. For instance, if you ask a recent college graduate, “What do you think of Bach or Conrad or

DeVinci?" Most likely, they will look back with wondering eyes and be speechless. It is very sad to say but not knowing literature and the arts is a modern form of academic and cultural illiteracy. Not knowing the richness of humanity's journey through the arts and literature is to be ignorant of life itself. How is it that we are producing college graduates who know nothing of these things?

Nishitani: As you said, the number of students is decreasing in Japan. Therefore, universities need to survive in this situation. How? In what way? As far as university management is concerned they need to show that their graduates are getting solid employment. In order to raise the employment rate, there are two factors involved. First, to train students as to how to adapt to corporations that are competing in the global economy. And second, to employ successful business people or famous celebrities to attract potential students. In these and other ways, universities have joined the neo-liberal cause. They are attracting students in order to create more human resources rather than free-willed individuals who might contribute to humanity in ways both great and small. To me, this is where the crisis appears in academia.

Kowalczyk: Most of what you say is true. On the other hand, there are many humanity-based activities taking place at universities. One should not become too pessimistic. The question is how to bring academia back to where it should be: a place that increases the well being of humanity. Fighting the consumer-oriented system, which in many ways is destroying our humanness, will take a tremendous amount of foresight. I am afraid that many teachers are teaching what they have learned rather than teaching what they are learning, or should be learning. They are forgetting that professors too are learners. The university of today appears to be

behind the times, appealing to a golden age that is now quickly becoming a part of the past, rather than leading us into a better world. It appears to be caught in reinforcing a world that obviously is not working. This is a world that is not making life better and more compassionate, but one that is stuck in a moribund, highly competitive paradigm. Either we learn and teach that we must live together and share what has been given us or, most likely, we will all perish together. This is not a lesson that you will learn, at least not yet, at a business school where profit is the ultimate goal. And are not all universities becoming a kind of "business school"?

Nishitani: In this connection, I would like to once again stress the importance of communication in the classroom. Teachers, like the conductor of an orchestra, should teach. Teaching and guidance is a major role of every teacher. However, at the same time, dialogue in classes is highly important. Martin Heidegger said, "In the case in which one can have the possibility to talk, one can then listen or pay attention to the others' talk." In too many cases, there is one-way traffic coming from the teachers towards the students not only in Japan but throughout the world. Classrooms should be a place for discussion. They should be a place where students stop being consumers or clients of the university and rather become a place where they can talk freely and quite actively. Through such a dialogue, students are led into understanding the true meaning of freedom of speech and thereby learn the deeper meaning of the world democracy.

Kowalczyk: Today's classrooms teach fairness, with each individual being allowed to express him or herself, but fairness and sincere debate and discussion are two different things. In an open classroom, each student should, as Heidegger said, have their own opinion inside of them waiting

for their chance to express it. Too often, especially in Japan, students are wary of being in opposition. Therefore, there is no personal opinion waiting to be expressed. Opposition is an essential part of life. It is the in-yo of existence. Opposing ideas lead us towards the truth. If a student or a whole class is afraid of opposing what the teacher says, education comes to a dead-end. And, as you state, one of the main aims of education should be to strengthen democracy, to strengthen freedom of expression. Without an expression of opposing ideas, no democracy is possible. On the contrary, such an atmosphere is the fertile ground for a return to fascism.

Even in the United States, ever since 9.11, more and more people are living in fear of the future. Less and less people are willing to speak out and make their opinions known. The continued existence of the Guantanamo Detention Center, in clear defiance of long established international law, and the general public acceptance of hidden state torture show this to be true. This is a highly dangerous trend. True education is the way out of this. True education is the way out of the crisis.

Nishitani: I totally agree with you. At my age, more than ever, I feel the importance of an active life rather than a passive one. A society that is composed of a passive majority is the road to fascism. I would like young students to be more active, more expressive, more argumentative in their lives. I would like each of them to have an opinion and to not be afraid to express it. I'm afraid the current education system, from the elementary schools through the university, instills the antithesis of this ideal. In school, one learns to be silent.

Kowalczyk: Yes. And what we have been talking about is the sad truth that the current socio-economic system requires a passive citizenry. A

great amount of energy, particularly in the U.S., but also in Japan and other countries, is spent on entertainment. This includes everything from nightly television to professional sports to video games to hours spent on a cell phone. All of this is entertainment. If Marx were alive today, instead of blaming religion, I believe he would say, "Entertainment is the opium of the masses." When one can be entertained on a daily basis, why should one bother with thinking about more serious things in life? This is especially true about deeper, sustained thoughts concerning the future of our coming generations. The socio-economic system has created a way to keep the people from addressing the truly important issues that are a part of the crisis. And this attitude extends, most unfortunately, to the university classroom where the critical situation we are in finds further ignoring, or one might say, ignorance. The reason we find ourselves in a crisis is because higher education is not looking outside the window at the real world and bringing these problems into the classroom where they can be discussed, debated, and possibly solved. Education itself has become passive. Content with its comfortable, yet rapidly changing, past.

### *Future Prospects*

Nishitani: I think crisis itself is an opportunity. It appears that in the future many young people may face great adversity. According to a recent survey, many young people in Japan replied, "Now is the happiest time." This is because their outlook for the future is dark, much worse than the present situation. However, I believe adversity is the best teacher. I sincerely hope they can pass through this time of crisis. In this sense, an alert and active mind is highly important. With an open mind and open heart, they will surely learn.



Kowalczyk: Thinking positively, we can already see this happening. Somehow, students know. They know that they are in trouble. They know that the future appears dark. They know that something must change. For the time being, however, what must change is still vague, lost in the mist of the times. Thinking about the Occupy Movement in the U.S. and Europe, there were no direct demands, just an opposition to the status quo.

Not only the students, *all of us know*. We know that the current system can no longer sustain us into the future. It is not only about dwindling resources and rising population. It is not simply about the deterioration of the environment and global warming. It is beyond the battle of the rich versus the poor or the lack of jobs in our advanced economies. It is the socio-economic system itself that somehow must be changed. Since this has seemingly become a part of human consciousness, even though the natural tendency is to avoid change, change most certainly is on the way. Positive change. This is the opportunity that you have commented on.

Nishitani: I, myself, often feel powerless, impotent in my life. I felt I am too small to move what most be moved. But if you study history, humankind moves the gears of history, not any particular system. Therefore, I do believe that we can change the world for the better. Of course, this so much depends upon our younger generations and they in turn highly depend upon education. Therein lies our future.

Kowalczyk: Being an American, I am a born optimist, even in the face of the seemingly bleak situation in the United States. And I agree that humankind is wise enough to face the current crisis and transform the world for the better. There are many times when I have clearly seen this in my students' eyes. Hope. Belief. Optimism. All this, in spite of great

adversity and challenge. And, yes, so much depends upon education to help them along, to encourage them to begin building a better, fairer, more human based world.

My great hope is that the universities will become more aware of the crisis and bring a great debate into the classroom. This would be a debate that will look at increasing globalization, rapid technology, and the dictates of neo-liberal capitalism. If this can be put on the academic table, we all can hope for and expect a much healthier world. Knowing my colleagues, I believe the universities should and will lead the way out of the crisis. As you have stated, the way out is through education.

Thank you so much for agreeing to this discussion.

Nishitani: It has been my sincere pleasure.

### **Afterward by Robert Kowalczyk and Susumu Nishitani**

Although there are those who might look at this dialogue as being overly critical of academia, the intention of both participants was to be helpful more than to criticize. It is well known that university faculty members are doing the very best they can under the prevailing circumstances. However, administrative burdens continue to increase each year. With each increase in this area of the faculty's work comes a diminishment in the time and energy that can be spent on dealing with students on an individual basis, discussing educational goals and means, and conducting research. The needed research is not only in one's own area of study, but also on a much broader level of the living, real world that encompasses that discipline.

At universities worldwide, the crises unfolding outside must be brought out into the open. Following this, there is a need for considering and discussing how professors and students might help to contribute to a better world. If universities allow more time for these considerations, they will in turn empower students with the abilities and desires to challenge the wrongs that affect not only their own futures but also the futures of their children. This is both the challenge and the responsibility of academia, in all countries. The preceding dialogue was conducted with the sincere belief that change already is occurring throughout global society. It is the university's great challenge to assure that the coming change be rational, democratic, and effective. This is academia's role in the midst of the crisis.