

Students of the World Unite -

**you (soon may) have nothing to lose
but your worthless degrees.**

by Richard Jolly*

One tends to think of University students in the third world as the budding elite -- educated to a style and at a cost which reinforces aspirations for a life far removed in income, status, power, and often even geographical distance from the mass of their fellow countrymen. No doubt, this is the pattern in most developing countries (as well as in many developed ones), even where graduate unemployment has reduced the expected earnings of the educated and introduced a demoralising delay before finding a job. But the student movement in certain countries of Latin America and recent events in Ethiopia and Ceylon make one wonder whether the picture might be beginning to change -- rhetoric becoming more genuine, and elitism giving place to serious involvement and more active political commitment.

What now seems to be furthering the change is the powerful combination of the energy and idealism of youth reacting to the frustration fired by growing unemployment. Unemployment not only shatters the hopes of the graduates, but the prospect of unemployment has important repercussions within the educational system -- on the one hand introducing a sense of pointless endeavour, but on the other stimulating a reaction to the society which allows this to happen.

There can be little doubt that these trends will grow sharper in the future. Without fundamental changes in existing strategy the volume of the educated unemployed in many developing countries in the seventies will swell enormously. The growth of university and secondary school output has already been set in motion by the large expansion of enrolments in the sixties -- now increasing at a rate often two or three times faster than the growth of jobs 'requiring' university or secondary

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school qualifications.

Various things can happen to this surplus of output over needs: the educated can take jobs below those for which they are formally qualified; they can move into self-employment; or many more jobs for the educated could be created by government, 'make work' or genuine. At the same time, many others are likely to remain outside employment, openly unemployed for longer or shorter periods or as non-participants in the labour force, (particularly females), because they do not think it is worthwhile to join the search for a job which is so hard to find.

But whatever the particular outcome, it will involve for most of the graduates a substantial reduction in earnings and status -- below what they anticipated when they embarked on their course of study and below what was commonly received by new graduates a few years ago. There will be strong objective grounds for considerable disappointment and frustration.

Whether this frustration will be sufficient to stir more profound changes is another matter. Even after allowing for a period of unemployment, some reduction in earnings, loss of status and lower prospects for promotion, most graduates still seem likely to end up better off than those without degrees (or secondary school certificates) and still receiving at least a modest return for the financial and other sacrifices they and their families have made to get the education. Moreover, a declining job market may stimulate some students (and their families) to develop an even stronger interest in getting good jobs -- and avoiding any activities in the meantime which might prejudice his chances. (This is particularly likely when a high proportion of graduate jobs are in government.)

But actions are not all and not only governed by maximising immediate self-interest. The other result of the frustration -- and the growing prospect of unemployment and feeling of pointless endeavour facing students even while studying -- is to raise questions about the organisation of an economy and society which permits such unemployment to arise. These questions hit the part of the population most vulnerable to such attack -- those, according to Eric Hoffer, who are "intensely discontented but not destitute.... those whose poverty

is relatively recent, the new poor, who think with the ferment of frustration. The memory (one might add, their hopes) of better things is as fire in their veins. They are the disinherited and dispossessed who respond to every rising mass movement." (1)

Most unemployed university graduates cannot really be called poor -- but after three or four years in university, three or four years in unemployment must seem somewhat like poverty. And as De Tocqueville said: "Discontent is likely to be highest when misery is bearable: when conditions have so improved that an ideal state seems almost within reach." Or as Hoffer puts the point: "It is not actual suffering but the taste of better things which excites people to revolt." (2)

This is not a subtle chain of argument, nor is it new. There are other possible outcomes of growing unemployment among the educated elite. One of the worst possibilities would be for elitist education to now be followed by policies designed merely to defuse any tendency to revolt among the educated -- by buying them off with jobs and a stake in a system which leaves others less educated unemployed and incomes distribution extremely unequal. This could for a while deal with the most vociferous section of the unemployed -- but resources will be seriously strained, unemployment elsewhere become exacerbated and general inequalities may worsen.

At the moment, degrees are not worthless and students still have something to lose. But if unemployment continues to grow and degrees are further devalued, what then?

(1) Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer*, New American Library, 1951, p.31.

(2) Hoffer, *op cit*, p.33.