

Harvesting on the Fields of Ignorance:
On the Blessings of Not-Knowing and Not-Understanding in the Post-State Socialist Reforms of
Higher Learning

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Just as I realized the meaning of life
They changed it.
Contemporary urban folklore

I

Once we too were students and we were young. Being young under Brezhnev was as different from being young in my country now as it is in many other countries. When a western journalist asked a Soviet worker at around that time about sex in the Soviet Union, the answer followed the ideologically sound line of reasoning: “V Sovetskom Soyuze seksa net” (There is no sex in the Soviet Union). Being young under Brezhnev and complying with the requirements of that regime was not always too easy.

Sometimes we smoked. Actually, students in the *institute* I attended smoked far too much according to any standard, be it communist, capitalist or for that matter - feudal. I still remember the way we were warned against that habit, suggesting that the amount of nicotine contained in one cigarette was sufficient to kill a horse. Our response to that was that with every cigarette we smoked we killed a horse in ourselves and became ever so more human.

I remembered that story recently and realized what a great dialectic revolutionary principle we followed back then - truly Marxist for its dialectic method, truly revolutionary in its radicalism. Overcoming ourselves was after all the central task of the revolution, killing the old within ourselves and in the society, so that the “new man” could rise. Exactly like killing the horse in us. Commentators like a Hungarian historian Istvan Rev have recently made a significant effort to demonstrate the idiocy of such dialectics by quoting for example Hungarian an anonymous member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party who, with a hermeneutical bent, as Rev suggests, realized in 1989 the inner contradictions of the revolutionary dialectics:

“We bow our heads before those, too, who led by good intentions and by their convictions, became the victims of assaults or atrocities while fighting on both sides, even on the other side.” (Rev 2000, p. 297).

This sounds close to somebody being a horse and a human at the same time, if I may add. Rev’s paraphrase continues:

If everybody fought for democratic socialism, for the sovereignty of the nation, for far-reaching reforms, than we are heirs of everybody; then we are both this side and the other one (if “the other side” has any meaning at all). We shot ourselves while defending ourselves from ourselves, and either we are the Soviets, too, or both of us (that is, we) were invaded and finally defeated (Rev 2000, p. 297).

This, I would suggest is the tragedy of the revolution – we killed others and killed ourselves in attempt to overcome ourselves. Apparently, there was no end to the killing – everybody had an element of “old” within and therefore deserved to die. It was also everybody’s responsibility to report on the identified expressions of the “old” to the *organs* set up to assist in purging the old, the corrupt from the emerging communist body. It is therefore important to remember that indeed “communism” was something each of us did to ourselves and the others around. In an attempt to

survive everybody became an agent of communism, reducing with this our collective chances to survive.

However, on a final account it is not that obvious at all what role did communism play, or did not play in this major 20th century tragedy. To a very significant degree, invasion and control by the Soviet Union dominated the picture, and breaking away from it was might well have been perceived in 1989 as a goal higher than replacing communism with capitalism. It is, of course, all fine until we are not dealing with Russia. We can blame everything on the Russians. But whom can the Russians blame? It is because of the Russia's central position as the source of revolution and the invader, that I think that Russia's position for almost a decade now has been about creating a discourse of continuity from the Tsarist regime, through the Soviet Union all the way to contemporary Russian Federation in an attempt to consolidate the country, creating a new national identity and avoid it further falling apart, while the rest of the region is looking for ways to construct a discontinuity with the state-socialist recent past, identifying with the West, or their own more distant past.

Condemning the mass murder of millions in the name of the "new society" constitutes a position, as an old Bolshevik would certainly have understood, that represents nothing short of a bourgeois weakness that also was to be overcome by rooting it out mercilessly. That is – by killing the bourgeois within. Nikolai Bukharin, the last remaining of the old Bolshevik intellectuals, killed during the Moscow purges in 1938 understood the tragedy of his position, but nevertheless agreed with the dialectic that required his death, so that the Soviet society could purge the old in itself and give rise to the new man and new society. Only one of them was worthy to see the promised land of communism – that was obviously comrade Stalin. Bukharin agreed with everything – being charged with the crimes he had not committed and even getting killed for that. All of that was done in the name of goals and to follow the universal laws of the development of the society. The only he could not accept was if comrade Stalin had *really* believed that he had committed those crimes. Bukharin was to die as a representative of the old who had no place in the new society. And if the public was to be told that it was actually for his crime, that was acceptable too. He only wanted comrade Stalin to realize that it was not because of his crimes that we had to die, but to make space for the new man and a better society. On December 10, 1937 Nikolai Bukharin wrote his last letter to Stalin. He opens it by saying:

Iosif Vissarionovich:

This is perhaps the last letter I shall write to you before death (Getty and Naumov 1999, p. 556).

Later in this rather long letter he makes his revolutionary position abundantly clear:

For God's sake, don't think that I am engaging here in reproaches, even in my inner thoughts. I wasn't born yesterday. I know all too well that *great* plans, *great* ideas, and *great* interests take precedence over everything, and I know that it would be petty for me to place the question of my own person on a *par* with the *universal-historical* tasks resting, first and foremost, on your shoulders. But it is here that I feel my deepest agony and find myself facing my chief, agonizing paradox (Getty and Naumov 1999, p. 557).

He continues:

If I were absolutely sure that your thoughts ran precisely along this path, then I would feel so much more at peace with myself. Well, so what! If it must be so, then so be it! But believe me, my heart boils over when I think that you might *believe* that I am guilty of these crimes and that in your heart of hearts you *yourself* think that I am really guilty of all these horrors. *In that case*, what would it mean? Would it turn out that I have been helping to deprive [the party] of many people (beginning with myself!) - that is, that I am wittingly committing an *evil*?! In that case, such action could never be justified. My head is giddy with confusion, and I feel like yelling at the top of my voice. I feel like pounding

my head against the wall: for, *in that case*, I have become a cause for the death of others. What am I to do? What am I to do (Getty and Naumov 1999, p. 558).

And while having not committed the crimes he is being charged with he still finds guilt in himself, such as having hung around with another traitor, Kamenev back in 1928:

For *this* forgive me Koba. I weep as I write. I no longer need anything, and you yourself know that I am probably making my situation worse by allowing myself to write all this. But I just can't, I simply can't keep silent. I must give you my final "farewell". It is for this reason that I bear no malice toward anyone, not toward the [party-state] leadership nor the investigators nor anyone in between. I ask you for forgiveness ... (Getty and Naumov 1999, p. 558).

So the party of the Bolsheviks was overcoming itself just by means of a mass suicide.

II

I have taken this time to give the above example to draw a broader context for what the today's talk is about – the transition from communism to capitalism.

First, we have to see the process historically. I do not think that 1989 can be understood without studying communism, its rise and sources in the western thought. It does not look meaningful to me to start from the position that some kind of perverse communist societies of unknown or unimportant origin started falling apart in 1989. The communist societies did not represent the proverbial "East" in Europe, but grew out of the Western modern project. I do believe that one should be aware of three hundred years of European history and intellectual thought to have a proper context for the situation in 1989. I also think that a particular notice is to be taken on the Russian revolution. Looking into the rise and nature of communism allows one to see a few threats the current imperatives of economic growth and economic competitiveness, as promoted for example by the European Commission, pose to freedom and democracy.

Second, I am afraid that talking about the post 1989 developments in terms of a transition from "communism to capitalism" is as meaningless as the previous transition from capitalism to communism. As it appears to me, the Marxist theory of capitalism giving a rise to communism has never been confirmed, and I do not think that turning the formula around would improve our understanding of the laws of the "development of the society". I would rather assume that there are no such laws. But I am not a historian and could perhaps have got it all terribly wrong. Rather than trying to come up with another grand theory, I could perhaps say a few words on practical issues related to supporting the development of freer societies in place of those that thanks to ruthless application of a fully scientific theory had become slaveries.

But before moving to the transition which may well appear, as a Russian writer Viktor Pelevin put it – from "Nowhere to Nothing", we may take a look at what an old communist Aleksandr Yakovlev had to say about it.

Yakovlev (1923-2005, a member of the Communist Party since 1944) was one of the architects of Mr Gorachev's "perestroika" and the secretary responsible for ideological work (The First Secretary) in the Politburo. I saw him speaking in Moscow in February 2005, at the age of 83, just a few months before he passed away. In a conference devoted to the 20th anniversary of the beginning of perestroika, Mr Yakovlev spoke about what he thought of communism back then, and what to his understanding had come out of the changes. He had no illusions of the outcomes of *perestroika*:

Today we see that power has become corrupt, [those at the power are] cheats and swindlers. In the days of Brezhnev we thought that we were the most honest, that indeed every bourgeois had to bow before us, like Mayakovsky had it. But it occurred that only by creating a small possibility to steal it became an everyday matter, even a satisfaction and, if you wish, an enjoyment. As a result of this miscalculation we ended up with such a quasi criminal or criminal capitalism instead of a normal bourgeois civil society (Yakovlev 2005, pp. 15-16. Translation from the Russian by V.T.).

Perhaps the initiators of *perestroika* made the same mistake as other revolutionaries in other times or perhaps even our own contemporary revolutionaries, who believe that removing an oppressive regime is well sufficient to release the creative human powers. Instead some other forces have been unleashed back then and more recently again. Apparently human beings have as little of the workers' class interests in their nature as the bourgeois civil society or to turn but to another religion – the Buddha nature. One may still wonder how was this lesson not learned from the communist revolution in 1917. Yakovlev certainly had no illusions what it was about when he called it the “counter revolution”:

Until we do not understand for the real that in 1917 we had a counterrevolution, that we had for 70 years criminals governing our country and we had a criminal fascist regime with all of its consequences, that we have until this very day standing in our city squares a monument of an ideologist and practitioner of international terrorism (and that during our fight against terrorism!), like this we continue living with a divided consciousness. It was him who spoke about reaching worldwide communism by violent means. This is terrorism. It was him who established subversive groups in the form of communist parties that were paid for that with the money from our budget. We hosted schools of terror for other countries, particularly from Latin America, Africa and others. It was him who in his articles wrote about terror – hangings, shootings, and so on.

And then, referring to comrade Ulyanov's successor:

I. Stalin personally signed documents that condemned to execution 44 thousand individuals, personally ... (Yakovlev 2005, p. 18-19).

He also describes the events in 1917:

Let us remember times after February 1917 – criminality acquired its license. But after the October counterrevolution in 1917 banditry became a state policy (Yakovlev 2005, p. 14).

What we now refer to as the communist or state-socialist society was fundamentally a criminal society, where the knowledge of the ultimate laws of nature and the society justified any crime and the breaking of any agreement. Mass murders were committed in the name of power, although some like Bukharin were still looking for a more profound theoretical justification of that. And apparently it was not as much because of the civility of the “new man” who apparently was still the old one, still the same he had been for the past thirty thousand years, but the oppressive society that made him and her to behave within certain limits. Something many in these countries seem to be missing – the civility of the slaves in a slave society. But one does not become a free man by having one's master killed or removed. Apparently, becoming free takes learning. Free society is not just a free society. Living in a free society has its own norms and it is structured around its institutions. Moving away from the communist slavery requires building the institutions as well as learning how to live with them. It is a complex process which Offe, Elster and Preuss called “rebuilding the ship at sea” in the title of their book a decade ago, arguing convincingly that we are not free choosing the institutions for the new society, but bound to follow but a few known patterns and unable to “overcome” our own recent past, exactly as Yakovlev spoke in 2005:

I do remember how I more than once discussed with M. Gorbachev that the *nomenklatura* was infected with the old psychology, that it was very hard to make it rethinking or overcoming itself (Yakovlev 2005, p. 15) .

Despite all the lessons Mr. Yakovlev had learned during his long life, he never understood that “overcoming” oneself as an individual and a society was an empty theoretical construct, with no meaning other than a license to kill. But the proverbial horse in us never dies, but perhaps it can be controlled, disciplined and educated.

III

Overcoming itself is one of the main themes of *transition*. As children of communism, we have been told, we have to acquire a new mentality, we have to become normal. I do remember my first meeting with Prof. Stefan Amsterdamski, the late Dean of the Graduate School for Social Research under the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Science in Warsaw about a dozen years ago. He told me that *we* had to change *their* mentality. I do not know why exactly he said that. Whether he really believed that or did he expect that this was something representatives of “Western” funding agencies wanted to hear I will never know. But I did think at that moment that I did not want to change anybody’s mentality. That a de-brainwash was not a much better than the original brainwash performed by the communists, and that people should be left alone to handle their own mentalities in an unlikely case the word can be attributed any consistent meaning. This, I am afraid, may be a relatively rare position. Agencies and individuals engaged in transition usually take a more active position. They know the difference between the good and evil, old and new, normal and abnormal. And they are eager to reach out their hand and sometimes cash to normalize the abnormal. I think that I do not exaggerate suggesting that I have a problem or two with that attitude, and many of my East European colleagues have too, although not always do they acknowledge that openly.

There appears to be a rather significant gap lying between the understanding represented by the owners of the “transition culture” – that is the Western funding and expert organizations as Michael Kennedy suggests, that are in a hegemonic position to both diagnose the East European societies as well as provide the remedies, and the East European recipients of that funding and expertise who at the times may have a problem with openly acknowledging their abnormality. It is, after all, that in many of the western minds the image of the Eastern man as a barbarian at the gates has changed little over the past three centuries or so.

Back in the eighteen century Edward Gibbon saw the Eastern man as somewhat less human than the humans in cultured countries:

The portrait of Attila exhibits the genuine deformity of a modern Calmuck; a large head, a swarthy complexion, a small deep-seated eyes, a flat nose, a few hairs in the place of a beard, broad shoulders, and a short square body, of nervous strength, though of a disproportioned form (quoted in Wolff 1996, p. 299).

But the picture drawn by a Leningrad-born American writer Gary Shtayngart does not appear more generous:

All those Georgians and Tatars and Ukrainians with the sweaty-brow entrepreneurial spirit so beloved by the American consulate. All the Ingush and Ossetians and Chechens with casual attitude towards public violence and that would create the fine explosive Russia we know today. These men could throw a punch, strangle a hooker, fake a customs form, hijack a truck, blow up a restaurant, start a shell company, buy a television network, run for parliament (Shteyngart 2006, p. 58).

But this is not necessarily the way the people in Eastern Europe see themselves. According to the Bolshevik and communist discourse the slope of development had just the opposite direction.

Seven years before his murder by his friend Koba and other comrades still alive, Nikolai Bukharin thought that people in the Soviet Union indeed enjoyed a privileged cognitive position. Simply saying, being a communist gives one a more adequate understanding of the nature and society:

Cognition, considered historically, is the more and more adequate *reflection* of objective reality (Bukharin 1931, p. 18, original italics).

In a similar vein, Andrei Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union reports to the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934:

Our literature is the youngest of all literatures of all peoples and countries. And at the same time it is the richest in ideas, the most advanced and the most revolutionary literature. (Zhdanov 1934, p. 17).

And not far from that line, Prof. Sadovnichii suggests that for Russia "joining the Bologna Process would equal brain surgery where Russia has been given the role of organ donor" (Subetto, Chekmarev 2003). Andrei Kortunov has recently suggested that an adequate niche for the Russian Universities internationally would be training faculty for the US universities. There seems to be little doubt that the perceptions on the academic potential in Eastern Europe are widely diverse, to put it politely.

Many who come to Eastern Europe are well aware that they have a formidable work to do taming the barbarian – call him Ivan, Jaan, Jan, Janis, Janos. The task is more difficult also because of the cultural and linguistic issues. Back in early 1990s only few of those people spoke English, the language many people among the more “normal” learned during their first three years of lives. Entire generation of associates with international organizations in Eastern Europe were recruited from the ranks of the local English teachers. Which usually meant a high degree of loss of the subject specific content in the course of communication.

Indeed, making the transition to work has been difficult. Not only have the people in transition found it difficult to accept some fundamental assumptions of the transition culture, such as their relative inferiority in comparison to Westerners. I would also argue that the owners of the transition culture would have never been able to work in Eastern Europe if they had anything close to an adequate understanding how they were often perceived in local communities – we still hear about the “Marriott Hotel brigade in Warsaw in reference to World Bank delegations working on the Polish transition. Even more difficult would their position have been if they communicated with the aid recipients directly, without translation.

Internalizing the inferiority of the East by the latter has its own effects. As Attila Melegh (2006) has recently suggested, purging the Roma as the “other”, “the East”, “the backward” within is one of the effects of the overly eager white Magyar population to present itself to the West as genuinely Western. Constituting just another *dialectic* attempt of a society to overcome itself.

Salman Rushdie (1991) has makes a wise remark in the brackets in one of his essays entitled “Imaginary Homelands”:

The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained (p. 17).

This stands well in agreement with my experience from thirteen years of work on East European higher education reforms. In many instances reforms emerge through translation. I remember that sometimes in early 1990’s according to one report the number of higher education institutions in Ukraine had grown more than four-fold thanks to simple exercise in translation that turned some

700 vocational schools into higher education institutions. A reform performed only on paper. And very efficiently indeed. One would say that its cost was indeed so close to zero that it is not worth of mentioning.

There are many concepts that do not exist in many of the East European languages, like policy, the rule of law, or for that matter – quality assurance, tenure or academic freedom. While concepts like that appear on project documentation submitted to donors in English, in local languages there is usually something else. But luckily enough, that never reaches the donors' attention and that makes the work possible. Eventually both languages and realities change and new words emerge to signify new phenomena. We have fascinating examples how through the introduction of new concepts – “lyceum”, “gymnasium”, “college”, or even something as simple as “university autonomy” attempts were made to open the space for new realities. These realities are, however, always negotiated between the new imaginations and old realities, and therefore always constitute cultural hybrids.

This would perhaps be the true meaning of transition, but it is much slower a process than the owners of the transition culture would have accepted. Misunderstanding and gaps in communication are being compensated by a flexibility demonstrated by the recipients of aid and expertise, lubricated by the expectation of funds and other benefits to follow the humiliation and self-denial.

The positive changes, to the extent these exist, have been much slower than initially expected. The expectation to demolish the state-socialist institutional fabric and replace it with another one or nothing at all except a free market, have not been met. This has allowed Andrzej Rychard, a Polish sociologist to remark recently that the recent economic boom in Poland has not been accompanied by any significant institutional reform.

IV

Finally a few further words should be said about higher education reforms. As I suggested above, education and particularly higher education has a critical role to play in social changes such as those in Easter Europe over the past two decades. I also suggested that historical experience seems to have demonstrated that knocking down the old structures, murdering those representing the old habits and mentalities and doing away with the old teaching has hardly ever lead to a better society. Most often, as the lessons learned by Alexnader Yakovlev have suggested, that leads to further lawlessness and disrespect of human lives. Perhaps it is not unlearning the old but learning the new, which is important.

Early 1990s were characterized my high expectations for fast and comprehensive reforms in East European higher education systems. Even UNESCO, an organization which perhaps for some pretty good reasons had for decades been rather kind to the state-socialist dictatorship organized in 1991 a conference that concluded that the East European higher education systems, corrupt and contaminated as they were, were likely to disappear in a relatively short time and make space for new universities – free, smart, with lots of research funding and frequent travels to academic conferences and exchanges in West. Well, that never happened. More recently similar expectations have been loaded on the European Bologna Process. The results are most likely to be comparable.

But one has to admit that they idea of a revolutionary change in higher education was attractive indeed. Reform agenda in higher education, at least to extent their external drives are concerned, follow the transition culture as described by Michael Kennedy, westernization being their main

theme and goal. In 1995-96 the Civic Education Program mounted a massive exercise conducting a needs assessment in Central and East European social sciences.

The study makes an attempt measuring the penetration of Western knowledge and teaching methods, the latter being conceptualized in terms of the so-called active methods and use of written assignments, into post-communist universities. Indicators used include the following:

- the percent of university teachers who have studied in the West,
- the average number of conferences abroad that university teachers have attended since January 1992,
- the average number of times that university teachers have gone abroad on a scholarship or exchange program,
- the average number of times that university teachers have taught a course abroad,
- the percentage of university teachers who have received formal training in teaching methods and curriculum development by an international program,
- the average number of international research projects in which university teachers have participated.

The study also looks into the Western presence in East European universities, such as:

- Western visiting lecturers since January 1992, as a percentage of the host department's size,
- Western visiting lecturers who have taught for a full semester or more since January 1992 (calculated as a percentage of the host department's size),
- the percentage of courses taught by Western visiting lecturers in the fall 1995 semester (CEP 1997, p. 31).

The report expresses disappointment over the low levels of exposure to Western knowledge and methods of teaching, complaining for example that:

More than one-third of university teachers in the surveyed departments have never studied in the West, gone abroad on a scholarship or exchange program, or even attended a conference abroad since 1992. (ibid p. 30)

Retrospectively one may suggest that the results were surprisingly high and in many instances most likely heavily exaggerated, suggesting for example that in 1995 Western materials constituted 24% per cent of social science teaching materials in Russia, 49% in Romania and 61% in Estonia. Given that more than a decade later one can still find but a few foreign language speaking social scientists in Russian universities, such results are highly likely to be deeply misleading. Be it as it may, what is more interesting is that the fact that exposure to West, Western presence and the use of Western knowledge and teaching methods all have had minimal if any impact on teaching and learning in East European universities. East seems to be strongly resisting any Western influence. The Report (CEP 1997) for example bluntly states:

Western visiting lecturers have no significant impact on the instructional goals of their host departments; and study in the West has a negative influence on the goal of teaching cognitive skills. (ibid. p. 48)

And:

Foreign exposure has no significant effect on the goal of university teachers at Central and East European social science departments of teaching substantive course content. (ibid.)

That may be seen as supporting Jean Baudrillard's earlier claim:

Now, contrary to the apparent facts which suggest that all cultures are penetrable by the West – that is, corruptible by the universal, it is the West which is eminently penetrable. The other cultures (including those of Eastern Europe), even when they give the impression of selling themselves, of prostituting themselves to material goods or Western ideologies, in fact remain impenetrable behind the mask of prostitution. They can be wiped out physically or morally, but not penetrated (Baudrillard 1994).

While the expressions Baudrillard is using appear somewhat frank to me, I do think that he is correct indicating a massive problem, which the owners of the transition culture deny, or attribute to the backwardness if not outright barbarianism of the recipients of aid and expertise. Assuming a higher position on the scale of development makes certainly the life much easier for the Western expert and aid organizations by eliminating the need to understand the reality on the ground and assuming it to be worthless. However, one may try to imagine a better world, which does not emerge as a result of some natural law of the development of the society. It would suggest that a fairer and more open society may emerge not as a result of wiping away the old, but working through it. This approach would require understanding of the society to be changed, something which was certainly not present among the agencies that entered East European societies with all possible reform agendas in early 1990s.

After almost twenty years of reforms it is not obvious at all what exactly was wrong with the communist system of higher learning. What exactly was it what made the communist higher learning communist. Suggestions have been many – rote lecturing, lack of a work in small groups, vocational orientation of higher education, a different degree system. Retrospectively most, if not all of that has been mistaken. While Western consultants working in East have presented their own particular experience as the universally western, there have been very few Eastern practices without having a counterpart somewhere in West. Moreover, as a part of the Bologna Process, East European higher education is actually been driven back where it stood twenty years ago – closely connected to the needs of the labor markets, vocational and mostly illiberal in its nature.

Michael David-Fox in a paper a few years ago gives an example about one of the early Bolshevik reforms in higher education – the “laboratory-brigade method”, something I would suggest to take a closer look by those who assume that communist higher education did not know about the work in small groups. Perhaps, they new more of it than anybody else:

... revolutionary innovations in pedagogy – so-called active methods such as the Dalton or Laboratory plan, touted for their collectivism and the undermining of the authority of the old professoriate – were implemented much more in Communist universities than the old universities, and formed the basis for the “laboratory-brigade method” that swept through higher education in the era of the first Five-Year Plan (David-Fox 2005, p. 34).

What seems to be one of the fundamental problems of communist higher education is its detachment from the reflection on the society, critical analysis of its processes and offering a site to critical discourses and meaning-making. But again, not only has the transition culture largely failed making a contribution here. Quite often it has been instrumental supporting narrow managerialism and utilitarianism it has adopted as the quintessentially universal. The latter, however, offers little protection against the threat of repeating the twentieth century horrors. Some of the arguments made, such as for example promoting social inclusion of the Roma on the basis of its higher economic returns all too easily open the door to new atrocities given a sufficient economic justification is being found. One should accept that a fairer and a more open society may not necessarily be the cheapest one – a position increasingly difficult to maintain in the conditions of the global economic competition among the players some of whom demonstrate an utter disrespect to freedom, life and human rights.

We should also remain aware that the top of the academic hierarchy located in core countries cannot perform the task of meaning-making everywhere and offer the sites for critical discourses globally. Global theories and global meanings have their strict limits. This reminds me for example a discussion with the Dean of the Social Science Faculty of the Chang Mai University about a decade ago. He was a good Buddhist who took his work and self-improvement seriously.

He told me: “Every evening when I go home, I think over what I have done today and try to understand how could I do better tomorrow”. But then, he had a serious problem. He said: “We are doing a lot of research in this faculty on prostitution. But as I see the stack of research reports growing, I also see the problem getting worse in this country.”

Here, I think we have a significant problem when we think about scholarship in peripheral countries as we are, our connection to the international academic communities as well as participation in the local public spheres and supporting to solving local problems. To give a simple example – a mainstream educated reader in Estonia finds Lacanian analysis of early 20th century Estonian poetry just ridiculous. Despite the fact that this is something a scholar can give a successful paper on or publish it in a reputable learned journal. It does not ring any bells in somebody who sees the soil in that country being more than just dirt. Not that I have anything against Lacan. But only that much of West assumes to be universal is not that universal at all. There has to be a better way to engage in a high level scholarship that is more inclusive for languages and ideas than the current highly hierarchical academic world allows. But this is not necessarily a direction we have been following recently.

It appears to me as if we have traveled almost a full circle over that past two decades. Expectations harbored among East European intellectuals to replace the communist university as servant of the industry, combined with training in communist ideology and military training with a host of institutions similar to the top US private universities have not materialized at all. Resources available to universities remain often scarce and even if for many of the countries, particularly those who have joined the European Union, the borders have been removed, shortage of funding for research if not travel, render participation in international conferences if not impossible then often meaningless. In the context of a project funded by the European Science Foundation we still discuss the issues of East European social sciences “catching-up” – term that at least for this speaker carries a heavy load of orientalism, so much present in the transition culture discourse.

Sometimes the voices heard from the European Commission also sound somewhat familiar to an East European. In a typically anti-intellectual manner:

The Commission, finally, sees itself as surrounded by ignorance and a lack of commitment (Olsen 2005, p. 22).

And elsewhere:

The Commission also claims that the time of “heated debates” over university organization have come to an end (...), thereby framing reforms as technical questions of finding efficient organizational forms consistent with necessities and shared goals (ibid. p. 21).

Ben Okri has recently shared his hopes for the university of the future:

The academies of the future will do one thing we do not do today. They will teach the art of self-discovery. There is nothing more fundamental in education. We turn out students from our universities who know how to give answers, but not how to ask questions. The wisdom centres in our culture do not reach our students. They leave universities with skills for the workplace, but no knowledge of how to live, or what living is for. They are not taught how to see. They are not taught how to listen. They are not taught the great art of obedience, and how it precedes self-mastery. They are not taught the true art of reading (Okri 2003, p.8).

It is hard to see this happening under the current mainstream European higher education policy, but exactly what Okri is advising us against:

We take the living potential that are young minds and turn them, reduce them into job-fillers and economy providers (ibid.).

V

I am not arguing for, nor am I requiring stupidity. What I would like to see is a scholarly humility that acknowledges the necessary limits of the understanding of each and every of us, perhaps the only productive way of not-knowing there is. It is a privilege to be able to lead an utterly unproductive life, at least as far as industrial production goes. However, the issue most critical in the light of the communist and fascist experiences in Europe is that one has to support a critical mass of free minds even if that costs. Using the best minds for marketing research may well constitute a misuse or even abuse of the most valuable human resource we have – the power of well trained minds.

The Soviet slavery by the end of its days had become totally unproductive, being a negative value-added economy, and I still maintain that this was one of the most significant reasons why it fell. But I do not think that we should or even can rely on the economic efficiency only. We better take care that is a sufficient number of people who understand what is going on next time some madman comes up with a final theory and decides that from that point on nobody else needs to bother thinking on anything else but the ways to produce a more effective weaponry and killing all the enemies, starting from ourselves.

While I do not approve the ignorance with which many agencies entered the East European societies in the early 1990s, assuming, quite often, the lower value of human beings there and their aspirations, I still call for admitting a need for a different kind of ignorance – the fact the nobody can ever assume and understanding of all there is, and the need to avoid offering final solution. It is a moral imperative to assume that such does not exist – neither in economic progress or in any revolutionary program.

I would rather remind us about Mikhail Bakhtin, who humbly suggested that: “The world is free and open. Everything is ahead. Everything is still to come.” Having experienced what he had, he perhaps had the least reason to say it. But he had the courage and humility to do so.

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