

# The vocation of the university and the anti-reason of bureaucracy. On the negative aspects of the internationalization of higher education in Poland

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The fear of tutors and teachers, conformism of students, at last - indifference and apathy of their parents - these are side effects of contemporary changes in education. In his essay Piotr Nowak searches for the sources of these negative phenomena. One of them is enormous hypertrophy of bureaucracy at universities and a new language it addresses to the people of knowledge; another - mass culture, egalitarianism, and industrialization of the University.

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## Introduction

When troubled by the silent reply from my students after asking them about their favorite books I used to add: 'You know, Kafka, a great German writer or Dostoyevsky, Russian political and religious thinker'. This used to provoke laughter. Today I don't hear it any more. A sad conclusion is simple: students stopped reading books replacing knowledge with information. Books have been pushed out by spark-notes and great names ceased to mean anything. I wouldn't put all blame on students. In my opinion this situation to a large extent is a consequence of 'liberal' and 'open minded' attitude of teachers. Let me give you an example. My university colleagues, driven - in most of the cases - by the care for students and their convenience, copy and scan excerpts from books that students are supposed to read for their classes. I do not accept such practices. I believe that such behavior fosters many disturbing and destructive habits. I do not accept it not only because a MA freshman - former fourth year MA student - doesn't know where the university library, or for that matter any library, is. I refuse to accept it because as an academic teacher I would like great books' of Western tradition to be read completely, but also as a publisher, who experiences on his own skin that students lack the habit of buying books, that they stopped to fashion themselves into 'an intelligent and a well-read person', that they are satisfied with copied bits and pieces. Today's student does not see any worth in buying a book, and perceives reading it to be lame. Instead of reading, they 'click', they 'google' and 'copy-paste'. It's not cool anymore to be an intellectual. It doesn't bring any money. It doesn't bring any prestige. I get a feeling that students from our partners changed into illiterate troglodytes. It is more and more difficult to interest them in a topic without a power-point presentation, without images of thought, without a 'sentence' projected to the screen. They don't understand that you can do without it. Learning turns out to be too difficult or too boring to them. They are immature, childish. Many times I've experienced that, for example, difference between 'good' and 'evil' seems to them a mere matter of convention, a matter in which we can always come to terms with each other. These students come, later on, to my classes. I'm afraid that everything I'm telling them is necessarily as abstract as

paintings from Trietrakow's gallery when seen without a basic knowledge in the history of art. We all are, of course, free men and everyone can look at them, but to a completely ignorant person the images would say nothing from what the author intended to say. Perception of such a person will be limited to an admiration for the frame, some interest in realistic representation of characters from more than 200 years ago, or a thoughtless perception of colorful stains in the case of 20th century painting. So I always encouraged my students, and I still do, to study at home, to look for and recognize themselves in the works of philosophy, literature and other arts. It is a time consuming activity, but a very worthwhile one.

Recently, yet another steps have been taken to the convenience of troglodyte students, who have always disregarded self-knowledge. This time the aid comes from the bureaucrats of Ministry of Science and Higher Education. They published a handbook written by professor Andrzej Kraśniewski under the title 'How to construct programs of education in accordance with the National Educational Framework for Higher Education' written for academic teachers, who are supposed to begin to teach according to this newly adopted framework. One sentence of that book puzzled me the most, and it reads as follows: 'Effects of teaching defined by an academic institution should not reflect expectations and ambitions of the faculty, but a possibility of achieving these results *by the least apt student* (author's italics), who is to be granted a diploma confirming his qualifications". Supporters of such attitude claim that this does not mean lowering of the standards of education, but a redefinition of the effects of education in a way that will allow achieving them by the least apt student. Let us imagine, then, that we have 'the effect of education' defined in the following manner: "A student, who finishes a course in 'Modern Philosophy' is able to recognize, define and describe the most important terms and problems of modern epistemology". My question is, then: What about reading 'Transcendental Ethics' that opens 'The Critique of Pure Reason'? Does the work done with this book reflect my expectations and ambitions, as Kraśniewski puts it, or does it belong to a basic readings of a 3rd year Philosophy student? Does it, at all, fit in 'effects of education' as we defined? If it fits, then the least apt student is unable - and I know it from my long academic practice - to master it. Redefinition of the effect of education in reality does mean lowering the standards of education and a substitution of knowledge with a temporary set of information, useful in at a given moment on the job market. This is a negative evaluation of students.

We are talking about a situation, in which the standard of academic teaching is being adjusted to fit not even an average, but the least apt person, that is to say, a person who is the last fit for studying at all. In my opinion, Kraśniewski's suggestions are an unprecedented attempt to introduce a negative evaluation of students. Until now in my classes I have looked for the best and most intelligent students. Now, I'm suggested to change. I'm encouraged to conduct a quiz for the biggest idiot in the group, for the greatest victim of his or her own incapability, who will then help me to write the syllabus. This is insane.

## Cashed freedom

The university of old was a place where the past referred to the future via the present. Today, it is neither necessary nor possible, because university is supposed to refer only to the present, in particular, to the requirements of the markets with its narrow, material needs. Scholars no longer have any influence on how universities are run. They gave up this field to business and administration. Submission and lack of criticism are new valuable scholarly features. 'Sapere aude' a distinction for courage, so precious in Kant's time, is berried on the bottom of

the closet. Since my existence depends on different evaluations, why in the world would I put myself in any unnecessary danger? “And yet, all around me - Kant writes - I hear orders: Don't think! Officer orders: Don't think! Train! A financial adviser orders: Don't think! Pay! A priest: Don't think! Believe!” Today, and it is a fundamental sin of scholars, 'not thinking' is the most common way. Academicians, some out of fear of unemployment, some for fear of losing their well paid jobs, run away from the siege of administration and business into a mild obstruction desinterpreting their orders, or worse, they strike a chord of moral superiority which provokes an honest smile on bureaucrats' faces. Meanwhile the stakes are really high. Those are: 'freedom' and 'power'. University used to be a proper sphere of freedom. In the span of hundreds of years it was gradually losing it giving way to politics (that includes church authorities). Today this freedom is almost completely gone. It has been, and we need to say this aloud, cashed or exchanged to other goods like for example academic tourism. This is the illness, but what is the remedy? In the next part of my presentation I would like to draw an outline of a possible solution to this problem.

In my opinion the university of old is dead and that there is no sense to galvanize its corpses. On the contrary. We need to help it leave this world in peace. I believe that the Bologna process and recent reforms of higher education in Poland might significantly contribute to this cause. Thinking has moved out from the university and this gives some hope. An institution I have the pleasure to help building, Count August Cieszkowski's Foundation, can be a good example. Our foundation publishes a philosophical quarterly KRONOS, which turned out to be a spectacular success in Poland. We run a publishing house that publishes books in 'Kronos' Library' series. The quarterly is still, to some extent, co-financed by the Warsaw University (which receives valuable points for this support), but considering the scope of the whole enterprise it is hardly a university initiative. We organize conferences, lectures, seminars, screenings and debates. We organize other cultural events and take an active part in widely understood public sphere. We cooperate with city authorities, state institutions like the Ministry of Culture, galleries and cultural institutions run by foreign embassies like the French Center of Culture or Goethe Institute, to name few. We conduct our classes at the university, we do the serious thinking outside its walls. And slowly we learn how to live with it.

Thanks to the implementation of rules common to the Western universities, rules, that were supposed to help universities to cope better with the requirements of the free market, in a couple of decades universities changed into vocational schools and are a quite large employers. There is, however, no reason to lament about it. We simply need to learn to do, what we used to do within its walls, outside of it, in the sphere where freedom of thinking still holds on pretty well.