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Norms and dilemmas of the semi-periphery: the society of ignorance and the post-ministerial desert

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**Norms and dilemmas of the semi-periphery:
the society of ignorance and the post-ministerial desert**

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When I hear the word 'culture', I reach for my gun

Attributed to Joseph Goebbels

(The Third Reich's Minister of Propaganda)

The end of 2013 has brought two pieces of good news. Firstly, on 27 November, the Prime Minister dismissed – to the relief, if not satisfaction, of a considerable part of the scientific community – Prof. Dr. Barbara Kudrycka as the Minister of Science and Higher Education. Secondly, on 17 December, the Ministry published a list of scored scientific journals, in which the *Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)* journal was given four points. As for a journal rated for the first time, the score is fairly good, the more so that some of the Ministry's requirements we do not meet by design.

The taking of the position of the ex-minister (*h*-index 6) six years ago was greeted with the hope of the long-awaited reform of Polish science. The hope was fulfilled only partially in the initial period of office while more and more numerous negative phenomena accumulated.

The introduction of Polish science to world science was, according to the Ministry, to be done by the selective adaptation of the forms, if not appearances, of the world scientific community rather than its universal norms, which we repeatedly wrote about in our journal.

The conviction of the ex-minister of her monopoly on wisdom and competence was a symptom of this situation, the results being manifested in the unprecedented harmful bureaucratisation of science, 'and thus the total destruction of objec-

tives and vision of what universities, studies, and research should be' (Drachal 2012: 30). The bureaucratisation resulted from a distrust to the scientific community, the feeling in which the complex of provincialism is difficult not to observe. 'Nothing in fact uncovers provincialism as much as a blind adoration of the mythical centre' (Fronesis 2013). It is also hardly able not to get the impression that the purpose of the bureaucracy is the atomisation of 'the academic community by the reinforcement of the hegemonic position of the Ministry' (List..., 2013), which results in conformism and opportunism (Mizińska 2010). What becomes the hegemon is 'Quantity and its servants - Indicators. [...] Continuous assessments and verifications [...] are manifested in the awarding [...] the sum of "points" for measures indicated by anonymous bureaucrats from the Ministry, having often no idea of the specifics of the work of scholars and students' (ibidem).

Ministry activities and their legal regulations developed a new model of a scientific career, which involved pursuing the path leading to titular (i.e. full) professorship rather than conducting research. The model included (1) the tightening the criteria for obtaining a Ph.D., (2) simplifying the procedure for obtaining habilitation, and (3) bureaucratisation of the procedure for obtaining the titular professorship. A few facts illustrate the latter phenomenon.

Firstly, reviews of Ph.D. and habilitation dissertations are included in the achievements of the potential professor, even though the candidate does not affect the achievement as (s)he may not commission the reviews himself or herself.

Secondly, managing 'research teams implementing projects funded through competitions' are included amongst the achievements towards becoming a professor (Law on Higher Education, article 26, paragraph 2) while it is not required that they 'made any significant contribution to science by the projects' (Starnawska 2013). This regulation depreciates breakthrough, and even epochal, scientific achievements of outstanding scholars, according to the philosophy of the 'collective wisdom'. Neither Nicolaus Copernicus nor Albert Einstein would have a chance for the titular professorship in this system for the latter scholar 'did not win any competition for funding a team that would collectively come up with the theory of relativity' (ibidem).

Thirdly, grants are included in the achievements of the potential professor, a fact that promotes managers rather than scholars, i.e. the ability to raise money is privileged over the contribution to the treasury of knowledge.

Fourthly, the appropriate financial settlement of grants is essential rather than achieved scientific results. This implies the expectation of 'a potential professor to spend a certain sum of public money and settle accounts, even if it brought no profit to science' (Starnawska 2013).

Fifthly, in grant applications it is not only stages of the research that should be planned in detail but also their results. This regulation negates the possibility of epochal discoveries arising from funded grants which are unpredictable and unplanned by definition. A. Einstein, mentioned above, would thus have to outline his theory of relativity in the application as the planned 'effect' (the term favoured in the bureaucrats' jargon) of the grant.

As a result, it is difficult to resist the impression that the criteria to achieve the titular professorship would be hard to meet for a considerable part of the already nominated professors, including both the former and current minister (the former because of her modest scientific achievements, the latter for her lack of promoted doctors and not sufficiently numerous reviews of doctoral and habilitation dissertations) while political connections seem to facilitate this procedure. The nomination of Dr Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, the vice-president of the ruling party and the Mayor of the Capital City of Warsaw (*h*-index 4), on 12 November 2013, soon after she happily avoided being dismissed in the referendum serves as an example. This results from the fact that the nomination of professors was left to the discretion of the Central Commission for Academic Degrees and Titles, being in fact an organ of the state administration (Jaroszyński 2010).

This is related to the fact of the irrational, if not obsessive, distrust of the ex-minister of the faculty, perceived as an anti-developmental interest group, blocking positions to the young generation. This may be indicated by the fact that while the government raised the retirement age from 60 (for women) and 65 (for men) to 70, for associate professors the age was lowered from 70 to 60 and 65, respectively, with a violation of the acquired rights. Interestingly, however, the declarative care for the

young generation did not result in a change in the regulation according to which the vast majority of post-graduate students are not entitled to scholarships. In consequence, post-graduate studies became a hobby for gentlemen. The declarative care of the Ministry for the B.A. and M.A. students does not seem to be felt as inconsistent with the charging of fees for the second field of study. This results from the fact that 'within the constitutional right to free education the student may accumulate a specified minimum of [points in the] ECTS [European Credit Transfer System], if (s)he, however, wishes to gain more, (s)he must pay. Because the ECTS is the exponent of the contribution of the student's work, it can be explicitly said that the Ministry makes students pay for their own overtime' (Trzcionkowski 2013).

One result of the ex-minister's reform is 'the petrification of the feudal system at the top and hysterical rat race at the bottom' (Fronesis 2013). The race results in the formation of a 'new man' – *homo ratus*, who replaced the already outdated *homo sovieticus* and *homo post-totalitaricus* (Mizińska 2010). The massive 'ratification of society' is one result, which involves 'the predatory zeal solely for one's own vested, or even egocentric, and at the same purely short-term, interests' (ibidem). 'The ratification of society, annihilation of personality, [Z.] Bauman's *fluidisation* of everything that have ever had features of sustainability favours the emergence of the phenomenon of *human pulp* – a kind of *human liquid material*, empty and formless. [...] this is the enabling (and in a sense even extortion) of a change of the man controllable from within to one controllable from outside. The latter is the ancestor of Dummy who can be later persuaded all, and allowed to delude himself that it is he who chooses from among a multitude of possibilities whom and what he would wish to be. [...] The only thing that he controls himself is[, however,] the remote control for changing programmes, which, according to its name, are *programming* his mentality' (Mizińska 2010).

In the public debate on the reform of science and higher education, the 'voice of scientists remains neglected. The Ministry [...], appearing in the role of an arbitrator, refuses scientists' right to express by treating their opposition as a conservative resistance [...against] a positive modernisation[, called [...] a defence of the particular privileges and [...] pathological system, as contemporary Academia is being de-

fined' (List..., 2013), and creating 'scientists as feudal reactionaries' (ibidem). At the same time, the creators of the reform 'legitimise it with the argument of the struggle for the students' interest and emancipation, as well as their defence against the ossified education system. The students' interests remains, however, imaginary because their voice in this discussion is negligible [and] students [o]rganisations [...] meet at best with indifference' (List..., 2013). However, contrary to 'the implemented service provider-client logic, the academic staff still is authority [for students] and the reference point in the process of professional and life socialisation' (ibidem). Since therefore 'the resistance of scientists is defined as "reactionary convulsions of the feudal university"', it is under- and postgraduate students[,] defined by the bureaucrats as the main beneficiaries of the reform, who have the potential to challenge its logic' (List..., 2013).

It is important because the whole 'university machine currently operates in one direction: to reward uncritical obedience to successive orders of the Ministry, rector, and minor authorities. [...] Top institutions (such as the Ministry and all sorts of ministerial committees) rely [...], in fact, on the only argument, i.e. their exponentially self-produced PROCEDURES. [...] Banality is, to a large extent, unavoidable (if not intended) result of the Dictatorship of Procedures. [...] A sort of a ministerial "edict" can be taken as an example, regulating how the mourning after the Smolensk tragedy¹ had to be commemorated in the University. This curious document - assuming that adult people within the university community cannot behave properly in such a situation - seems to be irrefutable evidence of infantilisation by the Ministry' (Mizińska 2010).

The university was subordinated to the 'standard of the Firm. The Phantom of the Accountant is hovering over it - similar to that met by the Little Prince on a planet. [...] the Accountant was spending all his life on counting, he was not able, however, to answer to the Prince as to *what* and *why* he was so furiously counting. Although Polish universities very earnestly seek the "implementation" of any arbitrarily imposed "procedures" and "regulations", an increase of their scientific level

¹ The aeroplane catastrophe of 10 April 2010 in which 96 top politicians and public personalities died, including the President.

cannot be seen. They [...] remain the poor relatives of Western universities, which do not know about their [very] existence. In this way uncritical and unthinking imitation results' (Mizińska 2010).

The scoring of journals was to be an element of the objectification of the criteria of scientific achievements. Apart from the criteria being widely criticised by the scientific community, including in our journal, and being changed on several occasions by the Ministry, it is worth noting that, in the procedure of scoring for 2013, the results were to be published by 15 September in order to be able to object till 15 December. In fact, however, the results were published on 17 December, a fact which is one more case of not only a disregard of the scientific community by the Ministry and its incompetent officials, who frequently change their ideas and requirements, but also of their arrogance (see Guzowski 2013).

Interestingly, applications for the scoring of journals are submitted electronically while the system can only read the Latin alphabet. The international philosophical journal 'Σοφία' (*Sophía*) was therefore not considered in the scoring. Indeed, according to the Ministry, Greek is not a recommended language of science. The Ministry's activities had already resulted in the liquidation of philosophy in the University in Białystok, a fact which provoked discussion as to whether or not a university without philosophy is still a university (Likwidacja filozofii..., 2013). The latter question is, however, more complex for 'in today's actual Poland [...]secular philosophy in Białystok is not needed' (Michalski 2013). Academic philosophy in general needs to be defended, 'if compulsory philosophy and secular ethics is introduced to Polish junior and senior high schools [...]. For the time being, ethics is available in 4.5[%] of schools while there are only traces of philosophy in Polish schools' (ibidem). 'Mass teaching of secular ethics and secular philosophy in Polish schools will be possible merely in a strong secular state' (Michalski 2013) which contemporary Poland is not.

The question of philosophy is, however, also an element of the Ministerial ideology, assuming a necessity of the 'bureaucratically controlled commercialisation of research' (Trzcionkowski 2013) and implying that the role of universities is not to perform the culture creating function but – according to the neo-liberal ideology –

the provision of educational services and the preparation of graduates to the current needs of the labour market, i.e. a concept of 'the institution of higher education as a device implementing the current economic demand' (Drachal 2012: 30). In practice, this is to say that – 'based on so foolish [...] demands' (ibidem), in our universities we are selling services to those whom we despise (Mizińska 2013). It is hard not to notice this is the end of a certain civilisation, as predicted, by the way, by the classics of the genre, as indicated in the motto of this text.

One result of the combination of the neo-liberal ideology with the complex of provincialism is the vision of the insurmountable opposition of the market and academia (see List..., 2013), as well as aversion to the humanities, manifested in depreciating of the role of the mother tongue, history, classical languages, logic, ethics, and philosophy (Dębiński 2013). The humanities are 'the basic element of not only university culture but first of all tradition. The moving away from the values carried by humanities may have disastrous consequences for our culture, if not civilisation' (Dębiński 2013). Philological studies in Poland choose 8% of the GCE graduates, the European average being 11% (Trzcionkowski 2013), and this figures are the measure of the 'success' of the ministerial reformers. 'The measure of the peripherality of Poland is not only the index of innovation but also the presence of Latin in the general teaching' (ibidem). In European schools Latin is learned by 20% of students as an average, and in Poland 0% in junior and 3.8% in senior high schools (ibidem). In 2013, the GCE exam in Latin and ancient culture was taken by 208 students, i.e. an embarrassing 0.06% of all candidates, and this is – considering the role of Latin in the history of Poland – a symptom of the crime committed against our ancestors (Trzcionkowski 2013).

Rather than support efforts to improve the conditions for learning, the Ministry discourages young people from studying the humanities, stating 'in the official interpretation of the National Qualifications Framework (KRK), [i.e.] the guidelines defining the laying of programmes, that "the learning effects should not reflect the ambitions of the staff but real opportunities to achieve these effects by the weakest student"' (Trzcionkowski 2013), which may lead to a deep cultural crisis (ibidem). Two ideas patronise the university: training and education (Dębiński 2013). Training,

favoured by the Ministry, 'is the equipping in knowledge and specific skills necessary to perform specific tasks [or] operations. Education[, on the contrary,] is the equipping in intellectual, moral, and aesthetic culture (ibidem). The purpose of the university is primarily education rather than preparing 'students for the labour market, whose needs are changing continuously. Academic education is [...] the care of the cultural heritage' (Dębiński 2013). The university may not be an addition to the economy nor 'a factory of knowledge and graduates' but rather 'the forge of ideas and place of the formation of attitudes' (Rektor 2013).

As a result, it can be assumed that the Ministry has no idea what to do with the Polish humanities, a symptom of which being the preparation of a document that the scientific community noted as the Programme of the Underdevelopment of the Polish Humanities (Guzowski 2013).

This is related to the fact that scientific institutions were submitted to a parameterisation the results of which remind one of a Potemkin village in its form (Fronesis 2013) and an Orwellian vision in its containment, even though described accurately by Alexandr Zinoviev (1974) in his *Yawning Heights*. 'A new, more progressive wage system was introduced for researchers. Wages in this system are dependent on the number of points gained according to the following rules: director of an institute - 500 points, official visit abroad - 450, delation - 300, head of a department - 100, report to the authorities - 250, free work - 50, monograph - 3, publication - 1, scientific discovery - 0.5 point, etc. A continuous increase in the level of research began. The most talented and productive scientists stood up to fight for positions, began to travel abroad, and get on with writing articles for propaganda and denunciations' (Chłopecki 2013).

In this context, an important question arises as to how the activities of the Ministry described herein are related to the government slogans to build a *knowledge society* and *knowledge-based economy* and, on the other hand, how the latter two categories are related to those of the *information society*. The latest is not, of course, a knowledge society and will certainly not become one if the ministerial 'reformers' transform universities into 'factories of knowledge' (por. Trzcionkowski 2013) because, based on observations, it is possible to suppose they will succeed with only

half of their intentions, i.e. a transformation of universities into factories. So far therefore information is expanding while knowledge is contracting, a fact that is a part of a more general process of the creation of a society of ignorance.

Jadwiga Mizińska (2013) asks even a more important question of the relation between ignorance and stupidity, identifying within the latter good-natured, conscious, and legalised stupidity, all of which relate to the subject matter of this text. In the category of legalised stupidity, she includes university stupidity whose manifestations are: corporationalisation, bureaucratisation, destruction of the hierarchy, pseudo-egalitarianism, dictatorship of titled obscurants, trogloditisation of students, and intimidating effects, and more generally, Copernicus-Gresham's law, according to which good money is driven out by bad.

There are strong grounds to believe that the – already criticised – activities of the Ministry result from the developmental dilemmas of the semi-periphery. It is hard not to notice, however, that the complex of their own parochialism does not help to solve these dilemmas, creating a post-ministerial intellectual desert instead. It is not certain, of course, that the new Minister, Prof. Dr. Lena Kolarska-Bobińska (*h*-index 13) will change the philosophy of catching up to the core of world science by the de-intellectualisation of universities and by pushing scientists from universities to independent research institutions (see Trzcionkowski 2013), the change that our journal and its Editor-in-Chief (*h*-index 10) do not, however, lose hope of. In response to the calls of the Ministry of 'the social responsibility of universities' we are calling of a *social responsibility of the Ministry* (see Dębiński 2013).

To wait for cooperation aimed at the restoration of the culture-creating role of universities would be, however, too much to expect. Having lost interest in the humanities, it is difficult to expect anyone would still understand that the role of the *university* is to collect, store, enhance, and cultivate *universal* knowledge (see Mizińska 2010). It therefore appears both symptomatic and symbolic that, after the systems' transformation, the inscription 'Science in service of the people' disappeared from the façade of the rector's office building of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (*ibidem*) while nothing was placed instead, not even the slogan 'Science in service of business'. The cause seems trivially simple: the semi-peripheral business

does not need science but rather the University Business, guided by the idealism-free ideology, as a producer of *Banal People* (Mizińska 2010). Even though our journal *Przestrzeń Społeczna (Social Space)* is not going to accept this ideology, we intend to willingly describe it and criticise it, as well as explain its conditionality and its beneficiaries.

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