

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: CASE OF ESTONIA

LITERATURE OVERVIEW AND RELEVANCE TO REAL LIFE

Schools of all levels are influential institutions that socialize people and transmit knowledge, skills, culture and values. On top of this, universities are expected to offer answers and solutions to multiple problems that societies face. This additional role and responsibility of universities has attracted considerable academic as well as professional attention. Among them, Newman's *The Idea of a University* is widely regarded as the most important work ever published on the topic. Although, written in the 19th century British context as an argument for liberal education it hardly has lost its relevance today. Nevertheless, there is number of more recent publications that have tried to bring Newman's ideas up-to-date. Among them, works by Oakeshott, Neave Pelikan, and Richter have attracted wide attention about universities' role in western societies.

In post-communist social transformation context the role of universities has mostly been dealt from the viewpoint of economic transformation, the social role of universities has attracted far less attention.

Indeed, the classical transition literature that supplied the blueprints for post-communist transformation, emphasizes the importance of education for long-term sustainable growth¹. Numerous are also the opinions in post-communist countries that soviet higher education was excellent. Moreover, many people are still proud for such soviet technical achievements as space travel and expect the science to be the Gerschenkronian strong medicine that would enable the region to catch up with the rest of the developed world².

The discussion on the social role of universities in transition has, with very few exceptions³, taken place in the context of the role of intellectuals (whether connected to a university or not)⁴. It is reasonable to believe that there

¹ In fact, one can find the policy recommendations and stress on the importance of channeling funds into education from documents such as the, Washington Consensus from 1990 (Williamson 11) Post Washington Consensus from 1998 (Kolodko) as well as EBRD's investment promotion policies from 1997 (Buiter, Lago, Stern 47).

² See for instance Chase (1998), Flanagan (1993), Szczepanski in Peteri (1998), Tamm (1998), Munich (2000) and Paasi (2000) for optimistic point of views; Kovaleva (1999), EBRD (2000), World Bank (1996) as well as Buiter (2000) for less optimistic views and arguments urging for immediate upgrading of post-communist (higher) education.

³ My preliminary research allowed me to identify just Miroslav (expresses the new vision for socialist university); and Greskovits (the role of foreign advisers in ECE transition).

⁴ See Lagerspetz and Raud (1996) for the argument of how intellectuals had a dual identity during the Soviet times (to legitimize the ideology as well as to keep a nation alive). See Konrad and Szelenyi (1979) *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* as well as the numerous revisions of their theory by Szelenyi (1986-87); Konrad and Szelenyi

are at least two distinctive reasons for this. On the one hand, the role of university has not attracted a distinctive interest due to the separation of higher education from research institutions in the former soviet block. On the other hand, defining the object of research vaguely allows researchers to engage in considerable conceptual stretching—if needed intellectuals included just academics from universities and academy of science research institutions, more often, however, this group included also journalist, writers, actors, musicians, painters etc. In short, universities' role in transition has not been researched systematically or independently from the bigger social/status group known as intellectuals.

This gap deserves to be filled because academics have secured for themselves a special immunity—an academic freedom to criticize the existing political as well as socio-economic establishments. Arguably this should serve the interest of society. Does it? I believe the transition processes in ECE/FSU offers an excellent opportunity to test it and illuminate whether academia deserves the special treatment that they argue is necessary for their as well as society's proper functioning.

(1991); Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley (1997) for elaboration on soviet and post-soviet stratification system. See Bozoki (1999) for comprehensive literature overview on the intellectuals before and after the collapse of communism.

PROJECT OBJECTIVE AND PLAN FOR FULFILLMENT

Theory and Hypothesis

As the title of the project indicates, the objective of the study to be undertaken is to assess the role of university in social transformation. More particularly, the research tries to offer an explanatory framework of how the role of academics changes over the course of social transformation. I hypothesize that there are three clearly indictable stages that academic elite goes through during the transition period. First, during socially turbulent times academic elite is able and willing to capitalize from the historical moment due to embedded social and cultural capital. Second, as the society develops, some of the revolutionary academics integrate into the newly established power structure, some return to their original occupations as their temporary roles are taken over by more professional groups. Regardless whether the integrated or returned are more numerous, the original situation reverses in the third stage. That is, it is not so much the university that supplies the political institutions with experts but the other way around--the newly established power structure starts to supply universities with lectures.

To document this change, a survey, a documentation analysis and follow-up interviews will be conducted. Based on the survey, two observations are expected. First, I believe to be able to observe considerable academic elite involvement and participation in politics in early transition process. Second, I expect to document the reasons why academics withdraw from daily politics. Based on the follow-up interviews, however, I expect to be able to document the extent and role played by universities or people connected to universities in these early transition processes. Last but not least, based on the study of faculty composition I expect to find that contrary to the early 90's when universities supplied government institutions with experts, ministries and other state offices have by now started to supply academia with lectures.

The proposed hypothesis would be proven wrong, should it turn out that academic elite played a very minimal role in bringing about the 1989 socio-economical changes. That is, should I learn that the number of academics involved or that their contribution to bring the 1989 peaceful revolutions and social processes that followed was very minimal.

The proposed hypothesis would be proven equally wrong, would the study show that universities are not employing experts from out-side academia rather than still supplying power structures with experts.

Data, Methodology and Case Selection

As indicated in the literature review, research dealing with the role of universities in social transformation does not go much beyond speculating on the role of intellectuals in transition. What we miss is an empirical study based on good data. It is probably correct to argue that one of the reasons for current situation is the difficulty in data collection. Indeed, collecting the data necessary for proving the above described theory of academic elite role in post-communist policy making is time consuming (large number of interviews to be contacted, documents to be collected and analyzed). Furthermore, the importance of local context and language make the cross-country comparative study almost impossible for a single researcher, and I do not expect to be an exception. Therefore, I have to limit the empirical study to a single country, which limits the generalization possibilities but, nevertheless, is justified for theory development purposes. That is, hypothesis-generating case study, even if initially based on just one country and only later to be tested among larger number of cases, is desirable in an area where no theory exists yet. The role of universities in post-communist transformation definitely is one of those areas.

I selected Estonia for three reasons: (i) its typical post-communist legacies, (ii) smallness, and (iii) the contextual familiarity. More particularly, Estonia fits very well to represent ECE/FSU post-communist transformation because, like most other countries in the region, she inherited all the typical socialist legacies. However, the major reason for selecting Estonia for the study was her smallness that allows me to conduct a complete sample survey--to cover all the university level institutions and academics teaching there, without discriminating against ownership form or professional rank. Last but not least, Estonia was selected because I have a competitive advantage--language and context familiarity as well as personal contacts. In principle, it should improve the quality of research. Yet, it may also be a source of bias(es) that I hope to avoid with the help of non-Estonian advisers and reviewers.

Based on the Statistical Office of Estonia there are 14 universities⁵. The exact number of academics teaching there⁶ is not known but according to my estimates it is approximately 2000. Nevertheless, the list of teaching staff (as primary asset of any institution of higher learning) is very often displayed at World Wide Web and therefore readily available and I expect to be able to cover with the survey the vast majority of the academic staff. My own experience as well as that observed by other researchers (see Burges and Vidovich)

⁵ The number of institutions of higher learning is much higher--over 40. As they include the institutions that were previously known as vocational schools, the research to be undertaken limits the study to universities, only.

⁶ According to the teachers union *Universitas*, there are some 2700 academics teaching at public institutions of higher learning out of which not all are universities (Delfi).

confirm that academics are quite easily accessible – many of them have made surveys or interviews themselves and therefore easily meet such types of requests.

Moreover, to overcome the possible difficulty of document collection as well as to enhance reliability, methodological tool known as triangulation will be used. This technique involves cross-referring and crosschecking data with the aim of producing a more robust or holistic picture. It will be done by employing several instruments: standardized, yet, anonymous questionnaire; interviews; and documentation analysis. In other words, reliability and validity will be increased by double-checking the data collected from questionnaires by making, interviews with current as well as former policy makers.

The core of the questionnaire shall indicate academic elites' personal and occupational history, connections and involvement with political movements, parties, individual politicians as well as government institutions in general. I am especially interested in academics' involvement in party program development and public policy making: advices given during different stages of law making⁷. As mentioned, some parts of this collected data will then be double-checked by in-debt interviewing and reviewing the personal composition of the government and parliament expert commissions. All this will be done in order to produce as robust theory on the role of universities in post-communist social transition as possible.

⁷ To take an advantage of the situation, the survey additionally intends to ask questions about grants received, research published as well as academics' consumption habits.

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