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University in Exile: The Experience of the Twenty-First Century

COMMEMORATING THE SEVENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE establishment of the New School as a university in exile requires from us, first of all, to reflect on the nature of the accompanying and preceding developments that, *inter alia*, manifested themselves in the unprecedented brutal persecution of intellectuals in Nazi Germany and forced them to go into exile. Of no less importance is also learning lessons from this dramatic experience of preserving the lives and professional careers of those whose only guilt was free thinking—a quality of being human that is the most valuable one, though by no means always in our possession, as most of us take for granted.

Such lessons do not belong only to the sphere of pure theoretical reflection. They also include the extremely important practical value of creating the pattern of possible ways to support intellectuals who are forced to flee from their own home countries, and provide them with opportunities to continue their important activities. In addition, these lessons should remind all of us of the danger in believing that such events of persecution belong only to the past. The illusion of inevitable societal progress that prevailed in European thought during the twentieth century was paid for, as we know, at an inadmissibly high price. At the same time, there is no reason to expect that while entering the twenty-first century we are becoming more realistic about our ability to cope with the extremely challenging issues of our time.

Two thousand and nine is the year of celebrating the remarkable events that took place 20 years ago, in 1989. Change, initiated in the former Soviet Union under the aegis of perestroika, created developments throughout the region, finally contributing to the collapse of the communist system. It seemed that mankind had finally reached a new stage of development, where the advancement of democracy had become a possibility for the whole world.

We all remember quite well the exciting expectations when, several years ago, we were approaching the twenty-first century, which coincided with the beginning of the new millennium. We were inclined to believe that the world was entering a new era, leaving behind destructive wars, colonialism, the constant threat of nuclear disaster, the poverty of nations, and other remnants of the previous dramatic history.

No wonder such events as September 11, 2001, and then, some years later, the collapse of major financial institutions and the worldwide economic crisis took us by surprise—while we were so confident in the progressive development of society and already calculating further advances on the road to democracy.

Behind this confidence, sometimes immune even to such dramatic upheavals, hides a particular state of mind that is deeply rooted in the intellectual tradition of the Occident.

It is well known that the intellectual tradition of the twentieth century demonstrated various attempts at unprecedented radical questioning not only of dominating theories of societal development but even the very fundamental principles upon which Western thinking had been based for centuries, including the very perception of human nature.

The main question is whether those insights—which were articulated in the sphere of theoretical reflection and indicated the decreasing efficiency of the manner of dealing with various issues of social reality, even in the hemisphere where it has been practiced for many centuries—could be easily transplanted to other sociohistoric environ-

ments, where the necessary intellectual prerequisites for their understanding and practical implementation were lacking.

In this context I would like to present the remarkable story of the creation of the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, and through the analysis of this case, to address issues of societal transformation in general and the crucial role that education is playing in this regard.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of its former territory into newly independent states have contributed, both in the West and in the post-Soviet space, to an enduring optimism vis-à-vis post-totalitarian transitions. Such expectations, however, were not accompanied by the corresponding experience or knowledge needed to tackle the extremely complicated and challenging issues that had to be confronted. The world-renowned achievements of Soviet research and education in mathematics and in the natural and technical sciences were not mirrored by sophistication in the social sciences and humanities, which were dominated by communist ideology to such an extent that they hardly could be regarded as knowledge at all. Bizarre subjects, such as “scientific communism,” “the history of the Communist Party,” and “Marxist-Leninist philosophy” dominated research and education in the isolated context of Soviet social sciences.

At the same time, there were a few who were thinking differently and who, even under the strict ideological control of the authorities, were able to cautiously introduce new ideas (even though they were labeled, in accordance with the official policy, “bourgeois ideology”). There was a slowly growing professional community dispersed throughout the country, which existed only because of the mutual support and solidarity they extended to each other. This group found itself, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in a disrupted environment. This environment was dominated by an overwhelming majority of social scientists who were former *nomenklatura* ideologists, and now attempted to disguise their previous intensive participation in the spread of commu-

nist ideals and loudly argued for that which they not so long ago vigorously attacked.

It was also a time of renaming old educational institutions with invented attractive names and of establishing new institutions with the promise of training people for professions that had suddenly become very popular: business, management, banking, law, economics. Most important, those who promptly converted themselves for the purpose of teaching those subjects had almost no qualifications to do so. Strange as it may seem, this enthusiasm, which was clearly nonprofessional, was supported largely by various forms of educational cooperation and financial assistance from the West. If one were to undertake an inventory of the various projects undertaken in the field of education alone in Belarus, beginning in 1991, one would find that the sums spent might well exceed hundreds of millions in various foreign currencies. As we know, all these projects were carefully justified in each particular case, aimed at introducing the ideas of democracy and reforming the educational system in a post-totalitarian country. These goals, however, were not only not achieved but in most cases had counterproductive results. More often than not, they helped to reestablish the Soviet-style indoctrination and provincial education that now has become an important instrument in maintaining the existence of an authoritarian society in Belarus.

The situation is not very different in other independent states of the former Soviet Union with more liberal political environments, where hundreds and even thousands of institutions of higher learning produce “professionals” with a heavy emphasis on social sciences while simultaneously discrediting the nature of education as such rather than contributing to the urgently needed critical mass of a differently educated young generation.

Of course, what appears so evident now was not clear to such an extent at the very beginning of the process. Still, even at that time some of us had an understanding of the extreme difficulties of the process of transforming social reality, destroyed by the long domination of a

brutal communist regime and by the extreme challenges that had to be faced in reaching the proclaimed goals of democratization. There were also many reasons to doubt that such programs and activities in education and such attempts to assist in the social transformation at large could produce the desired changes. However, these doubts were largely dismissed by the numerous foreign experts and advisers who enthusiastically participated in these activities, convinced of their final and inevitable success. In particular, intervention into such a distorted social reality from the outside was undertaken without any effort to create a meaningful framework for communication and understanding between two enormously different intellectual traditions. This doomed the effort to failure, because in the absence of a common language that might provide the basis of effective interaction, nothing could be achieved.

This understanding, however, was at the center of the foundation of the European Humanities University (EHU) which, from the time of its creation in 1992, proclaimed as its mission the introduction of the core values of a culture of democracy into a sterile and ideologically isolated intellectual environment. It is no wonder that often those from whom we expected to get support for this unique and unusual endeavor failed to understand this important mission. Such subjects as philosophy, theology, and art, whose interests lay in the basic values of European tradition, seemed far too distant from the “practical” professions traditionally backed by various international programs of cooperation.

Enormous effort was necessary to break these kinds of stereotypes and create in our partners the proper sensitivity to these crucial issues of education that are usually lodged at the periphery within the more pragmatic framework oriented toward the “immediate” solution of problems of societal transformation. However, within a rather short time, thanks to the enthusiasm of the EHU founders, and with assistance of the Open Society Institute, the MacArthur Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the U.S. Department of State,

and foundations and governments in Europe, the EHU has become one of the most attractive and internationally recognized university in the country and the region.

Then, because of its wide popularity, the university was identified by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's regime as a threat to his authoritarian rule. It was forcibly and brutally closed in 2004—just like the events that took place in 1933 in Nazi Germany—out of fear of a place where free and uncontrolled thinking existed.

And here we are approaching the issue of the great fragility of such institutional initiatives as EHU, which, while generally the recipients of international recognition and support, in crucial moments of their existence do not possess any protection that ensures their survival. There was no lack of international solidarity as expressed in the joint *démarche* of Western ambassadors through resolutions of international and national official organizations, publications in mass media, and so forth. But, as usual, the West limited itself to mere appeals, and the regime was quite confident that the West would as usual capitulate and accept its rule of the game. For example, after EHU's closure, its two most successful and unique programs, the department of political sciences, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France, and the Institute of German Studies, which existed with assistance of various German foundations, have been converted into programs authorized and fully controlled by the regime—with the collaboration of France and Germany.

The reestablishment of the university in its present capacity as a “university in exile” in Vilnius became possible—to the surprise of the Belarusian authorities, who usually are effective in reaching their goals—only at the invitation and with the generous support of neighboring Lithuania. Although it seemed a logical response to the regime's outrageous behavior, Lithuania's gesture was an exception rather than a rule because the existing instruments of international cooperation in education and those generally dealing with postcommunist reality still do not demonstrate any capacity to understand and apply effective strategies capable of bringing about the desired results.

In these circumstances, analysis of the EHU case might provoke some thoughts that reach far beyond its local particularity as far as the general involvement of Western democracies in the present world are concerned. Therefore, while dealing with this specific case, we can talk about the *typology* of understanding of the present social reality in general, which appears more and more resistant to all efforts of influence—so much so that the question arises as to whether or not we still can rely on traditional ways of thinking and acting when we are confronted with unprecedented dramatic changes in the globalizing world.

The situation in Belarus has evolved for the worse, slipping step by step from the extremely favorable situation of the early 1990s to a point where resources of Western assistance are being used to establish an authoritarian regime. The main issue here, in this particular case and beyond, is the extent to which we can continue to rely on this particular and familiar intellectual tradition, being so confident in its universal applicability, when the failure of expected results becomes more and more evident. What should we expect from similar kinds of activities when we are facing social and cultural realities far more complicated than in Belarus?

EDUCATION FOR KNOWLEDGE OR THINKING?

The peculiar expression of Martin Heidegger that “science does not think” might sound strange and even controversial, and still has not been recognized for what it has to contribute to matters of education.

The image of science and the prestige of knowledge are deeply rooted in the Western intellectual tradition. But only in the era of Enlightenment has it created the dominating paradigm for the whole development of society under the aegis of the progress of knowledge. It was Kant who vigorously championed the ideas of the Enlightenment and admitted that humanity has taken the road toward irreversible progress once reason become enlightened and that knowledge carries

the most crucial burden in this regard. In one of his later pieces of writing, *An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?* (1798), Kant conceded that we have actually achieved moral progress.

But with all his optimistic trust in the omnipotence of knowledge, Kant was quite aware of its limitation. It is in this context that he introduced the concept of the “power of judgment” (*Urteilkraft*) as a specific human capacity separate from the ability to use knowledge. In a famous passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains this difference in relation to the educational process: “An obtuse or narrow-minded person may indeed be trained through study, even to extent of being learned. But as such people are commonly still lacking in judgment, it is not unusual to meet learned men who in application of their scientific knowledge betray that original want, which can never be made good” (Kant 1965: B 173). Kant also insists that the capacity of judgment is “a peculiar talent that can be practiced only and cannot be taught” (B 172).

But while Kant had already demonstrated an awareness of that peculiar capacity identified as *Kraft* in the first *Critique*, it is not until his *Critique of Judgment* that this faculty becomes a major interest to the degree that his earlier analysis of the perception of the nature of knowledge undergoes a radical modification. Confronted with the idea of completing his theory of the unity of reason, Kant discovers that the principles of rationality proclaimed by the Enlightenment do not possess universal validity. When he is confident that the system of knowledge he has presented is applicable not only to nature but also to the sphere of human freedom, he suddenly realizes that it does not correspond to the sphere of art.

This turn in Kantian thought goes far beyond the internal polemics within the framework of philosophical reflection. It means that his whole heritage might appear in a different light, presaging developments in the European intellectual tradition in the second half of the nineteenth century. These developments are related to the process of

identifying the specific nature of human sciences as distinct from natural sciences. It is also known that these insights were expressed well before Kant. However, this tradition initiated by Vico, Hamann, Herder, and others was considered for a time to be peripheral to the idea of knowledge, which tended to be fixed in its a priori forms.

Commenting on this dramatic shift in the history of ideas that involved even such thinkers as Kant, whose initial intention was to lay the ground for a universally applicable theory, Hannah Arendt indicates that Kant's philosophy "derives ultimately from his firm rootedness in a tradition that regards philosophy as essentially identical with contemplation, a tradition that Kant himself, *half unknowingly*, helped to destroy" (Arendt 1994: 172, emphasis added). As a result, "that philosophy, which had been thinking exclusively in concepts ever since Plato, had now lost its faith in concepts" (Arendt 1994: 170).

At this point we can address the very complex innovative issues articulated in Kant's last *Critique*, which, according to Heidegger, still remains not only improperly apprehended but was subject of various misinterpretations (Heidegger 1961: 125). First and foremost, this is the nature of *judging*, which is, according to Arendt, "a highly mysterious process" (Arendt 1994: 21) and cannot be limited to mere application of general rules to a particular case.

"It is well to understand," notes John H. Zammito in his carefully elaborated analysis of Kant's still not fully acknowledged book, "that Kant maintained into the *Third Critique* his distinction of 'thought' from 'knowledge'" (Zammito 1992: 343). Thus, Kant concentrates his "decisive concerns neither in questions of beauty nor in questions of empirical biology, but rather in the ultimate question of the place of man in the order of the world—his freedom and his destiny" (Zammito 1992: 342).

It is precisely these issues that are of crucial importance for understanding how *thinking* can be stimulated in the educational process.

But what was emerging as a major problem more than two centuries ago appears almost forgotten in our time, when man is so over-

loaded by the accumulated scope of knowledge while being “cut off from the absolute, rationally accessible realm of ideas and universal values and left in the midst of a world where he had nothing left to hold onto—not his reason, which was obviously inadequate for an understanding of Being, nor the ideals of his reason, whose existence could not be proved, nor the universal, which in turn existed only in the form of himself” (Arendt 1994:169-170).

In these circumstances of a great need for intellectual orientation, numerous educational institutions are intensively exploiting the growing demand for educational skills by substituting the provision of purely informational knowledge for the ability to stimulate thinking. In the course of such activities, those exposed to such practices are being persuaded that one needs to be introduced to knowledge consisting of ready-to-use schemes, formulas, and recipes for solving all problems. Such reliance on fixed knowledge corresponds to our natural inclination to look at things in such a way that we impose upon them standardized visions and clichés. This, of course, makes our life much easier while we continue to neglect Socrates’ wise belief in waking up fellow citizens who otherwise might “sleep on undisturbed for the rest of their lives.”

What is at stake here is not only the matter of mere intellectual dimension. The inability to think not only deprives people of their “human dimension” but leaves them receptive to dangerous ways of conduct, particularly in this epoch of mass society. Ideologies of a political, nationalist, and religious nature may easily ignite human passions for all sorts of radical and destructive behavior.

It was again Hannah Arendt who traced the seemingly innocent absence of thinking to the roots of human behavior that provoke totalitarianism:

We see here how unwilling the human mind is to face realities which in one way or another contradict totally its framework of reference. Unfortunately, it seems to be

much easier to condition human behavior and to make people conduct themselves in the most unexpected and outrageous manner, than to persuade anybody to learn from experience, as the saying goes; that is to start thinking and judging instead of applying categories and formulas which are deeply ingrained in our mind, but whose basis of experience has long been forgotten and whose plausibility resides in their intellectual consistency rather than in their adequacy to actual events (Arendt 2003: 37).

It is not the place here to remind ourselves once again about the numerous similar warnings expressed about the present state of affairs in education. However, it is worth recalling David Wood's warning that "the enlightenment ideals of higher education are subject to various kinds of corruption" (Wood 2005: 189).

THE PRESENT SITUATION IN EDUCATION

Several decades ago, Hannah Arendt's article, "The Crisis of Education," was published in its English translation. In no way was it the only reflection on the dangerous trends in education in the twentieth century. But Arendt was one of the few who put her ideas of radical questioning about education in a context of "a more general crisis and instability in modern society" (Arendt 1977: 185).

According to her analysis, at a time when "we have lost the answers on which we ordinarily rely without even realizing that they were originally answers to questions," we respond to a crisis, which "becomes a disaster," by relying on our "preformed judgments, that is, with prejudices" (Arendt 1977: 174). Needless to say, since then the state of affairs in education has not only not improved—it has also been confronted with additional challenges.

The tremendous scientific and technological advances of our present society and the deepening processes of specialization in existing knowledge have contributed to the development of an almost industrial

production of specialists in mass universities and colleges all over the world, a situation that creates a strange mixture of “educational theories which originated in Middle Europe and consists of an astounding hodgepodge of sense and nonsense under the banner of progressive education” (Arendt, 1977: 178). This unprecedented expansion of educational activities is predominantly aimed at *training* specialists in each particular field.

Things get much more complicated if we are dealing with education in the social sciences and humanities. The temptation to apply similar methods of teaching here inevitably fails, since we are dealing with different kind of activities not exactly rendered by the English term *education* but rather by the German *Bildung*. The meaning expressed by this term, usually related to the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt, though widely acknowledged, is becoming less and less effective in its practical application, even within the tradition where it has been cultivated for almost two centuries.

The idea of *Bildung*, interpreted as “upbringing” or the “activity of forming,” has always been the most elusive and an extremely challenging issue when it comes to educating the rising generation. Theories and practices applied in this field, with their successes and failures, do not allow themselves to be fixed in absolute forms ready for application. Still, in traditional societies there were ways of transmitting basic values of socialization, and these ways were worked out and preserved with only slight modifications throughout centuries. Our reality, however, has undergone such extensive and dynamic changes that even Hamlet’s words, “the time is out of joint” do not adequately express it. These traditional ways now do not seem to account for the nature of the changes. The permanent problem of education—how to find the way for adult educators to reach the young—has been aggravated so that even the common language of communication between generations seems to have disappeared.

THE ISSUES OF RESEARCH

More than any other sort of knowledge, the social sciences and humanities derive from the articulation of Heidegger’s term “facticity”

(*Faktizitaet*)) of human life and express the richness of its experience. Since no formal language of logical definitions allows us to convey such experience, and since the analytic tradition's early programs of purifying meaning by ridding it of its ambiguities turned out to be unsuccessful, we are inevitably constrained by common language and we discover that the multiplicity of its meanings indicates any deficiencies.

It is well known, however, that even within the European intellectual tradition with its relative homogeneity, attempts to clarify the "proper" meaning of basic ideas and notions are constantly thwarted by the difficulty faced in formulating them in particular languages. Even the early efforts to transmit the Greek cultural heritage into Latin demonstrate how much remains hidden, rather than fully expressed and modified, simply due to different natures of these languages.

The creation of national languages in Europe and appropriate terminology have contributed even more to dissociation of fixed meanings from their original source. To be sure, this multiplicity of linguistic expressions promotes a variety of cultural interpretations of basic values and ideas that keep tradition alive. At the same time, there is a danger that fixed definitions prevent us from making the effort to find our own appropriate language for addressing a particular current situation.

While acknowledging that each language is potentially open for any kind of expression, we have also to accept the reality of the existence of different cultural traditions which, due to specific historical circumstances, have accumulated unequal experience in interpreting written texts. Even in languages of such cultures, as, for instance, Germany, there are constant attempts to question the validity of accepted translations (for example, Schleiermacher's translation of Plato) and add new nuances to the current understanding of a text's meaning. In this regard it is enough to mention the names of Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Arendt, and many others whose creativity in large measure derives from their efforts not rely on existing "canonical" translations but to create

their own. In this way they demonstrate that the very idea of expressing “objective” meaning in the process of translation is a great illusion. Here we face what should be called the necessity “of a reexpression that can—and often does—succeed to some degree” (Sallis 2002: 84).

Reexpressing a text in another language world, requires resolving certain multiple meanings, transpositioning various syntactic structures, and shifting from particular metaphors valid in the one language to other metaphors valid in the other language, hence reexpressing certain figures of the original within an alien metaphors appropriate to the other language. Such reductions, transpositions, and shifts result in loss of signification and of syntactical and metaphorical force (Sallis 2002: 84-85).

That is why not only poetry, as the famous saying goes, is lost in translation. *We have to deal with a certain untranslatability of all texts in the humanities and social sciences* and to acknowledge, as Heidegger did in his *Spiegel* interview, that “Thinking can no more be translated than can poetry” (Heidegger, 1988: 108). The main consequence of this understanding implies not only that every translation is a creative activity of interpretation but that thinking itself has an “utterly translational character” (Sallis 2002: 18).

If we now turn to the situation of the humanities and social sciences in the post-Soviet space, we can see that we are at the very beginning of the process of our integration into the intellectual tradition, though this process is not always successful in its first forms. We have to recognize that without a critical mass of professionals in various fields of research within each particular country, translations of a limited number of publications from foreign languages can too often be undertaken by those who possess only knowledge of foreign languages, are mainly motivated by pragmatic interests, and have insufficient understanding of the matters at hand.

Nevertheless, these translations are used by the overwhelming majority who are not able to read original texts and are therefore taken as the basis for research and education purposes. This is an enterprise doomed at the outset, since these translations do not provide a way for the social sciences and humanities to move forward. The situation is particularly difficult for small nations, where the introduction of national languages in research and education, along with limited intellectual and financial resources, creates additional complications.

It does not, however, prevent numerous institutions of higher learning from claiming that they provide high-quality education in various fields and intensively exploiting cooperation with partners abroad, who provide an additional stamp of legitimacy for their programs.

Apparently, these extreme challenges for research and education in the social sciences and humanities are not matters of concern and do not dampen the still prevailing enthusiasm for these educational activities. Converting education into training implies the idea of “social engineering.” It means trying to instill professional skills while ignoring the whole range of complex issues addressed within the framework of what is traditionally identified as a “liberal arts education.” The lonely voices of those arguing for a way to preserve and transmit the core values of humanity in this time of unprecedented social dynamism and accompanying hardships are not properly heard.

This issue is of particular importance for societies in transition. The intellectual vacuum left after the collapse of an old system of norms is being spontaneously filled with the strange mixture of mass culture—in the form of mass entertainment—and pragmatically oriented consumer psychology. It creates fertile soil for all kind of deviant behavior and radicalism of the young generation, which is growing up without having access to what Arendt called the “human condition.” It also diminishes the expectations of those who, after the initial and not very successful involvement in the issues of post-Soviet reality, express the hope that only generational change can secure the expected positive results of transformation.

There is no indication that an awareness of the serious shortcoming in educational practices, which are sporadically articulated, might bring about serious changes in the foreseeable future. The existing machinery remains intact in the current environment of complacency with the naive expectation of inevitable positive results. The deeply rooted optimism of bureaucratic structures, mixed in varying proportions with the pragmatic interests of those involved, demonstrates their almost complete immunity to constructive criticism of those activities that are becoming more and more self-sufficient in nature and bear decreasing relation to existing reality. The understanding that engagement in our global society requires a new mindset remains limited to sporadically expressed concerns.

The vulnerability of the educational sphere recently hit by growing global economic instability makes the possibility of vitally important reforms even less realistic, as the most urgent matter now is not to reflect on the change of strategies but to secure the very survival of existing institutions of higher learning. This brings us back to the European Humanities University.

In such circumstances, the project of EHU, now located in exile in Lithuania, remains one of the few almost desperate attempts to demonstrate, in extremely difficult conditions, how important it is to establish new, institutional niches and strongholds of intellectual life of a different nature and quality in the still not very favorable global environment. It creates conditions for consolidating the energy of professionals who, through their academic activity have challenged the legitimacy of the emerging authoritarian regime in Belarus.

This project was recently identified and supported, in addition to our traditional donors, by the European Commission, the Nordic Council of Ministers, and several European states. It nevertheless remains fragile and unstable. The success of the story of the New School celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary might remain unique and unrepeatable if we do not arrive at the understanding

that free thinking is still at risk of persecution or secure the conditions for its support.

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