

Knowledge Society and Its Workers

The idea of knowledge society is gaining a considerably wide acceptance of the academic circles – for them it is somewhat ennobling and entails social recognition of their rank. However, this acceptance desensitises us to a range of controversies stemming from this ideology. They are connected with the *capitalist* character of knowledge society. Knowledge is a commodity, which entails the necessity of its parcellation and privatisation, and therefore undermines the basic principles of public education – especially academic, which traditionally stipulated the necessity of education based on free access for students to the process and current findings of research. This ideology justifies an array of exclusions connected with access to knowledge for people who are being prepared to work at producing knowledge – deprived of access to knowledge with the value of capital (patents, copyright, corporation-commissioned research), they are taught what it takes to produce it. It is an analogous situation to the one described by Marx in his analyses of the origins of industrial capitalism.

Development of capitalism is described on the basis of the processes of parcellation (privatisation with the right to fence off) of the land owned by commons, taking place in England. On the one hand, it leads to the concentration of ownership, which favours generating a surplus of financial means, ready to be invested; on the other – to mass evictions of peasants farming those lands before. A class of people thus emerges who can do nothing but manual work – they cannot sustain if they are not hired. This human “surplus” is administered by the developing industry.

Referring this briefly outlined structure to the area of knowledge society, we can determine the conditions of the emergence of this social form, based on capitalist knowledge economy, as follows: **The main condition of the creation of knowledge capitalism is the privatisation of knowledge occurring according to the principle of parcellation of the major part of “knowledge commons” (public domain of knowledge, its community-based ownership) and the creation of procedures that disable the location of newly created knowledge, with a profit-generating value, in this domain. The supplementary condition, though equally necessary, is the emergence of a class of people who “don’t possess” knowledge, but are able to produce it and are forced to accept employment in the knowledge production sector.**

Transferring the genealogy of capitalism drawn up by Marx to the analysis of processes occurring in contemporary academic and educational policy¹ enables us to establish links among phenomena usually treated as remote: rampant multiplication of academic curricula, their reorientation towards teaching the skills of self-reliant knowledge production, insisting on patenting knowledge and its practical implications, increasing role of business in financing research, parametrisation of academic units and individual selection of employees, and last but not least “plagiarism panic” leading – in the name of intellectual *property* protection – to the elimination of knowledge considered in the categories of common property. Treating knowledge in the categories of capital means that *investment* in knowledge has to be driven by economic rationality: it must bring a determined profit in return. What stems from this, in turn, is the necessity to introduce a specific “educational currency” into social circulation, a parametrised measure of value allowing to assess expenditure and income and compare the value of specific institutions and persons (here obviously confined to the role of commodity).

Knowledge workers

The term *knowledge workers* is present in literature in two meanings. We encounter the first in economic, sociological and pedagogical texts, treating *knowledge economy* as a challenge for education system. In short, *knowledge economy* is in need of **knowledge workers**, and this means workers much better educated than in the former times, above all with the skills to work with information, previously taught exclusively at the academic level. The second understanding appears in texts concerning the condition of the academy and refers to the deprofessionalisation of scientific work. Harnessed within the economic regime, it becomes a “job”, severely controlled by stiff procedures and driven by external motivation, and the ones who carry it out are not the professors like before, but simply **knowledge workers**².

The study whose fragments are quoted below had an incidental character and was drawn up on the occasion

¹ See e.g.: Slaughter S., Leslie L.L. (1997). *Academic Capitalism. Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press; Philips, D. (2005), Economics as ideological fantasy. Dispensability of man by way of changing the nature of ideas. *International Journal of Applied Semiotics* Vol. 4, No.2., pp. 9-34.

² Scott, P.: From professor to 'knowledge worker': profiles of the academic profession. *Minerva* 45, 2007, pp. 205-215.; Kleinman D.L, Vallas S.P., Science, capitalism, and the rise of the 'knowledge worker': The changing structure of knowledge production in the United States. *Theory and Society* 30, 2001, pp. 451-492.

of preparing my text for a publication concerning “being a Ph.D. student” at a contemporary university³. The main question posed to the participants of the study (Ph.D. students in social sciences) was: what happens to knowledge in the course of Ph.D. studies? The interview was conducted through an e-learning platform. All participants had the possibility to read the answers of other people and enter into debate with them, therefore the methodology of this incidental study can be referred to as *focus group interview*. Among numerous threads, I’ve selected here only several statements illustrating what Ph.D. students think about the relation between knowledge and skills, the spheres of exclusion from knowledge (and also *by* knowledge) and – in this context – the structure of access to knowledge at the university.

I will begin with the question of *skills*.

As far as I regarded MA studies in the context of the possibility to develop the **skill** of gaining and operating knowledge, I associated Ph.D. studies with the **research perspective**. However, research practice functions here exclusively as an element replacing didactic practice, and that mainly in the **character of service** (transcriptions, etc.).

Studying at the Ph.D level also means acquiring the *skill* of conducting research. Another participant of the study, who also emphasised the necessity of acquiring the skill of research work, wrote in the given context: “just let us do this work, and we will thus learn it”. The following statement pertains directly to the issue of knowledge:

I didn’t come here to get some specific knowledge, since I know how to use libraries, the Internet, I watch lectures online – when I want and whichever I want. It doesn’t mean that I don’t want to attend classes at all – I think it is important for us to meet and debate, and not sit alone with our projects/monitors, I simply don’t like the lecture-based form and writing tests for credit/

It is a clear voice in favour of active and autonomous learning, which is contrasted with the lecture-based form of classes ending with obtaining credits. Organised classes are not treated as a form of conveying *currently created knowledge*, unpublished yet, being in the course of research. “Library, the Internet and online lectures” are not the spaces where one can get acquainted with projects currently carried out in a particular unit, with theories, etc. that are not ready yet and in the process of research. It might be the case that these subjects of lectures have disappeared from the main current of didactic practice at the university. It might be the case that the mass character of Ph.D. studies in connection with the departure from the demand to possess a diploma of the faculty conforming to the profile of studies resulted in a shift of emphasis towards a lecture on the *basics* of scientific disciplines in the scope of which Ph.D. proceedings are to begin.

Another thread: Ph.D. studies seem to lead to *double exclusion*:

Exclusion by Ph.D. Probably yes, it seems that **nobody** will even want to talk to us. Because we will be excluded from the circles of normal (...) people by Ph.D. studies, and we will not be allowed to enter the academic elite because of low scientific activity (conferences, costly publications, sheer lack of time for studying)

The vision of *double exclusion* appears in several statements. On the one hand, obtaining a Ph.D. degree *reduces* the chance of employment beyond the academic system, on the other we have a vision of exclusion from the “university elite” – in the above quoted excerpt this exclusion is connected with the inability to live up to some content-related standards that are a condition of acceptance in this circle. A more complete vision of this problem is presented in the following (and the last quoted here) statement:

We constantly revolve around the system where on the one hand we are needed because we generate profit, on the other – the sheer **system makes it impossible for us to enter inside**. We are plenty, there is no money for us, we have to earn a living ourselves (...) so we cannot fully devote ourselves to studying, thus we are not good enough. It’s a vicious circle. The mass character of these studies will only accelerate the machine. And on its part, the university as an institution, or as someone put it here, a community will become **increasingly restricted**, to a much greater extent than when Ph.D. Theses were carried out by individuals in the course of preparation for scientific work. It is a broader problem stemming from the marketisation of universities: **on the one hand simplified science for the masses, on the other hermetic “genuine” science**.

³ Szkudlarek T., Knowledge workers, inner university and liminality. [in]: Thomson P., Walker M. (eds.), *The Routledge doctoral students' companion. Getting to grips with research in education and the social sciences*. London: Routledge, 2010.

If we attempt to draw up any kind of summary on the basis of these several excerpts, we are dealing here with a vision of people striving to acquire *scientific work skills*. For that matter, these people also experience the syndrome of “education overload”, excessive criticism and “unnecessary complication” of the procedures of everyday professional practice. At the same time, what also clearly appears here is the vision of the lack of chances for inclusion into the hermetic world of “genuine science”, which might be primarily understood as the world of “regular post” science, connected with permanent and somewhat socially secure *employment* within the structure of the university. People who represent such complicated orientation will probably continue to “revolve around the system” as *qualified workers* able to carry out research tasks: as mobile workforce that can be employed in various projects – probably mainly at the borderland of the academy and social practice, with little chance of permanent (fixed employment) scientific work. It seems to me that we are dealing with a quite clear continuation of the strategy of *social construction of a worker*, with institutionally created the *obligation of hired labour* at low rungs in “knowledge factories”.

At the same time, there is a clear vision of the „internal university”, a kind of elitist structure functioning in the middle of the field accessible for students and Ph.D. students; a structure that is at the same time decisive (resembling the communist “them”), desired and inaccessible (“they will not accept us / not allow us in”) – also representing the fantasy of “genuine science”, to which Ph.D. students only occasionally gain access with commissions for technical work (“transcriptions”). It can be grasped with a metaphor of a medieval town and its suburbia. Surrounded by walls that guarantee relative safety, it keeps the masses that inhabit the suburbia at bay. They are at once redundant and indispensable for the inner city: they are a reservoir of workforce, suppliers of cheaper work and cheaper goods, and finally – as Stefan Czarnowski notes – they are a force “in the service of violence”, mobilised in the course of riots, pogroms or revolutions. The social radicalism of youth in the countries of Europe, strictly connected with the functioning of educational institutions educating for the sake of “employability” can confirm the accurateness of this metaphor.

Currently, regardless of whether the „suburbium” proves a permanent margin or a path to the inner university, the people who „revolve around” it constitute an element at once superfluous and indispensable. Ph.D. students of social sciences presenting their views in the debate reported here might not feel their “marginal indispensability” in the functioning of the university as clearly as it might be in the case of Ph.D. students at the laboratories of experimental sciences, which would simply cease to function if it wasn’t for these students. Nevertheless, their situation *is* generally similar: it is a situation of people educated to work in “knowledge factories” – on positions that have little in common with the mythical aura of Science, present in the phantasm of Humboldtian university.