

TOMASZ SZKUDLAREK: KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY AND ITS WORKERS

The idea of the knowledge society is gaining wide acceptance in academic circles; it glamorizes them and enhances their status. However, such acceptance de-sensitizes us to a range of controversies stemming from this ideology and connected with the capitalist nature of the knowledge society. Knowledge is a commodity, requiring compartmentalization and privatization, thus undermining the basic principles of public education – especially academic education, which traditionally stipulated the need for students' free access to the research process and its current findings. Such ideology justifies a number of exclusions regarding access to knowledge for those willing to work to create knowledge. Even though they don't have access to knowledge having a capital value (patents, copyrights, research commissioned by corporations), they are taught the skills necessary to produce it. This situation is analogous to the one described by Marx in his analyses of the origins of industrial capitalism.

The development of capitalism is attributed to the parcelization (privatisation with the right to fence off) of common land that took place in England. On the one hand, it led to the concentration of ownership, which favoured generating surplus funds for investment; on the other – to mass evictions of the peasants who had previously farmed such land. A new class of people thus emerged who only knew manual work and could not sustain themselves without paid work. This human "surplus" was administered by the developing industry.

By referencing the structure briefly outlined above to the context of the knowledge society, we can determine the conditions for the emergence of the knowledge society, based on the capitalist knowledge economy. The main condition for the creation of knowledge capitalism is the privatization of knowledge through the parcelization of the major part of "knowledge commons" (the public domain of knowledge, its community-based ownership) and the creation of procedures that disable the location of newly-created knowledge in this domain with a profit-generating value. The supplementary condition, though equally necessary, is the emergence of a class of people who "do not 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 distinct. Such phenomena include the rapid expansion of academic curricula, the change of focus towards teaching the skills of self-reliant knowledge production, the pressure to patent knowledge and its practical implications, the increasing role of business in the financing of research, the parametrization of academic entities and the achievements of individual academic employees, and last but not least the "plagiarism panic" leading – in the name of intellectual *property* protection – to the cessation of considering knowledge as common property. Treating knowledge as a means of capital means that *investment* in knowledge has to be driven by economic rationality: it must bring a concrete profit in return. What stems from this, in turn, is the necessity to introduce a specific "educational currency" into social circulation, a parametrized measure of value making it possible to assess expenditure and income and compare the value of particular institutions and individuals (here naturally reduced to commodities).

Knowledge Workers

The term *knowledge workers* has two meanings in literature. We encounter the first in economic, sociological and pedagogical texts, which treat the *knowledge economy* as a challenge for the education system. In short, the *knowledge economy* needs *knowledge workers*, and this means better-educated workers than in the past, generally being skilled at working with information that was previously taught exclusively at the academic level. The second understanding appears in texts concerning the state of academia and refers to the de-

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.

professionalization of academic work. Once incorporated within the economic regime, academic work becomes a “job”, highly controlled by rigid procedures and driven by external motivation,² and those performing such job are simply *knowledge workers* rather than professors.²

The study partially quoted below had an incidental character and was drawn up while preparing my text for a publication concerning “being a PhD student” at a modern university.³ The main question posed to the participants of the study (PhD students in social sciences) was what happens to knowledge in the course of PhD studies. The interview was conducted through an e-learning platform. All participants were able to read the answers of others and enter into discussions with them, therefore the methodology of this incidental study can be referred to as *focus group interview*. Among numerous threads, I have selected here only several statements illustrating what PhD 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*.

While I perceived MA studies as a chance to develop the skills of obtaining and using knowledge, I associated PhD studies with research opportunities. However, research practice turns out to be a mere substitute for didactic practice, and mainly takes on the features of a service (transcriptions, etc.).

Studying at the PhD level entails acquiring the *skill* of conducting research. Another participant of the study, who also emphasised the need to acquire the skills of research work, wrote in this context: “if you just let us do this work, we will 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 – whenever and however I want to. 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 credits.

This is a clear voice in favour of active and autonomous learning, in contrast to the lecture-based form of classes ending with obtaining credits. Organised classes are not treated as a form of communicating *currently created knowledge*, still unpublished, still being researched. “The library, the Internet and online lectures” are not places where one can get acquainted with the projects currently being carried out in a particular institution, with theories, etc. that are still in the process of research and development. It might be the case that such subject areas have disappeared from the main current of didactic practice at the university. It might be the case that the mass nature of PhD studies, combined with the departure from the requirement to possess a diploma conforming to the faculty’s study profile, has resulted in a shift of emphasis towards lectures on the *basics* of those academic disciplines in which the doctoral degree is to be taken up.

Another thread: PhD studies seem to lead to *double exclusion*:

Exclusion by PhD? Probably. It seems that nobody will even want to talk to us. Because our PhD will exclude us from the circles of normal (...) people and we will not be allowed to join the academic elite because of our insufficient academic activity (conferences, costly publications, sheer lack of time for studying).

The notion of *double exclusion* appears in several statements. On the one hand, obtaining a

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.

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.

PhD degree *reduces* the chance of employment beyond the academic system, on the other hand, we face 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 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. There are too many of us and not enough funds, 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 PhD theses were carried out by individuals in the course of preparation for academic work. It is a broader problem stemming from the marketization of universities: on the one hand, simplified science for the masses, on the other, hermetic “pure” science.

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 opportunities for inclusion in the hermetic world of “true science”, which might be primarily understood as the world of “full-time employment” in academia, 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 a mobile workforce that can be employed in various projects – probably mainly on the boundaries of academia and social practice, with little chance of permanent (full-time employment) scientific work. It seems to me that we are dealing with a fairly clear continuation of the strategy of *social construction of a worker*, with the institutionally-created *obligation of hired labour* on the lower rungs of the hierarchy in “knowledge factories”.

At the same time, a clear vision emerges of the “internal university”, a kind of elitist structure functioning in the middle of the field accessible to BA, MA and PhD students; a structure of decision-makers (resembling the communist “them”), desired and inaccessible (“they will not accept us / not allow us in”) – also representing the fantasy of “true science”, to which PhD students only occasionally gain access with commissions for technical work (“transcriptions”). It can be encapsulated in the metaphor of a medieval town and its outlying districts. Surrounded by walls that guarantee relative safety for its citizens, it keeps the masses that inhabit its surrounding areas at bay. They are both redundant and indispensable for the inner city: they are a reservoir of labour, 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 young people in Europe, strictly connected with the way educational institutions function for the sake of “employability” can confirm the accuracy of this metaphor.

Nowadays, regardless of whether the “suburbium” proves a permanent exclusion zone or a path to the inner university, those who “revolve around” it are both superfluous and indispensable. PhD students of social sciences cited herein may not feel their “marginal indispensability” within the functioning of the university as clearly as PhD students at the laboratories of experimental sciences, without whom they would simply cease to function. Nevertheless, their situation *is* generally similar: people are educated to work in “knowledge factories” – in positions that have little to do with the mythical aura of Science present in the phantasm of the Humboldtian university.