



**THE MODERN UNIVERSITY IN POLAND: TRANSITION FROM COMMUNISM
TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

by

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Abstract

The place and role of the Polish higher education in transition from totalitarianism to democracy is discussed. Educational problems are presented in the socio-political and economic context both in the communist era and in the times of transition. Communist ideology referring to education is also treated. The focus is on contrast between communist and democratic ideals and forms of education. A particular reference is made to the goals and state of education under communist regime. A separate chapter is devoted to the tradition of illegal /independent/ education in Poland in the last 200 years. The role of education in the fall of communism is also underlined. The final part of the paper refers to the description of the present state of higher education and the debates on the modern university of the future among Polish academics.

Introduction

Poland has over one thousand years of history behind her. In the medieval times, in particular, after the union with Lithuania, the 15th century Poland was a big country, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, covering an area of about 2 mln km². At that time Poland played an important role in Europe, being a country of tolerance and progressive system of government. A number of nationalities such as Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, Byelorussians or Tartars, just to mention a few, found home in Poland.

The first Polish university was founded in the 14th century in Cracow.

The situation changed drastically in the last quarter of the 18th century. Poland was partitioned among Russia, Prussia and Austria and ceased to exist for over a century /1795-1918/. When her oppressors were beaten or vanished /tsarist Russia/ the country gained her second independence both for only 21 years. Six years of German occupation /1939-1945/ and forty-four years of communist rule were the fate of Poland in the last 50 years.

Communist Rule in Poland 1945-1989

According to the Yalta and Potsdam agreements Poland found herself under the dominance of communism after the end of World War II. The communist rule took a form of total state, a party-state. The communist party and the state were in many respects viewed as one. The center of power was based on coercion and indoctrination enforced by ideology. The duty of ideology was to create a belief or conviction in people that theory guaranteeng the progress of society was in possession of the party and that no one else but the party possessed such a theory. The totalitarian system tried to rebuild the society according to the ideological goals. In practice, it meant ignoring or rejecting traditions and customs, convictions and values of the majority of people living in the state. The totalitarian state, however, was not able to control the people fully. Spontaneous social processes based on solidarity of people usually contributed to dysfunction of the system.

The communist rule in Poland was viewed by many Poles as an alien graft. First of all, communism was strongly identified with Russia - a country that traditionally was anti-Polish. The second independence was not served on the plate to Poland but won on the battlefield /Polish-Soviet war of 1920 and so-called miracle at the Vistula River/. Anti-Russian feelings were not shared with the Poles by other East Europeans such as Czechs or Bulgarians. One way or another they were grateful to the Russians for being liberated. For Poles the so-called "libaration" was not identified with freedom at all.

Poland was the least suitable country in East Europe to accept communism after World War II. The anti-Russian feelings were not the only factor. Poland was a religious country /over 90 per cent of Poles were estimated to be Roman Catholics/. Feelings of tolerance to others and democratic traditions were very strong. At the same time the Polish working class was weak and peasants devoted to private ownership of land were unwilling to yield to collectivization. The Communist Party of Poland /KPP/ was crushed down by the Russians in 1937-1938. A large number of leaders were liquidated after the delegitimation of the KPP by the Comintern in Moscow. Stalin did not trust Polish communists.

In sum, the experiment with communism in Poland was unlikely to succeed. The first anti-communist political demonstration took place in Cracow on the 3rd of May, 1946 -- to celebrate the May Constitution of 1791 - a national symbol of democracy. Two people were injured, 1,000 arrested and 12 sentenced for prison terms /from 1 to 7 years/. It would be hardly possible to describe all the political demonstrations in the years of the communist rule, however the most memorable social outbursts took place in each decade: 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, 1980, 1988. The nation time and again protested against the communist regime. As long as the communists succeeded in separating the working class from the intelligentsia /intellectuals/ they were able to keep power. When it happened that workers protested /1956, 1979/ the intelligentsia dissociated itself from the working class' cause and vice versa /1968/. The unifying front of opposition /workers and intellectuals/ began to appear after the workers' bloody riots of 1976 /Ursus, Radom/. The outstanding members of political opposition /Lipiński, Kuroń, Michnik/ established the Committee for

Defence of Workers /KOR/

in 1976 to help the workers persecuted by the regime. The founding members were soon arrested and sentenced.

The crisis of the 1980s was broader and deeper. It penetrated the whole society and manifested itself in the form of political and ideological cleavages, degeneration of culture, erosion of universal values. It was the trial time for the communist rule. The solidarity of workers and the opposition intellectuals was so tight that the communist government yielded to the social demands and power was peacefully taken by Solidarity.

Development of Education 1945-1989

The consolidation of the communist system in Poland was accompanied by far-reaching social, economic and political changes. The *raison d'être* of communist state was based on the strength of the working class which was elevated to the position of supremacy. Heavy industry was developed irrespective of economic costs for mass employment of workers. Obedience to the state and faithfulness to the communist party's cause became the prime value.

The education system was subjected to central planning. The main functions of education were following:

- political and ideological indoctrination to produce disciplined subordinates,
- production of manpower /mostly at a low level/ for the oldfashioned, simple labour and energy consuming heavy industry,
- providing politically reliable and absolutely loyal bureaucrats and engineers executing orders accurately and being highly obedient.

The communist economy did not demand for higher qualifications. In result secondary and tertiary education were vocationalized. The whole system was highly centralized and found itself under strict bureaucratic control followed by curricular-organizational unification /unified textbooks, over-loading of syllabuses, traditional type of instruction/.

Goals of Education under Communism

Educational theory in communism was allegedly based on the Marxist ideal of man to be "developed from all sides". This was not the case in practice because theory was mainly derived from the political doctrines of communism. Didacticism answered the genuine purposes of this theory. It referred to an extreme application of technicalities in the teaching process. The process was split into minute parts and attention was paid more to technical concerns than to the discovery of subject-matter using methods such as free discussion on the basis of different and possibly conflicting sources, for example, in history lessons. The main goal of didacticism may be defined as indoctrination, through constant repetition of carefully selected subject-matter, serving to reinforce the communist Weltanschauung.

In effect, the role of education in communist state was downgraded both in the scale of pay and in the social prestige of educated people. Priority was given to "material production". All the professions that were financed from the state budget were affected adversely. The salary of physician or teacher was lower than the pay of workers.

State of Education under Communism

In the last 20 years /1970-1990/ following the general trend for school reform in many countries many structural changes were suggested in the two National Reports on Education /1973, 1989/.

In fact, no reform was carried out mainly due to the arrogance of the communist policy makers to public opinion.

In effect, the Polish system of education operated on the basis of the 1961 Education Act till the very collapse of communism. Its achievement was rather moderate in 1989: 6 per cent of the population were graduates of higher education, 24 per cent of secondary general and vocational education, 21 per cent of lower secondary vocational education, 43 per cent completed only primary education and 6 per cent of the population had education lower than primary. It is estimated that at least 1 mln adult people were full illiterates. The number of functional illiterates was estimated at 40 per cent /1/.

It would not be easy to change the situation for better because funds available for education are decreasing steadily:

4.7 per cent GNP --- 1985

3.5 per cent GNP --- 1988

2.2 per cent GNP --- 1991

Over 80 per cent of funds for education goes to salaries and wages, however teachers are paid 30 per cent less than the national average. In result, qualified and ambitious teachers are leaving the profession. More and more underqualified and unqualified join the teaching force.

Table 1

Qualifications of primary and secondary school teachers /1991/. /2/

Qualified teachers	:	330,000
Underqualified teachers	:	181,000
Unqualified teachers	:	100,000
Total	:	611,000

State of Higher Education under Communism

The structure of higher education consisted of 89 institutions of higher learning /besides several higher military and police schools/. All of them were under control of the state except one Catholic university and two theological colleges.

Universities and technological universities enrolled more than 50 per cent of all students. The remaining percentage was enrolled in specialized higher schools /engineering colleges of education, agricultural academies, high schools of economics, colleges of education, medical colleges and other/.

Table 2

Students in higher education /in thousand/, /3/

1970	:	330.8
1975	:	468.1
1980	:	453.7
1985	:	340.7
1986	:	334.5
1987	:	342.6
1988	:	356.4
1989	:	378.4

On the basis of UNESCO, ILO and World Bank statistical data on higher education Poland was losing ground systematically.

Table 3

Higher education graduates for 100,000 inhabitants /4/

1975		1980		1985	
n. of grad.	rank order	n. of grad.	rank order	n. of grad.	rank order
249.8	7	218.0	10	197.8	21

The number of students also decreased in the whole population substantially.

Table 4

Higher education students for 100,000 inhabitants /5/

1975		1980		1985	
n. of stud.	rank order	n. of stud.	rank order	n. of stud.	rank order
1362	11	1284	16	957	24

Higher education was functioning in Poland over the whole period of communism in a sui generis rational way. It fulfilled the needs of the planned sector of economy. Up nearly to the end of the 1970s the educational scene looked quite stable.

The conflict between the traditional system of higher education and the social needs for higher education graduates appeared in the 1980s.

The phenomenon had at least two causes:

1. Collapse of the tempo of economic development in the middle of the 1970s. The industrial production decreased substantially. The university graduates were not able to find employment easily,
2. There was an overproduction of educated manpower in traditional sectors /humanities, social sciences or mechanical engineering/ but certain groups of professionals /economists, managers, high tech engineers/ were in short supply.

Generally the impact of higher education graduates on the state of economy was limited, however the graduates played a very important role in society at large as an intellectual opposition to the communist rule.

A note should also be taken that graduates of higher education as far as the level of their general and professional competencies was concerned were comparable with those in the Western countries. The situation deteriorated when they started their professional careers because economy as a rule did not demand for improving, upgrading or enlarging professional or general competencies through taking part in various in-service courses. In effect, Polish university graduates stopped developing as professionals.

Polish Tradition of Independent Education

Motto: "The slave should know more
than he is expected to"

/Plautus/

Poland had rich traditions of organizing illegal /independent/ education not only for children but for adults, too. Under the partitions or German occupation the Poles were forced to carry on a latent form of national life. Both the Russians and Prussians did their best to uproot Polish national traditions, however, not with much success. After independence /1918/ Poland was able to reunify her lands into one national organism and to create an economically effective state in no time at all. She was able to win the Polish-Soviet war of 1920. To do such things would not be possible without the spiritual state of preparedness of the whole nation under partitions. The Poles protected and kept intact their language, religion, history and national traditions and waited for the moment to release their accumulated energy.

The Poles had a good chance to cooperate with Hitler before the war or even under the occupation. Their instinct of survival prompted them to keep the Germans at a distance. There was no Polish Horthy, Quisling or Pétain. The decision was right, otherwise Stalin might have reduced the country to the size of Monaco or San Marino both in the scale of territory and number of inhabitants.

Independent education during the communist era was organized by groups in political opposition: dissidents, freedom fighters and solidarity activists. In one form or another, these groups or social movements strived for the attainment of goals such as human rights, independence and democratic pluralism. It was understood that these goals would not be easily achieved. The anti-communist opposition organized people committed to the goal of working for a future in which the communist system would be replaced by parliamentary democracy. The educational activities of the social movements, which were not numerous and mostly illegal, depended on self-education and participation in group discussions. Topics for discussion were the types of political systems that might emerge in a post-communist state, the balance of power in such a future political -- bi- or multiparty system -- and the place and role of Parliament in the new political system. Study circles were also formed around other major themes. Examples are groups discussing privatization and market economy, education, philosophy, publishing, and cultural life. This form of "underground" community education had become well established towards the mid-1980s. Even some state-controlled institutions such as public libraries, theaters and museums participated in the illegal circuit, helping in carrying on "alternative" cultural life.

A very significant role was played by intellectuals such as university professors, teachers, journalists, writers. A sort of "Flying University" was established. It contributed not to a small measure to the growth of intellectual and political life in the underground through lectures and seminars given to opposition activists. A number of intellectuals were persecuted, arrested or imprisoned for their underground educational activities.

Important was also the educational effort of religious leaders of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church was the only institution besides the communist state apparatus with an independent social structure and a real power basis in society. The Church could not only make its own decisions and rules but also, to an extent, implement them. Even though the Church was primarily concerned with religion, it had an important role to play in philosophy and cultural life; such issues as human rights are deeply embedded in Christian tradition. It preached passive disobedience to communist rule through "internal migration". The Church was important for keeping morale, for example, by taking care of political prisoners and their families.

In conclusion, a large part of education took place in the independent system. It may be noted in the case of Poland that from 1982 to 1989 the leaders of the Solidarity Movement initiated the so-called "Long March" to freedom of thought. The distribution of illegal publications -- books, dailies and magazines -- formed the core of this strategy of conscience-raising. About 800 books were printed by underground publishing houses during this period. This shows the importance of independent education in Poland in the years preceding the collapse of communism, and the extent of the educational activity that was carried on.

Role of Education in the Fall of Communism

There are many factors that contributed directly or indirectly to the collapse of communism. The following are among the most important ones:

1. In the 1970s Poles started to travel on a mass scale to the West for business and pleasure. Between 1975-1990 over 1 mln people left Poland for good mainly for economic reasons. The opening to the West helped the Poles to understand that the country they were living in was far from being normal because work was no work, pay was no pay and money was no money. Everything was substandard. When they compared the level of living in the West with that in the East they felt deeply frustrated. They understood that the only way out was the change of the socio-political system;
2. Foreign radio stations such as "Voice of America", "Free Europe" or "BBC World Service" together with Western mass media contributed not in a small measure to the demythologization of the communist system. They helped to offset the impact of communist indoctrination upon large sectors of population in East Europe. Among others, the Unification Movement through CAUSA, VOC and other programs scored many brilliant successes fighting against communism;
3. The education system over the communist era played an important role in raising the level of national consciousness and encouraging people to change the communist system. The communist school brought up its own gravediggers, such as Wałęsa who completed primary school, Bujak and Frasiński /the most outstanding

opposition leaders/ - graduates of secondary schools and Geremek /one of the pillars of Solidarity/ - a university professor. It was the school under the communist era that educated both workers and intellectuals to understand the idea of solidarity among people. It contributed enormously to the strategy of taking power by peaceful means from the communists in 1989.

Higher Education in transition

However ideal types do not exist in reality but there was a clear distinction between education in communist and capitalist countries.

It mainly concentrated around such antinomies as:

1. education for collective vs. individual achievement,
2. emphasis on high instrumental vs. high intrinsic value of education,
3. overt vs. hidden ideology of education,
4. planned vs. open recruitment and selection systems.

In fact, as it can be seen both the systems of education are different in many important respects. In transition to parliamentary democracy the whole system in the former communist countries must be thoroughly restructured which is not easy or even possible in a short span of time due to many factors such as old mentality, negative attitudes and perhaps due to the lack of money available for education.

The restructuring of education is not done in vacuum. The economy must also be restructured from self-sufficient to interdependent,

from central steering to free market mechanisms, from heavy, energy and labour intensive industry to light and high tech industries. The society as such must also change from homogenized to varied, from passive to active and creative, from collectivity to individuality, from public property to private and public property. The relation to nature must also change, too, from destructive to constructive, from no balance to ecological balance, from enemy to friendly attitude to mother nature. It is assumed that in the process of social change imbalances are necessarily brought about in the socio-economic system of the country. It is education that responds to these structural needs to re-establish a balance within the system.

The above assumption is coherent with the transition from communism to parliamentary democracy in East and Central European countries. Transition as such is mainly an educational process. Higher education has an important role to play in off-setting the consequences of decades of ideological indoctrination. The introduction of free market economics may not be possible without a reorientation in the scale of values and attitudes. People have to be made to understand that hard work, own initiative and especially risktaking in investment are indispensable for success in a free market system.

There is little doubt that the structure, direction and philosophy of higher education are in need of urgent reform, particularly in comparison with the competitor countries of European Community. It is necessary to redefine the essence and function of higher education; its role and place within the socio-economic system of the country in transition from communism to democracy. It would also be advisable to introduce new values to the system of higher education, such as: closer co-operation with industry, realization of new goals such as

common European consciousness, changes in the curricula reflecting the change of the system /freedom of choice, autonomy, democratization/.

It will not be easy to change people's mentality in this respect. The former system of education was directed to the acquisition of skills needed to serve uncompetitive economy sectors. The system was not preparing for changes and innovations or for acquisition of new skills.

In transition from command to market economy, one can note two opposing phenomena: unemployment and skills shortages. Unemployment which in 1989 amounted to only 0.3 per cent, by the end of 1991 rose to 11.3 per cent of the labour force and is still rising. Gigantic socialist industrial enterprises which employed millions of people are in the state of collapse. At the same time skills shortages are also becoming visible, particularly in management, office technology, commerce, banking or high technology industries. Moreover workers with knowledge of Western languages are in short supply.

The economic transformation depends crucially on the quality of the labour force, hence it is essential that higher education be reformed in accordance with the demands of a competitive labour market. Although investment in education was declared a high priority but the economy at present is not capable of freeing the required financial resources. A new system of education reflecting liberal democracy and free market economy is being created with many obstacles and difficulties. This is natural because democracy is a grass-root phenomenon hence more and more private and independent higher education institutions are being created for profit in Poland now. Business, administration and management colleges are set up by var-

ious foundations and private individuals. Some of them were established with an assistance of Western donors, some were set up as joint-venture educational institutions for profit. Fees in some of them are quite high /2,100-3,000 USD a year/. Higher education offered is accessible only to those who are able to pay for the services rendered. The private colleges are not short of clientele in particular those which offer business and management courses in English by expatriates. In one of such colleges 70 per cent of teaching staff are English and American nationals.

Generally, Poland faces a considerable reorientation of traditional higher education emphasizing in particular flexibility and responsiveness to market economy demands. Technical and financial assistance is needed to develop the new setting on a rational scale. What has been achieved so far /freedom and autonomy/ is much but not enough.

Modern University of the Future in Poland

Traditionally, university believed more in detachment than in commitment, more in dispassion than passion, more in objectivity than subjectivity, more in inquiry than in action research. Teaching was given more in dogmas than in mutual experimentation of teachers and students. For example, in science the researcher was more interested in unilateral control over variables than in enhancing mutual responsibility of the participants for the research. In all these attitudes and actions there was no balance. It seems to be the most important to think about the modern university in terms of balance between the inner and the outer worlds for the sake of the develo-

ment of a new civilisation.

Let us come back to the situation in Poland. The essence and role of the modern university within a new socio-economic system has not been an object of broader public debates in Poland yet. In defining the tasks of higher education one should take into account social and economic needs in the new situation resulted in the transition from communism to parliamentary democracy. It is likely that restructuring of higher education may bring about a number of conflicts between academicians on the one hand and authorities and society at large on the other. The crisis within higher education does not only refer to the conflict caused by the loss of confidence in higher education by the society but also to the internal situation within the higher education setting. The academicians have not been able yet to define the place, role and the functions of the modern higher education institutions. Some of them are of the view that the modern university be a centre of pure research and teaching and at the same time a platform of meeting and dialogue among scientists of the highest calibre, in particular of those who are critically disposed to the modern civilization and its threats /consumerism, bottom-line economics, permissiveness/. It is usually not noticed that if the role of the modern university is defined as such, it may be isolated from the society, following the old-fashioned ideal of the ivory tower. Other academicians are of the view that the modern university fulfil a number of new tasks: to be a centre of innovative initiatives in many spheres of life responsible for coordinating all the programmes in lifelong education /training and retraining courses in particular/. It is postulated that the modern university must contribute to dissemination of synthesized knowledge to the general public in the form of

public lectures, popular publications and in taking part in everyday public and political life of the country. It is a consensus among many that the modern university should overcome tendencies to split knowledge into more and more bits and pieces limiting the development of human mind and interdisciplinary communication. The old division of knowledge into science, humanities, social and technical sciences should be overcome by introducing true interdisciplinary curricula linking, for example, mathematics, science, philosophy, sociology, humanities and even technical science. It is believed that in such a way the modern university would become an integrated educational institution.

It is also possible that the modern university in transition will find its place between the two extremities. Perhaps it will become necessary on the one hand to provide service to the whole society, for example in the form of lifelong education, recurrent education, research in environmental protection or some sort of participation in the social service. On the other hand the modern university should be a symbol of higher education, culture and good manners for all. It should prepare the elite for many walks of life.

The modern university in transition in East and central Europe must take part in satisfying social needs resulting in a wave of changes in the countries of the region. The university must adapt to the changes in the socio-economic and political spheres of the new society. It must change its organizational structure to enable its participation in further incoming changes. It should also be noted that the modern university should not be overburdened with the tasks referring to exigencies of the day having more time at its disposal to concentrate on research and teaching of the highest quality.

In fact, such countries as Poland do not have much time to restructure her higher education. The situation becomes additionally complicated by the fact that the Western European countries are reforming their systems of education to make them more competitive in the united Europe where people will soon be free to select schools and universities as well as future places of professional work. It would be hardly possible for the countries of East and Central Europe to compete with West Europe. If the give-and-take mechanisms are not in operation we shall never catch up with the standards and material success of the western civilization. It is likely that we may play a role of the European reservation.

NOTES

- /1/ See on this point my own paper "History and Present Situation of Adult Education Policy and Adult Education Research in Poland" In J. Knoll /Ed./ Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung 1989, vol. 17, p.144-148.
- /2/ Official data issued by the Polish Ministry of National Education in 1991.
- /3/ Statistical Yearbooks 1970-1991, GUS, Warsaw.
- /4/ Calculations by the author of the paper.
- /5/ Calculations by the author of the paper.