



DISCUSSANT RESPONSE

by

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to **Ljubisa Rakic**

THE UNIVERSITY AT THE CROSS-ROADS: THE CASE OF YUGOSLAVIA

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Though the title of Rakič's paper refers to "The Case of Yugoslavia" it nevertheless outlines some problems that are common for university education in most of post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The problems raised by Rakič are evident and shared also by some other papers of Committee IV. This is, e.g., the problem of contradiction between the need for open access to university studies and the demand for preserving high quality of university education, the problem of academic freedom and autonomy, and other.

Some problems outlined in Rakič's paper are, however, rather original and I think our discussion could be focused just on them. In the following remarks I am turning attention to these problems trying to present my understanding of Rakič's ideas and adding my own critical comments to them. In some cases I will confront Rakič's ideas with my reference to solving the respective problems in Czechoslovakia, or more precisely, in the Czech Republic.

The problems deserving attention of Committee IV participants are the following ones:

(1) The most relevant idea in Rakič's paper is the statement that it is not sufficient to perform "partial adaptations of the university to new demands" but is necessary to perform "radical changes of the whole system of education" (p. 1).

This is, in fact, an old problem of contradiction between demands and postulations for "radical changes" vs. "step-by-step improvements" of education as reflected in a large number of publications in many countries.

In my view all of those who are demanding "radical changes" have to take into consideration several things:

- First, it is easy to proclaim verbally a necessity for radical changes of the whole system of education but it is difficult - and I would say almost impossible - to change radically the whole system of education in real-life practice. On the contrary, the findings of studies in international comparative education (Thomas, 1990, and others) and in school-reform making (Prucha, 1992) clearly show that reforms of educational systems in various countries today are being performed more efficiently through partial innovations, gradual improvements than by giant school reforms of the whole system at once.

- Second, a demand for "radical changes" of education is unrealistic on the ground of economic conditions. Even if one would accept the demand for "radical changes" this could not be realized because society cannot allow it.

What Rakič states in connection with it, namely that "it is not possible to restrict and stop access to higher education in an administrative manner" (p. 6), can be appreciated as a desirable postulate. Everybody will perhaps agree that administrative (or bureaucratic) restrictions are in some cases unhealthy for educational development. However, it is not enough to abolish only administrative restrictions to higher education and then to expect that the whole matter will be solved - if economic conditions are still effective.

I shall illustrate the problem by an example taken from continuing transition of higher education in Czechoslovakia.

Following the political changes of 1989 a new policy of access to higher education in Czechoslovakia has been introduced. The tendency was to eliminate all barriers to higher education which were characteristic of the past regime. The Higher Education Act

of May, 1990, codified, among others, a free access to higher education for all without political or ideological constraints (see, in more detail, in Prucha and Walterová, 1992). The universities and other higher education institutions tried to enrol the maximum number of students possible. Thus, the number of students at higher education institutions in the Czech Republic has increased from 15.4%, from the population year, in 1980, to 17.1% in 1990 (according to data given in Report to the OECD, 1992, p. 84).

However, these efforts for an extensive democratization of access to higher education were limited by two factors: the capacity of higher education institutions (teacher staff, space for teaching, etc.) and by financial sources.

Thus, the size and capacity of institutions as well as the amount of funding available pose substantial restrictions even if administrative restrictions are limited to a lowest possible degree. I see the similar situation (or even worse) also in other Central and Eastern European countries.

Consequently, it seems unrealistic to postulate "radical changes" in education for reasons just mentioned. Should we, therefore, demand a radical change of education or - having in mind existing economic and material resources - should we support step-by-step improvements? The answer is, in my opinion, quite clear.

(2) Another relevant problem raised by Rakič's paper concerns the means through which "the old university" should be changed and "a new one" should be created. Undoubtedly, what Rakič considers as relevant is right. The author outlines the following requirements (pp. 7-10):

- the new university should create a link of the educational process and scientific work at the university with the mate-

- rial and spiritual production of the society,
- the new university should not only educate "narrow experts" but should offer a broad range of general knowledge and not "specialist atomization",
 - the new university should not train "pragmatic technicians" who are incapable of human and social aspects of their branch and, equally, should not train "humanists" who are ignorant of technical and natural sciences,
- etc.

As I said, the postulates are theoretically right and hardly anyone would oppose them. Again, however, I would add to them: the postulations are theoretical, general proclamations that need to be corrected on realistic and practical grounds. Let's take, e.g., Rakič's postulate stating that

"The new university ... should ... educate experts for basic branches without specialist atomization. More precise specialization would be acquired on the spot, in the hospitals, museums, factories, farms, etc. ..." (pp. 7-8).

Such proclamation sounds as nice - but how to realize it in practice ? Could we imagine, e.g., that medical doctors would acquire their specialized knowledge and skills just by "practical work at the future job" ? And having at their disposal only "a broad range of general knowledge" as postulated ?

I think the postulate like this is not justifiable. It is a postulate of theoretical pedagogy that has no solid ground with respect to real-life practice.

(3) In conclusion I would like to discuss briefly yet another problem that is included neither in Rakič's paper nor in other papers of the Committee IV. This is the problem of the role of

students in transition of the university.

In deliberations about how the traditional higher education should be transformed we are usually concerned with factors as the structural changes of educational institutions, changes of curricula, nature of knowledge and skills as educational outputs, quality of teaching, relationship between teaching and research, and others. But we forget that the changes we postulate could not be performed quite efficiently if we don't take students as partners in performing the necessary changes.

Thus, I raise a question about the participative role of students in transition of the university: How far and in which manner should students be involved in the transition process as acting subjects ?

Again, with respect to the real situation in Central and Eastern European countries we have to evaluate the problem quite realistic. What are students' attitudes to present-day social and educational changes ? As an example the findings of recent sociological study (summarized in the Report to the OECD, 1992) on Czech students illustrate the situation as follows:

- Before 1989 the Czech university students have revealed a lack of participation in governing and influencing their institutions. Resignation became a permanent part of students' relation to society and education.
- In November 1989 students initiated the 'velvet revolution' and many of them began to participate in public affairs. This period was marked with students' euphoria for the transformation into a democratic society.
- However, during a post-revolution period one can observe that again a majority of students reveal a minimum participation in education affairs. In conditions of developing

free-market economy they are mainly focused on their own career, etc.

Thus, the previous political system which was interrupted in 1989 reflects some surviving stereotypes in students' attitudes and thinking - in particular, a passive approach on the prevailing part of students to influencing the affairs in their institutions.

How then can we take students as active partners in transforming the university? One way seems to be fruitful although in long-term perspective. This is to create in students the awareness of responsibility for society's development. In fact it is the problem of values in education. The respective education for responsive citizenship should start in the elementary school and should create the awareness of responsibility, not only to oneself but also to others and to the whole society including responsibility for education as well.

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