



DISCUSSANT RESPONSE

by

Rimantas Želvys
Head, Department of Psychology
In-Service Teacher Training Institute
Vilnius, LITHUANIA

to Ryszard Pachociński's

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

The Nineteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Seoul, Korea August 19-26, 1992

© 1992, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences

Discussion remarks on prof. R. Pachociński's paper "The Modern University in Poland: Transition From Communism To Liberal Democracy"

The paper presents the authors understanding of the role of universities in Poland in the post-communist era. It gives both the historical outline of the problem and the socio-political context of today. There is also a brief outline of the perspectives of the possible future development of higher education in Poland, which seems to be rather problematic and controversial. The development of the former communist countries during the last several years shows that it is rather difficult to foresee the nearest future and to define the ways in which this or that country will go in overcoming the heavy burden of its communist past.

In his overview of the communist rule in Poland prof. R. Pachociński says that the communist system was always viewed as an alien gift in his country and was strongly identified with Russia. Then he notes that anti-Russian feelings were not shared with the Poles by other East Europeans. It seems rather questionable whether, for example, Hungarians or Czechs have not experienced anti-Russian feelings after invasions into their countries in 1956 and 1968, not speaking about the Baltic states, who suffered severe political and national oppression since 1940. So, in this sense, admitting, that Poland was probably the most unfavourable country for introducing communism, we could argue whether Polish situation was really unique in the development of resistance against totalitarianism. Catholic Lithuania, for

example, was also a difficult area for communist experiments, though there is no doubt that in Lithuania were much less overt manifestations of it than in Poland: political oppression in the former USSR was much stronger than in the so-called satellite countries.

The author presents a broad panorama of the development of education in 1945 - 1989, based on statistic data. Though it can be informative for our Western colleagues, educators from the former Eastern block countries will hardly find there anything new. It is natural, of course, that functioning of higher education and its crisis after the end of the so-called planned economy is similar in all post-communist countries. The main difference which must be pointed out is that reforms in Poland started at the beginning of the eighties, almost ten years earlier than in the rest of the Eastern and Central Europe. In this sense the pioneering role of Poland undoubtedly must be stressed.

The traditions of independent and underground education has deep roots in the history of Poland. It can be traced back to the XIXth century, when systematic rebellions against the Russian Empire were stimulated mainly by independent thought born in the underground societies of former Rzeczpospolita universities. It is also necessary to point out the role of the Catholic Church, which, during all the periods of Russian and Soviet oppression was the only independent and at the same time officially functioning social institution. However, though underground education undoubtedly made a certain impact on the development of higher education, its role in the academic life should not be overestimated. Most of the former

dissident activists and today's political leaders got their basic education within the framework of the formal institutions of higher education and not so much in the underground courses.

The author's thesis about difficulties in changing the mentality of the people during the transitory period must be very important. Though restructuring of education is taking place and private institutions of higher education are emerging, it must be a long and painstaking process of changing people's orientation towards life and work in order to catch up with the rest of the Europe. It happens sometimes that visits of foreign experts or professors are of little value because people are not psychologically oriented to accept all the new information and skills and to use it effectively. It should be an interesting point for further discussion.

Quite symptomatic is the fact mentioned in the paper that the essence and role of the modern university has not been an object of a broader public debate. Governments of post-communist countries are hastily trying to reorganize their economic potential in order to meet the demands of market economy. At the same time the attention and financial support for preparing high class professionals, capable to function effectively in a new economic situation, is clearly not sufficient. The interdisciplinary approach and the system of lifelong education, in-service training is still in the process of becoming. What are the consequences of such approach and what are the ways of persuading politicians to give the priorities for education?

Loss of confidence in higher education by society is

linked closely with the ideologic role that certain academicians played in the communist past of their countries. Mostly these academicians are having difficulties in defining the new place, role and functions of the modern institutions of higher education now. Their place in the future development of education is to be discussed as well.

One more important process is being pointed out in the paper: educational changes in Eastern and Central Europe are coinciding with educational reforms taking place in most of the Western European countries. The process of European integration raises a serious dilemma: whether the ongoing processes in post-communist countries must be oriented towards meeting the demands of extremely difficult and controversial transitory period of today, or maybe more abstract and at the same time further reaching goals of restructuring education according to the future common European model must be set up. The author says that it would be hardly possible for the countries of Eastern and Central Europe to compete with West European countries in this sense and that a danger of becoming a kind of the European reservation exists. So the question of seeking for more ambitious aims or concentrating on today's ongoing processes is being left open.

In spite of the pessimistic final note of the author the paper gives a broad and in many aspects encouraging outlook at the perspectives of the development of higher education in Poland as well as, I should think, in other post-communist countries of Europe. There are many similarities which could be traced by comparing the processes which are taking place in most

of the former Eastern block countries. However, difficulties and contraversions which seem essential and inevitable for us, are not always easily and clearly understood in Western academic circles. In this sense the work of prof. M. Kachocinski is a valuable source of information, based on historical context as well as the facts of the present development, and it should be considered to be one of the main merits of the paper.