

# The grey faces of academic workers: On the non-emancipatory resistance of Polish humanists to the edu-factory reform of academia

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## Abstract

*In this article I deal with the Polish discourse generated by academics facing a reform of higher education. My primary interest is to what extent their statement enables or disables emancipatory practice. I point out that the structure of academics' prevalent discourse in the face of education-factory reform makes liberation impossible. Furthermore, it contributes to the reinforcement of social inequalities. In conclusion I indicate the necessity of developing both a different discourse and practice, which might enable to overcome the crisis, yet at the same time enforce the redefinition and reorganization of educational institutions and of education itself.*

**Keywords:** University, resistance, academic work, education factory

This article deals with the analysis of Polish discourse opposing the reform of higher education. It is based on statements by academics published in scientific journals, joint and journalistic publications as well as in books. The authors quoted serve as examples only, illustrating the general tendency which seems to prevail. The sample statements have been chosen for being the most representative; they blatantly depict the problem which permeates the dominating discourse on the Polish university. When selecting these examples I have also taken into consideration the speaker's position in the academic and political hierarchy of power. I intend to demonstrate that the statements of some of Polish academics render the implementation of emancipatory policy impossible. Moreover, by establishing a division between academia and the world of work, they contribute to the strengthening of social inequalities, and to the exclusion from studying, which is defined in the analysed discourse as the most human activity.

Polish transformation, as well as the transformation of Polish universities, is connected with the neo-liberal changes of capitalism. The tendency to increase supervision over research and teaching, the development of the audit culture, the redefinition of "autonomy", the transformation of the organisational culture, the precarisation, the casualisation of academic workers and students, etc. – all of these have a global character. The phenomena which are described and criticised in other countries have their reflection in the Polish context. Nevertheless, the Polish transformation of both the economy (Kowalik, 2009) and universities has a unique character (see Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2013; Walicki, 2011) which I do not intend to analyse here. On the one hand, it consists in the implementation of the most

radical version of neo-liberalism, and on the other, in the political submission and weakness of workers, including university employees, who – since 1989 – have not taken any strike action or staged any other organised protest (Sowa, 2015). The unique Polish location in the world system, the historical experience and the domination of the radical version of neo-liberalism influence practices of resistance.

### **The restructuring of Polish academia**

The amendment to the law on higher education took effect in the year 2012 in Poland. It has given rise to a heated debate within academia. It constitutes a formal and legal element of general social changes dated symbolically to the year 1989. The changes consisted in a transition from so called “real socialism” to the neo-liberal order in its most cruel and destructive form (Kowalik, 2009). The local, historical nexus of fordism and state capitalism (Barker, 1982) caused all pro-social solutions, typical for the liberal left, to be judged as communist (Szahaj, 2014; Walicki, 2013), which allowed the equation of the neo-liberal options with the democratic, liberal and anti-totalitarian ones. What is more, neo-liberalism was presented as the only rational possibility of establishing social order. Most academics did not protest against these changes but legitimized them and actively supported them (Nowak, 2010). This transformation, which wreaked havoc, destroying industry and the lives of “unadaptable” individuals, did not breach the walls of academia. Academics could enjoy a special status although the official discourse legitimizing the need for changes started to point out “loafers” who were lazy, mentally sluggish and without didactic talent – all because they enjoyed the security of employment. A violation of employment conditions was presented as a necessary element of disciplining “bad subjects” and raising the quality of research and teaching (for example: Leszczyńska, 2013; about the support for neo-liberal reform in Polish academia by newspaper see Zimniak-Halajko, 2013; Dobrołowicz 2013).

The transformation of Polish society was connected with the global changes of capital (Hardy, 2009). In this context, the transition from real socialism to capitalism should be analysed as a passage from fordism to post-fordism. I shall not analyse here the social changes or their relation to polish academia – I have already done this in another publication (Szwabowski, 2014a). What is important in the context of the discourse analysis in question is the fact that the employees of academia are transformed into wage labourers. Along with the real subsumption of society under capital (Hardt, Negri, 2000), the university has a central place in the social factory (Edu-Factory, 2007). It turns out that this does not mean the cognitivisation of economy but the introduction of a factory-like regime into academia. This paradox has been pointed out, among others, by Tomasz Szkudlarek (Szkudlarek, 2012). It is the perplexing situation of academia turned into a factory that provokes resistance by academics. However, the problematisation of such transformation, and its criticism, is peculiar.

## The discourse of resistance to the condition of the working class

Three different problems emerge from the analysis of the prevalent discourse opposing changes in the work of academia. The first one refers to understanding the transformations themselves in academia and capitalism, the second one might be called utopian (using the model of academia as a proper model, which, in fact, has never existed, for example see Ostrowska, 2014; Zamojski 2011), and the third one constitutes the criticism of the present state as pathology (the last two issues are analysed in Szwabowski 2012; 2013). These problems are intertwined, connected and mutually conditioned. The main precept associating them is the division between academia and the world of work.

The problem of transformation is dominated by the register of scandal and the register of intimacy. They function on two different levels and differ in the style of narration. In the first register, the authors mainly use the strategy of juxtaposing norm with pathology, morality with immorality. Fordism is treated as a state of normality due to moral considerations, the development of humanity, the establishment of relations among classes. Neo-liberalism is an appalling violation of traditional borders which, in the discourse, have been subjected to naturalisation and universalisation. Such a structure can be found in the texts of a leading Polish critic, Eugenia Potulicka who, even when citing radical left-wing thinkers, transforms them into cultural socio-democrats (Rutkowiak, Potulicka, 2010). Similarly Lech Witkowski problematizes the connection of the market with education, and points out that this connection becomes pathological once the borders are violated. By referring to radical rhetoric he claims that “education (...) must start a feud with the market” (Witkowski 2010, p.45). He defines “feud” in a conservative way.

The popular view is that the market should please the client, not spoil his or her good mood. Nonetheless, without spoiling someone’s mood, education is not able to provide the opportunity to notice one’s state of being spoiled as a cultural being and as a human being – the being under the wings of transcendence (Idem, p.40).

Witkowski does not ask about the possibility of autonomy or the conditions for the possibility of education understood in this way in a given social situation. His position amounts to the defence of educational logic against the logic of the market. He thus reproduces the position worked out by Kozyr-Kowalski, who proves that it is not so much capitalism that is the problem but the violation of the borders, which has a devastating impact not only on employees, by reducing them to labourers in *Sweatshops*, but also on relationships at university, by destroying the hierarchy between professors and students, which in turn leads to the tyranny of students (Kozyr-Kowalski 2005). Bogusław Śliwerski also operates the dichotomy of pathology and norm, the moral degradation executed by neo-liberalism, treating it only as a destructive – not transforming – force (Śliwerski, 2011). Zbigniew Kwieciński expresses neo-liberal transformations emotionally: “Only cynicism is left on the pile of depreciated values. There are no limits to greed” (Kwieciński 2005, p.17). And he calls for the announcement of The Zero Hour, the defence of students by enlightened pedagogues, the defence of adults and all people in danger: “Let us announce the educational Zero Hour [1]. Let us save our youth! Let us demand the ethos of academic pedagogy” (Idem, p.18). The

style of those statements becomes hysterical, characterised by emotional involvement which, however, is not progressive but reactionary – defending the former ways of exploitation, past hierarchy and injustice. In such discourse we are dealing with a kind of “retro-utopia” (Kochan, 2013), i.e. placing the ideal vision of the world in the past, in this case in the fordistic model of capitalism.

The register of intimacy also operates within the boundaries of the above-mentioned logic. The metaphors of home and homelessness, marriage and betrayal, divorce and toxic relationships are used to depict the transformations. Academia as a family, a human relationship developing personality and caring about humankind is replaced by a cold economic relation in which the individual worker does not count. What is more, the former partner keeps implying that a given person does not fit into the new relations, new reality, and that he or she comes from a different epoch. Therefore, the employee of academia feels alienated, redundant and deprived of the relationships which are essential for the existential feeling of security and the development of his or her humanity. The transition into this register is followed by a change of style. The tone of the statement becomes nostalgic. An example of such narration is Maria Groenwald’s text in which the author constructs a pleasant tale about a properly functioning university. It is a domestic space, “experienced in terms of familiarity, safety, trust” (Groenwald, 2012, p. 148). Academics treat academia as their second, and sometimes even the first home, because it promises them personal and professional development, and the growth of interpersonal relationships. The passion for searching, educating and creating transforms this home into a space of private character. Groenwald uses a metaphor of the university of promise to portray a utopian vision of a real university. The promise refers to the possibility of “professional development and becoming a better researcher as well as to the promise of personal development on the way to complete humanity” (Ibid, p.146). Home, a private sphere, a place of free human progress, is also a place of work, but characterized as a workshop, the main feature of which is “liberty”, the freedom to act. This idealised scene, brimming with deep emotion and nobility, is blatantly violated by cold economic calculation. The home disintegrates and the work changes from free passionate activity into pointless gainful action under the watchful eye of administrators. The author states:

“(…) university, as a place of academic and didactic passion, becomes a place where passion is denied for the sake of rational calculation; such university inevitably changes into the university of denial” (Ibid, p.149).

The university of denial is depicted in entirely different colours. These are cold interiors of factories, greyness of bureaucracy, musty news-stands with cheap trash. Economic rationality turns everything into ruin, wreaks havoc. University is not a home anymore, but “a place of compulsory stay (...) a sense of denial dominates in the sphere of experiencing university as a place of settlement” (Ibid, p.152). The workshop, in turn, becomes rationalised, transformed into factory space, and the quintessential freedom of academic work is replaced by compulsion, the external administrative supervision of research and didactics. The master-pupil relationship becomes extinct, and interpersonal relationships become volatile: “today’s

ties of companionship, support and backing tomorrow might turn into indifference, distrust, and sometimes even enmity (Ibid, p. 153). The author claims that this transformation is an invasion of barbarity in which university ideals are buried and forgotten.

Groenwald's text perfectly illustrates the merging of the above-mentioned issues, a smooth transition from one register into the other and their mutual support. The author's narrative, starting with the idea of university treated as once experienced reality, is at the same time a utopian vision. The response to the transformation of university is the return to its dignity. The criticism of the present state is determined by the description of the pre-transformation state which, in statements of various authors, is not located in specific time. In the discourse, the ideal university existed "some time ago", "earlier", "before the decline". It seems that retro-utopia is represented as a reality from different times, before the sin of the marketization of higher education. The salvation from neo-liberalism is possible only through the renouncement, redemption and establishment of what had already existed when the world functioned according to the divine or natural plan.

In the analysed statements, the transformation of university changes academics into workers. Michał Kruszelnicki portrays this in gloomy colours:

The classical, literary-cinematic picture of workers with sallow, expressionless faces, who enter their work places stopping for a while to run their identity cards over the reader, and then stand for ten hours at the assembly line while the supervisors follow their every move – conveyed our stereotypical image of factory work. The individuals working in professions which required particular and high competences – especially academics – were exempt from this humiliating monitoring to a large extent because they were trusted equally with other representatives of social elite, such as doctors, lawyers or politicians. Something has happened to that trust; it ceased to underlie the relationships among teachers and between teachers and students. This is why academics, for a long time considered lucky as far as the terms of employment were concerned, have recently been subjected to the management and supervision similar to "the fordistic world of production". *Now those workers with sallow, expressionless faces...it's us* (Kruszelnicki, 2011, pp 179-180).

Lucky people's fortune has changed. The conditions typical for hired labour in the times of precarisation and intensification of exploitation have become reality for academia. For example, Edward Malec states that the amendment of law is a way of intimidating employees. He points out that Paragraph 124 of the amended act makes it possible to fire titular professors. "This situation is unprecedented in Polish law. Even in Stalin's times it was practically impossible to dismiss titular professors" (Malec, 2011, p.56). The act also imposes the frequency of evaluating employees once every two years, and the necessity of dismissing them after the second negative assessment. Kruszelnicki, already cited, states:

"(...) the practices implemented in this culture [of audit – O.S.], are not emancipating at all despite their bureaucratic rhetoric of quality assurance and claims of making the education process transparent. On the contrary – firstly, they turn academics into objects of permanent, almost police-like supervision; secondly, they reduce our professional relations to dry, standardised, measurable templates subjected to potential inspection; and thirdly, they secretly

and indiscernibly change our way of thinking about ourselves and our profession” (Kruszelnicki, 2011, p. 173).

New regimes of work have started to produce individuals characterised by “a permanent fear about the future of employment” (Ibid, p.158), alienated, overworked, subjected to constant control and evaluation, deprived of the power to influence their academic and didactic endeavour, obedient and subordinate.

The problem is not the genuineness or its lack in the description of academics’ situation. I agree that the present conditions are destructive for the personal development and social relations (Szwabowski, 2014b). The problem is in what structure this description has been positioned. The fact becomes meaningful only in a specific context.

The discourse analysed here, which can be regarded as “the scandal of edu-factory”, separates the world of work from the world of academia. This dichotomy creates both the ideal university and what happened after the neo-liberal sin of marketization. In the cited text Groenwald claims that university “achieves the level of dignity by keeping due distance between itself and the din of clashing trends – social, economic and political – as well as the chaos of everyday life” (Groenwald, 2012, p.146). The possibility of existence of the workshop of free creativity, domestic space, personal development and interpersonal relations is determined by the separation from the necessary material production and the reality of the world of hired work. A true university is a temple, an aristocratic venue. Also in Kruszelnicki’s discourse it is the blurred border between the factory and academia that is the source of suffering, not the wage labour itself. In other words, being a true academic is constructed in the opposition to the world of work. The freedom of an academic is the freedom of a person who is not included in the logic of wage labour or the rhythm of production. The blurring of this distinction is treated as a scandal. The violation of the borders is something that cannot be accepted. It is the fact that the people of academia become workers and are subjected to the factory-like rhythm and exploitation that arouses resistance, not the exploitation, factory-like rhythm or being a worker per se.

Being an academic in “the scandal of edu-factory” discourse is positioned in aristocratic narration. The identity of university employee is constructed with regard to free time while the research and teaching in humanities is a manifestation of the life style (Veblen, 2007) of a layabout class rather than the requirement of the “matter” with which academics are struggling. The separation and privileges in the social division of labour allowed to ignore the suffering of “workmen” and “workwomen”. Moreover, universities supported and legitimised anti-worker reforms. I mention about it below (see also: Nowak, 2010, Charkiweicz, Wiśniewski, 2009)

The aristocratic character of resistance to the transformation of academic work, combined with the support for neo-liberal reforms in other fields, a peculiar insensitivity to the people of work, known rather from “cinematic pictures”, was demystified by the Minister of Science

and Higher Education, Barbara Kudrycka, in her response to “An open letter from the grave” (Płaźnik, 2012) written by concerned academics.

When over the past twenty years the state system has been reformed, free market introduced, the relics of socialism in state companies eliminated, reducing the privileges of steelworkers and railwaymen, academics understood the need for such changes really well. And now they should understand that in academic research similar changes are indispensable (Kudrycka, 2013, January 03).

Notwithstanding the ideological character of the former minister’s statement, it is worth paying attention to the indicated inconsistency of academics. Why are they withdrawing support while their factories are being restructured whereas they upheld neo-liberal changes as necessary and rational? After all, they themselves supported the government in the fight against privileges, the relics of socialism, the ill-mannered and lazy workers who took too much for granted. They should rather, in the name of historical necessity, stand by the authority and actively back up what is essential. Academic research can only benefit from this, and “what is dying in Polish academic research is the well-being of poor researchers who are not able to compete with their colleagues from Europe and all over the world” (Ibid). Confrontational, lazy academic *homo sovieticus* should be eliminated in the name of productivity, rationality and historical necessity. In other words, a wave of neo-liberal reforms hit education factories which had earlier reinforced the impact and disarmed the opposition. Working for the authorities, they acted as state aristocracy thinking that after the shocking transformations they will still remain a privileged group. The nightmare of the world of work has become everyday life of aristocracy who are bearing it with difficulty, wishing to remain aristocracy, at least in their self-image. The image, however, quickly fades away under the influence of real changes. A fear of “workmen” and “workwomen”, a hidden or open aversion to them intensifies conservative fantasies which do not liberate from capitalist fetters after all.

### **The limitations of “the scandal of edu-factory” discourse**

Constructing the identity of the academic, the ideal university and the space for human development in opposition to the world of work does not allow the adoption of a strategy which would enable the employees of academia to liberate themselves from their present situation. What is more, it contributes to the strengthening of this situation and initiates exclusion. This exclusive, reactionary mechanism is propelled by the division which structures the whole discourse. Defining transformations as the violation of borders makes it difficult, if not impossible, to implement practices that are emancipating from the holistic point of view. Furthermore, even from the narrow-field perspective this rhetoric seems pointless.

First of all, in the narrow-field perspective, it is difficult to find stakeholders who would maintain the privileged position of the academic world. The authorities are interested in establishing neo-liberal economy, and the present condition of the academic group, along

with the decreasing number of students, enables a free disposal of excess academic workforce, without any concern for their professional and physical survival. Consequently, the appeals for ensuring the autonomy of academia and academics are ignored by the authorities.

Apart from that, even when academics are not addressing their demands to the authorities but to society, the requests for the possibility to live outside neo-liberal conditions, “modest” desire for peace, existential security, may arouse indignation and anger rather than sympathy and solidarity. This is caused not only by re-sentiment warmed up by neo-liberal elites against “privileged groups” (i.e. enjoying the protection of trade unions, permanent contracts, and so on) but also by the fact that the privileged position is built on superiority, not solidarity. The precarisation. The casualisation of the living conditions of Polish society, the ruthless exploitation of workers is not questioned in this discourse. Academics simply claim that all this should not concern them.

The above-mentioned discourse strategies result in the isolation of the academic staff, preventing the formation of the shared experience of exploitation and the attempts to abolish it systemically.

Another vital problem connected with “the scandal of edu-factory” discourse is the definition of the academic employee. Technical staff or armies of people who enable research by taking good care of classrooms and equipment are not considered to be university employees. In other words, it is not acknowledged that “workmen” and “workwomen” have always been at university. Anyway, academics do not care about them. The fact that they are often employed on temporary contracts by outside companies, which sometimes fail to pay their salaries, is not a problem. An example could be the situation of the cleaning staff at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The cleaning ladies employed in the system of outsourcing did not receive their salaries. When they turned to the university authorities for help, they were told that the issue was not a subject of interest to the university. Only after the matter gained a lot of publicity did the university authorities feel obliged to help and terminate the contract with the company responsible for cleaning (BS, 2014; OZZIP 2014). This is only one example. The precarisation, the casualisation of technical staff is treated as a rational management strategy which is supposed to bring profits to university and, consequently, to improve the situation of the research and academic staff (Mirowska-Łoskot, 2014).

The definition of the academic employee also affects the definition of the community which is supposed to defend its own interests. The strategy of “narrow definition” becomes excluding in two ways: firstly, using the specific definition, it does not take into account certain groups belonging to university (students, administrative workers, cleaners, etc.); secondly, by imposing one voice it excludes the voices of others formally included in the definition.

The first exclusion has already been analysed, and it is the consequence of the divide between wage labour and academic work. The second one consists in imposing unity on a diverse



environment. Owing to the feudal structure of Polish universities, the dominant voice is the Professors' Voice which claims the right to represent the interests of university and researchers. Unity, therefore, is not a result of negotiating meanings or establishing the common position, but it is an act of violence, an act of silencing and sometimes stigmatizing other voices, and their symbolic elimination from the imaginary academic community.

The ostensible unity pushes the conflicts of academia into darkness. This does not mean their disappearance but their underground perseverance, which affects the strength of the community. The authorities also take advantage of this situation by mobilizing the excluded against the "professors' elite" with the view of carrying out certain reforms or/and protecting resistance.

The Professors' Voice narrows the definition of the academic employee even further, excluding those who do not have the postdoctoral degree (so called habilitation). It sometimes becomes anti-doctoral, in a sense that defending professors' privileged position both in the overall social and local academic dimension leads to gaining more control over subordinate researchers. The attitude towards the defence of a postdoctoral thesis may serve as an example of the conflicting interests. Its abolition was a step forward in making the promotion procedures transparent and in eliminating to some extent the arbitrary ending of some people's careers, especially of those who were dissident, controversial or entangled in inappropriate personal relations. Meanwhile the professors of the Polish Academy of Sciences are seeking political support for the reintroduction of the habilitation lecture in order to verify if the person not only represents the appropriate academic level but also speaks with the dignity appropriate for the awarded degree. They managed to gain the support of conservative politicians (Krajczyńska, 2015), the same who postulate censoring arts and maintaining only patriotic artistic work and the work referring to Catholic values (Bernad, 2014) as well as the ideological cleansing of academia from, for example, gender studies (Kuraś, 2015).

It is worth adding that the Professors' Voice likewise excludes professors employed in the private sector of higher education. They are not only excluded but also considered as those who contribute to the destruction of academia. The professors of academia, defending their interests, demand the elimination of non-state education, ignoring the fact that this would mean the loss of jobs. Treating non-state education as a uniform sector, they fail to acknowledge the existence of some really good schools in it, such as Silesian College (Dolnośląska Szkoła Wyższa), which gives employment to many left-wing thinkers, unwelcome at state universities.

The Professors' Voice, therefore, is the voice of power which deprives not only working people but also academics themselves of the possibility to represent their own interests. It constitutes the integral part of "the scandal of edu-factory" discourse. The divide structuring this discourse is revealed and intensified in the Professors' Voice, creating a specific concept of community.

The last discursive strategy consists in referring to professionalism. It also contributes to obstructing the evolution of solidarity among working people and the development of a common strategy of resistance to precarisation. Professionalism and professionals have been created and can exist only in capitalist conditions, that is those determined by the conflict between capital and work (Paschal, 2013).

It is worth noticing that sometimes referring to professionalism, which characterises the work of academia, is considered as a handicap. In this narration, the employee of academia is not suitable for other jobs and therefore requires special treatment. Workers can change jobs till they retire – the academic needs permanent employment (at best at one university) till the end of his or her days (Kruszelnicki, 2012, p.160). This strategy consists not so much in referring to the professor's social authority and the religious aura enveloping his or her profession, but in using the figure of the victim in order to keep the privileged position.

### **Going beyond prevalent discourse**

The structure of the analysed discourse, the core of which is the division into the academic and non-academic world, into wage labour and reflective life, is not suitable for creating an alternative or presenting critically the academic transformation and the way of production. It feeds on the myth of a totally free academic, the master of his or her time, and the myth of university, constructing it in such a way that it is gradually deprived of any emancipatory potential. Notwithstanding the fact that it is accurate and valuable at the level of describing personality destruction, constructing an intimidated, exploited academic worker, it cannot transfer at this level to the overall solidarity of working people against exploitation.

Being conservative to the core, “the scandal of edu-factory” discourse results in such practices both in the academic and social sphere. In the academic sphere, the Professors' Voice is established to defend the feudal structure and the function of university as the Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 1971). In the social sphere, there is the division into the better, i.e. those who cannot be subjected to capitalist exploitation, and the worse – other working people, citizens. Moreover, a certain understanding of education is supported, which presumes social selection. The elitist vision of higher education is more and more often openly propagated. For example, Marcin Król states that “society needs to be persuaded that elitism in science is natural and necessary” (Król, 2014).

Summing up, first of all, the prevalent discourse of resistance does not take into account the division among employees within university; secondly, it defines its own profession in opposition to workers, production work or service work which takes place outside academia; thirdly, by expressing the interests of professors' group, it becomes a conservative narration and practice, both in the academic and social field. The prevalent discourse of resistance is not only reactionary but also futile; either by appealing to stakeholders who do not exist or whose interests do not coincide with the illusions of protesting professors, or by failing to recognise the capitalist system and applying the dichotomy between “good fordism” and “bad post-fordism”, it is not able to grasp emancipatory tendencies.

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## Notes

[1] The Zero Hour is time at which a planned event is scheduled to start (for example Second World War) or time when a vital decision must be made. Hagen Schultz-Forberg write about it: “Zero Hours are not real. They are a metaphor for expressing a wish to lock certain experiences and practices securely in the past while embracing a new beginning” (Schultz-Forberg, 2013, p. 15).

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