



Russian Professor as a Laborer in the Era of Ratings, Digitalization and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. The traditional labor contract has actually ceased to be the principal legal document, regulating labor relations of Russian university teachers. The individual labor contract was reduced to the status of a mere ‘rudimentary’ annex to the so-called effective contract. The latter is legally non-existent and is not even mentioned in the Labor Code of Russia of 2001. The Covid-19 pandemic with its isolationist features aggravated the absurd paradigm change within the Russian Labor law. As a result, the illegitimate effective contract has virtually supplanted the regular labor contract. There may be traced three dominant features of the new labor regime, induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, the said labor regime fosters social dissociation of former (ante-pandemic) colleagues with the inevitable harm to the social nature and human dignity of homo faber. Secondly, we can witness the strengthening of the external - via internet - exploitation of university teachers by a corresponding managerial staff and the merging of this exploitation with the academic staff’s self-exploitation. Thirdly, the said regime is responsible for virtual disappearance of difference between working days of university teachers and leisure hours, previously reserved for reading and research.

Keywords: labor law, education, higher learning, collective labor contract, individual labor contract, effective contract, (private law) service agreement, rankings systems, ratings systems, the Covid-19 pandemic.

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1. BRIEF HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the genuine meaning of the word “professor”, the lawmaker in contemporary Russia is systematically describing the academic staff’s activity in terms of “job” and “(private law) service relations”, not in terms of “profession”, nor in terms of non-commercial “mission”. It was otherwise in the Russian Empire and the USSR. Tsarist professors, for example, were a state functionaries who received the so-called alimantation from the government, not a banal salary as it is nowadays. Moreover, any university professor, as well as a gymnasium teacher could be granted a high official rank of privy councilor. For example, both famous Russian historians and professors of the Moscow University – S.M. Solovyov and V.O. Klyuchevski – were privy councilors.

The Soviet Russia abolished the monarchical Table of ranks, which was established in the reign of Peter the Great.¹ However, the personal “professor estate” as an *official* rank did survive. The main, though formal reason for it was the fact, that the only employer under socialism was the Soviet Republic itself. Correspondingly, labor relations in the Soviet universities were only possible, if they implied loyalty on the part of a university teacher and confidence on the part of the Socialist Government. Within the Socialist ideology any university teacher was a salaried functionary, i.e. he was regarded as an “intellectual worker”, not as an academician in the “bourgeois sense”. Nevertheless, the said intellectual worker was permitted to enjoy some leisure time in the disguised form of “library days”, reserved for reading and scientific research. At the same time as a *casus specialis* of “worker”, a university teacher was subject to the so-called labor duty.² The latter legally eliminated the freedom of work as a token of bourgeois ideology.

There were, though, some blatant discrepancies *within* the Code of Labor Laws of 1918. Thus, the article 2 stipulated that the universal labor duty did not apply to individuals under 16 years old and over 50, as well as to invalids, who were unable to work. However, the article 4 stipulated, that “schoolchildren of all schools are to fulfill the labor duty within the corresponding school”. There are two possible interpretations of this rule: either only schoolchildren, who had reached the age of 16 years, were bound to work, or schoolchildren of minor age might also perform some work within their schools but were exempt from the extramural “universal labor duty”. In the latter case there remains a serious ambiguity as far as the collection of waste paper is concerned. Waste paper collection was very popular in the former USSR. On the one hand, waste paper collection was subject to *intramural* guidance and control from the corresponding school authority. On the other hand, collection of waste paper is in tendency an *extramural* activity.

More interesting, to my mind, was the exclusion from the universal labor duty those who were over 50 years old. If we stick to the title of this article, we have to acknowledge that in the 1918th Soviet Russia ALL university teachers over 50 were former Tsarist bachelors, masters or doctors. The profession of university teacher is still regarded as a *creative vocation*. It was even more so in the year of 1918 regardless the ideological and social turmoil within the Bolshevik Russia. 50 years is no “age” for a university professor by contrast with an average industrial worker, who was almost sure to have acquired some professional disease by the age of 50. Paradoxically, the Soviet State could hire a former Tsarist professor as a university teacher, if the latter did not object to it. But, the Soviet State could not force him to work as a university teacher by means of the legally enshrined “labor duty”,³ which was reserved only for manual work. Thus, there remained an island of “bourgeois freedom of labor” in the Bolshevik Russia, at least as far as the labor status of the *ancien régime* intellectuals was concerned.

¹ See: Decree concerning the abolishment of estates and civil ranks from November 12, 1917.

² See: The Code of Labor Laws from October 12, 1918.

³ See: Art. 12 of The Code of Labor Laws from October 12, 1918.

It was only in the “Brezhnev era” that the universal labor duty was abolished.⁴ The Soviet labor law during that period was characterized by the latent ideological schism between the institution of *collective* labor contract and the institution of *individual* labor contract. The legal recognition of the preponderance of the latter in real labor relations may be reconstructed from the Art. 18 of the Code of Labor Laws of Russian Federation from December 9, 1971.: “The factual admission to the job is regarded as a conclusion of the labor contract regardless the question whether admittance to work was properly arranged”. One may conclude from this stipulation that the eventual (non-) existence of a collective contract was “*une quantité négligeable*”⁵ both for the administration and a worker concerned.

On the other hand, one cannot easily deny the *ideological* preponderance of the collective contract. This institution was meant as a “viable tool” of the working force in its dealings with the managerial staff, or, better, with the executive head of a factory, school, and hospital.⁶ In reality, any collective contract was either a “frame”, a “matrix” of minimal sets of labor rights and duties or a mere formality.

In the end of the “Gorbachev epoch”, an interesting novelty appeared in the Code of Labor Laws of Russian Federation of 1971. Thus, according to the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation (05.02.1988) a new chapter XY-A under the heading “The working staff (=contingent of workers)” was introduced into the Code of Labor Laws of Russian Federation of 1971. The Art. 235-1 endowed the collective working staff with the following competencies:

- Deliberation concerning the necessity of conclusion of a collective contract with the administration (=managerial staff – S.K.), negotiating and approving a draft of a collective contract;
- Analyzing and solving questions concerning self-government of the working staff in accordance with the factory ordinance;
- Specifying a list of social benefits to be distributed from the factory assets and an order of the distribution of those assets among the workers etc.

The legal recognition of the “working staff” was akin to a tacit acknowledgement of the fact, that the institution of the Soviet trade - unionism proved its inefficiency as a tool of safeguarding and implementing interests of the working class vis-à-vis the “Socialist State”, which was in reality a political organization of State capitalism (see below).

2. THE LABOR STATUS OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Paradoxically, as far as the educational sphere is concerned, the system of blatant private capitalism, introduced by the Russian Constitution of 1993, did not supplant the USSR-system of state capitalism. Moreover, the latter was drastically reinforced by a peculiar governmental road map.⁷ The latter was conceived and elaborated as a means of “optimization” of the Russian educational system via the institution of so-called effective contract (see more details below). The competition principle became a corner stone of governmental policy in ANY social sphere.

The mentioned governmental road map envisaged the task of diluting the existing system of higher education by introduction of the controversial “matrix” of the so-called applied bachelors. The meaning of this term is to be grasped by its contraposition to the term “academic bachelor”. Thus, “applied bachelor” means “non-academic bachelor”, in the first place. The quasi-positive meaning of the term boils down to the thesis: “an applied bachelor

⁴ See: Art. 2 of The Code of Labor Laws of Russian Federation from December 9, 1971.

⁵ French, “a quantity to be ignored”

⁶ See: Art. 7 of The Code of Labor Laws of Russian Federation from December 9, 1971.

⁷ See: Ordinance of the Government of the Russian Federation Nr. 722-p from April 30, 2014.

is specially trained for a corresponding job and may be hired by any interested employer immediately after “graduating” from university”.

Although the classical institution of “academic bachelors” is to be preserved, the actual goal of the federal government was to factually denigrate the classical bachelor system by upgrading the vocational, or technical training. The upgrading was performed by simple introducing the category of applied bachelors into the system of classical university education. In other words, any vocational (technical) college leaver was allowed to enter any university, provided that this university had previously adopted a corresponding program for training *applied* bachelors. The experiment turned out to be controversial even in the realm of technical training (industrial chemistry, construction business, hotel business, accountancy etc.). Notwithstanding the benevolent “upgrading” within the educational “table of grades” many applied bachelors are still treated by their employers as blue collars, i.e. as mere technicians.

The expansion of the said experiment into the sphere of humanities (pedagogy, sociology, jurisprudence etc.) is not only controversial, it bears a great potential of pernicious repercussions and is certainly doomed to failure. Thus, applied bachelors among primary school teachers are “trained” by their benevolent mentors to *practically* dodge any serious question, which may be raised by some “theoretical pupils”. In other words, applied bachelors as future “applied teachers” are specially trained to turn the blind eye on any enthusiastic child. One cynical remark of the “applied teacher” is quite enough to restore the order of mediocrity, by mediocrity and for mediocrity: “Try to find an answer in the Internet and do not bother me and the whole class with your irrelevant questions”. It would be in vain if somebody tried to find a *legal* definition of the term “applied bachelors”. Correspondingly, the proclaimed practical fitness of many “applied bachelors” is mostly under suspicion by responsible HR-managers.

The same legal homelessness is characteristic of the controversial term “effective contract”. This institution is remarkable in many respects. As it was already stated, one would in vain search for its legal definition in the current Labor Code of 2001. The said Code inherited from the previous Socialist epoch two forms of individual labor contract: (1) a perpetual contract and (2) a time-limited, or fixed-term contract. The Russian lawmaker actually recognizes the precedence of (1) over (2). In other words, a fixed-term labor contract only comes to the fore, if a perpetual labor contract is impossible, i.e. it is naturally alien to some concrete labor constellations. For example, a perpetual labor contract with a seasonal agricultural worker is naturally out of place. Nevertheless, in reality we see a steady tendency of supplanting (1) by (2), as far as the university administration is concerned. Thus, practically all university teachers in contemporary Russia have a fixed-term job, often on the yearly basis. How can we explain, that even many experienced and highly talented professors in contemporary Russia have been degraded to a status of a “day laborer”?

As stated above, the term “contract” in the said Code is only reserved for (1) collective labor contracts and (2) individual labor contracts. I have already mentioned the practical inexpediency of a collective labor contract for an individual worker. That’s why the newly introduced institution of effective contract is meant to “merge” with the traditional individual contract, bypassing the institution of collective contracts.

The legally non-binding explanation of the effective contract may be found in the Ordinance of Federal Government of 26.11.2012. According to this Ordinance, which is not “the law“ *per definitionem*, but only a technical “bylaw”, the effective contract is a labor contract with a worker, which contains the details of:

- the obligations, attached to the worker’s position (=rank);
- salary conditions, including indicators and criteria of the worker’s labor efficiency, all of which determine the assignment of stimulating payments in relation to the achieved results and the quality of the provided public services, as well as
- measures of social aid.⁸

⁸ See: Ordinance of the Government of the Russian Federation Nr. 2190-p from November 26, 2012.

Since its gradual implementation, which started in 2012, the effective contract progressively revealed its “Janus head – quality”. On the one hand, the effective contract envisaged the strategic goal of improving efficiency in providing public services, especially in the public health care system and in the educational sphere. Thus, the better-qualified and more efficient hospital or university employees must receive better remuneration, than their less qualified and less efficient colleagues must. On the other hand, the practical implementation of the effective contract continues to suffer from the lack of objective universal (federal) indicators and criteria, which would exclude instances of subjective manipulation on the part of the corresponding managerial staff. By the way, it is allowed to introduce “local criteria” which positively discriminate the leadership and, correspondingly, negatively discriminate “the rank and file”. Within the academic staff the “better qualified” and “more efficient” employees usually turn out to be those workers, who are favored by the leadership.

The ultimate end of the whole fuss with the effective contract seems to be the governmental program of introducing the novel institution into the civil service system. In other words, the current civil service contract must give way to the effective contract (*see*: Vorobyova, 2014; Ryazantseva & Subocheva, 2014). The problem of this innovation consists in the nature of the civil service contract, as opposed to the nature of the effective contract. The former is based on the loyalty principle on the part of civil servants and the correlative confidence principle on the part of the State. By contrast, the institution of the effective contract is based on the competition principle among civil servants and – tacitly - on the “non-confidence principle” on the part of the Russian political authority towards its own bureaucrats. As a result, the personnel of public administration in Russia would be forced into the “matrix” of labor relations, which are characteristic of a capitalist corporation. Thus, the Russian Federation would acquire the features of a huge “state-capitalist company”. Luckily, this hypothetical outcome is not doomed to be realized, since the Russian Constitution of 1993, thank God, is at least legally sticking to the rule of law principle and the principle of the social state.

For various reasons the federal government under the former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev abstained from *total* substituting the novel effective contract for classical labor contract. The partial (in both senses of the word “partial”) legalization of the effective contract was achieved by means of “disguising” the effective contract as a mere “concretization” of articles 57, 72, 74 of the Russian Labor Code of 2001. All these articles are formal and mostly contain trivial technicalities. In other words, the mentioned articles have nothing in common with the ideology of the effective contract and were initially designed only for implementation of standard individual contracts.

Let’s turn now to current labor relations in the educational sphere of Russia. The effective contract is in fact only the visible part of the iceberg: it conceals the problem of the *corporate* efficiency of any Russian university as a whole. The corporate efficiency is calculated according to the controversial ratio “academic staff versus quantity of students”. The Medvedev government presumed that this proportion must be asymmetrical. In other words, the larger is the student contingent and the less is the academic staff, the more “efficient” is the corresponding university as a whole. It follows, that big traditional universities objectively found themselves in the privileged position. They were able immediately accumulate financial benefits as receivers of payments from various governmental projects in accordance with the mentioned governmental road map. Middle-sized universities were not so lucky but many of them managed to stagnate within the margins of status-quo. Small universities got the worst of the Medvedev’s educational experiment. They were confronted with three alternatives: to silently wither away, to be affiliated with larger universities or to play their own role in the game, named “optimization”. In the latter case, small universities were forced to regularly suppress the size of the academic staff. Only by this token, the ratio “academic staff *versus* student contingent” could be somehow “optimized” according to the wishes of the federal government.

Eventually rectors of small Russian universities elaborated a special technique, which boils down to the systematic suppression of permanent labor contracts and their virtual elimination from university labor relations. The universal subterfuge, often employed by many rectors, consists in the following: managerial staffs of small

universities illegally allege the (quasi-) inextricable entanglement of two distinct questions, i.e. the question of individual labor *contract*, on the one hand, and the question of professional *certification* (= the personal professional fitness), on the other.

There is no reason why these questions must be mixed forever, in the first place. It is true, that any newcomer has to accumulate all necessary qualifications, including his academic paraphernalia, when he applies for an academic position. In this case of initial application the candidate for a university position must *simultaneously* solve both problems, i.e. he must *conclude* a labor contract on acceptable terms and *prove* his professional eligibility. Nevertheless, even in this case we must distinguish between the set of “if-requirements” and the different set of “how-requirements”.

The first set of requirements concerns the question, *if* the said candidate may be formally admitted to the position he applies for. The second set of requirements focuses on the question, *how* the said candidate is *expected* to perform his future academic duties. After the candidate is admitted to the academic staff, the set of “if-requirements” is objectively relegated to a subsidiary role. From now on, it is only the set of “how-requirements”, which only counts. For an established university teacher his eventual systematic neglect of “how-requirements” (how he *actually* performs his duties) may serve as a reason to stop labor relations with him. In this case, the set of “if-requirements”, i.e. the question, whether the targeted person meets formal requirements, is mostly irrelevant or plays a marginal role. For example, the fact of overcoming the age limit may be added as an aggravating issue to his poor performance within the set of “how-requirements”.

Another technique exploited by rectors of small Russian universities consists of substituting the (private law) service agreement for genuine labor contract. In this case, the nature of labor law is diluted by the nature of private law. Any national labor law is structurally akin to public law, because relations between employers and employees are justly deemed as asymmetrical and originally unequal. That is why any national labor law is mostly *the* law of employees and for employees. As for relations in the realm of private law, they are constructed in terms of equality and the (presumed) symmetry. Now, if a rector factually refuses to uphold his employer status, he simultaneously “destroys” the employee status of his “subordinate”. Thus, the said rector actually falsifies his position as a rector, because he cannot function both as a rector and as a mere party to a particular service agreement with one of his employee acting as the other (private law) party.

By means of service agreements, rectors may kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, they “improve” the mentioned ratio “academic staff versus student contingent” at the expense of the academic staff. Secondly, they economize on university funds, because they may drastically reduce payments for those university teachers, who were thrown away from the system of labor relations by means of (private law) service agreements. Legally it means that the mentioned university teachers were expelled from the realm of labor law guarantees into the unreliable sphere of private law contracts.

3. CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES: RATINGS, DIGITALIZATION AND THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT

The modern western university seems to become an “educational enterprise” embedded into the market system of neoliberal capitalism. As for Russia, any higher learning institution in this country already deserves the name of “commercial company”. In this respect the metaphor “state corporation – Russia” is not out of place. Indeed, even the Russian civil service is to be transformed into the hybrid system of “managerial bureaucrats” or “bureaucratic managers”. This new brand of state bureaucrats must be specially trained and indoctrinated to stomach the system of effective contract with its underlying competition principle. Many Russian universities are already engaged in the experiment of training public administrators of this new (marketable) type.

Nevertheless, this situation is not new. Thorstein Veblen was perhaps the first, who argued that business and bureaucracy may go hand in hand, especially in the field of higher learning in America. “Business principles take effect in academic affairs most simply, obviously and avowedly in the way of a businesslike administration of the scholastic routine; where they lead immediately to a bureaucratic organization and a system of scholastic accountancy” (Veblen, 1918, p. 165-166). No doubt, the contemporary ratings system of academic staff is nothing but “scholastic accountancy” adjusted to the spirit of neoliberal globalization and digitalization.

According to Richard Münch, the academic world will experience fundamental change, if universities are regarded as commercial enterprises. Rectors or presidents will turn into chief executive officers (CEOs) and professors should become their “agents”. The main problem of a CEO will consist in assuring “efficient” behavior of the corresponding academic staff. The neoliberal economic mentality of a CEO presumes that “his academic agents” are prone to shirking their “office duties” and it must be prevented, in the first place. In other words, contrary to legal mentality, which still upholds the principle of *bona fide*, the neoliberal “economics” is based on distrust and suspicion vis-à-vis “subordinates”. But, how is it possible to control the academic “rank and file”? Thank God, according to Münch (2007), there is a university IT-department with its sophisticated software and a web of various indicators, scores and points.

By this means, first, an electronic duplicate of a university teacher is generated, maintained and systematically monitored. Secondly, this electronic duplicate lends itself to any digital fragmentation and “innovation” due to introduction of ever-newest models of universities’ rankings and professors’ ratings. However, the point is that the offline source of this ratings procedure, i.e. flesh and blood of a living person has only a marginal “resemblance” with his online duplicate. Unfortunately, it is mostly on the basis of his electronic duplicate that a real person is assessed. Thus, as argues Münch, researchers and teachers, who act in their personal responsibility before the scientific community and search for the New and Unexpected on the basis of accumulated knowledge, become mere “point hunters” (Münch, 2007).

The depicted dichotomy is even more aggravated by the problem, which Marx called “commodity fetishism” (*see*: McNeill, 2021). For Marx himself this problem was intertwined with the phenomenon of alienation (*see*: Ollman, 1977). The latter was imposed both on “capitalists” and “the proletariat” from above, as the automatic impact of the objective social forces under capitalism. In other words, commodity fetishism, as well as alienation (=dehumanization) affected humans externally and were no part of their own choice. Nowadays, according to Zygmunt Bauman the situation has changed. Various categories of people, from teenagers to ministers and presidents “are enticed, nudged or forced to promote an attractive and desirable *commodity*, and so to try as hard as they can, and using the best means at their disposal, to enhance the market value of the goods they sell. And the commodity they are prompted to put on the market, promote and sell are *themselves*” (Bauman, 2007, p. 6).

In my opinion, the rather gloomy verdict of Zygmunt Bauman is not so uncontroversial, as it may seem. First, there are sociologists like Münch and Bauman himself, who do not regard themselves as both commodities and promoters of themselves *qua* commodities. I am sure that there is a silent minority among contemporary teenagers who are not infected by the sort of consumerism, described by Bauman. Secondly, according to profound insights of Karl Polanyi, as long as humanity lasts, the Bauman-type consumerism can never succeed as a global totalitarian ideology. Polanyi argues, “creating a fully self-regulating market economy requires that human beings and the natural environment be turned into pure commodities, which assures the destruction of both society and the natural environment” (Polanyi, 2001, p. XXY).

It was already noted above, that the Russian neo-liberal era, ushered in by the Constitution of 1993, had never managed to supplant the state capitalist system of the preceding (quasi-)socialist epoch. In contemporary Russia, we witness the strange cohabitation of neoliberalism with its archaic Lockean background, on the one hand, and state capitalism with its Marxist-Trotskyist genealogy, on the other. The policy of Russian government neatly squares with

the proverbial “burning the candle at both ends” in the sense that Russia is plagued both with (neo)liberalism and the Soviet ideological heritage.

It is worth noting that the political class under Putin overtly dismisses both ideologies but surreptitiously sticks to them. Perhaps, invigorated by the Chinese experience, the Russian political class is convinced that “one may have it both ways”, as far as mixing anarchistic (neo)liberalism with authoritarian socialism is concerned. For the Russian political elite it simply seems a matter of juxtaposing the logic of anarchic private ownership with the authoritative, non-liberal nature of state capitalism à la Trotsky or à la Stalin. Paradoxically, this juxtaposing seems to “work” on its own *objective* basis, though often with surprise effects both for the political class and the “experimented on” population.

In this respect, it may be appropriate to turn to socio-political insights of Karl Polanyi, who formulated three still viable theses in his report at the sociological congress, held in London in 1946:

- the Marxist economic determinism was a 19th century phenomenon which ceased to reflect social reality in the 20th century;
- the capitalist market system profoundly distorted our views on man and society and
- these distorted views are main obstacles to the solution of the problems of our civilization (Polanyi, 1977, p. XYII).

I argue that the economic determinism did manage to survive the demise of the USSR and – though paradoxically - remains a surreptitious ideology of the contemporary Russian establishment. According to economic determinism, a man is but his social function within the prevailing system of social distribution of labor, material and financial resources. Thus, an individual “capitalist” is a function of capital accumulation. An individual “worker” is but a function of his labor power, i.e. his fitness for work, which presumes his fitness for exploitation by a corresponding “capitalist”. As far as the exploited class is concerned, the economic determinism “proves” the *absolute* dependence of a worker’s livelihood on his eventual wages.

The contemporary state capitalism in Russia readily embraces the economic determinism not only in relation to “workers” in the Marxist sense, i.e. to manual “day laborers” to be paid according to the amount of output per hour, but also in relation to any persons hired by the huge “state corporation – Russia”. As a result, not only the working class in its strict Marxist sense, but also all “salaried classes”, like doctors, teachers, civil servants, are deprived of their human nature and degraded to a status of a mere *commodity*, to be used or discarded at pleasure by the “state corporation – Russia”.

The word “commodity” makes sense only if the thing concerned is meant *for sale*. It follows, that to be sold presumes to be marketable. Thus, economic determinism, applied in relation to all persons, hired by the “state corporation – Russia”, finds its necessary outlet in the private market. In this way, the 19th century economic determinism embraces the 18th century economic (“neo”) liberalism. As a result, the 21st century Russia plays the absurd role of the history dump custodian in charge of the two most controversial archaic ideologies.

Now, let’s turn again to the effective contract as a dominant feature of educational system of contemporary Russia. In order to socially merge the salaried classes with the class of manual laborers it is necessary to eliminate any difference between wages paid to “blue collars” for any manual work and salaries paid to “white collars” for their intellectual skills, rather than for any manipulations, accessory to those skills. The subterfuge of those in favour of universal effective contract consists in the following: any salary calculation must be flattened to a simple ratio “output per hour”. As it seems, the only means to achieve this goal is to merge the institution of effective contract with an allegedly objective ratings system. In other words, scores, indicators and points may – by analogy – play the role of wages’ ratio “output per hour”.

Another problem is worth considering. It is closely associated with ratings in the field of higher learning. Any ratings system needs corresponding infrastructure including hardware, software, budgeting and “specialists”, i.e. those, who are – mostly exclusively and solely – responsible for the corresponding ratings procedure to be (1) initiated, (2) modified and (3) perpetuated. David Graeber insightfully remarks in this respect: “Everyone is familiar

with those sort of jobs that don't seem, to the outsider, to really do much of anything: HR consultants, communications coordinators, PR researchers, financial strategists, corporate lawyers, or the sort of people (very familiar in academic contexts) who spend their time staffing committees that discuss the problem of unnecessary committees. The list was seemingly endless. What, I wondered, if these jobs really are useless, and those who hold them are aware of it?" (Graeber, 2018, p. 8).

David Graeber coined the term "bullshit job" for this sort of useless and pointless work. In the educational sphere, one type of these "bullshit jobs" seems to be the job of those persons, who dedicate their professional lives to "methodology of teaching". The problem with these people is usually that they engage in the said methodology without having acquired any serious experience in *real* teaching. Another problem with them is that they usually have no idea about methodology of *learning*. In other words, they mostly do not know what the genuine learning process is about with its paraphernalia of pedagogy, pupil psychology, psycho-sociology etc. One may conclude that Russian "university methodologists" are mostly incompetent in double sense. Firstly, they are both ignorant and inexperienced in the field of *learning* theory and various learning techniques. As a result, they are, secondly, incompetent in the methodology of *teaching*.

As a kind of distraction, I would propose to appraise the latent seriousness of the joke, which the known Soviet pianist and professor of the Moscow conservatory Henry Neuhouse reserved for his freshmen. He reserved it as a kind of "introduction into the profession". According to Neuhouse, there are only three classes of pianists. The first class pianist performs concert music in public. The second class pianist teaches the first class. And the third class "pianist" teaches the second class how to teach the first one. In other words, the third class "pianist" writes methodological guides, or - in terms of David Graeber – performs a bullshit job.

Nowadays, the problem with the "methodological bullshit job" is aggravated by the fact, that educational methodologists are not only consolidated into a self-sufficed caste, they also are stratified within the system of the professional hierarchy. At the apex of the said hierarchy we find the "Great Methodologist" (= The Russian Ministry of Education and Science). The ministerial bureaucrats are a species apart. Their task only consists in implementing political priorities of the Russian government with no real feedback from educational "rank and file". The huge discrepancy between those, who are working with students on a face-to-face basis, and ministerial officials, responsible for implementing the governmental educational experiments, was epitomized by the famous German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. In one of his interviews, he gave reasons, why he systematically abstained from joining governmental committees, convened for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of governmental policy.

Having analyzed the situation in the field of higher learning in France and Germany after the 1968 – student revolt, Luhmann coined an interesting term "demo-bureaucracy". By this notion, he meant the peculiar transformation, or – better- degradation of university administration. Demo-bureaucracy is an "outlet for testing topics, which could accumulate consent; but propagation of the need for consent means simultaneously prevention of treating the issues, which find no consensus" (Hagen, 2009, p. 34-35). If we merge insights of Graeber with those of Luhmann, one may conclude, that a demo-bureaucracy as an inevitable institution in any multi-party state can only function by means of "bullshit job committees". Their *raison d'être* consists in searching for multi-party compromises, not for facing and overcoming real problems.

A specialist is only invited by the demo-bureaucracy as "one more potential voice" for interests of the conservatives or democrats or someone else. In reality all the fuss of the committee "deliberation" is about commercial interests, which are incongruent with the notion of "independent scientific expertise". This expertise as an ideal type is beyond economic questions of gain and "optimization". By contrast, any demo-bureaucracy is only there to gather political support for particular vested interests. That's why the demo-bureaucracy may easily dodge real social problems; it is not responsible for taking no decisions at all.

If we merge insights of Karl Polanyi with those of Niklas Luhmann, we are confronted with a two-fold dilemma. Firstly and in terms of Polanyi, the (globally westernized) political elite sticks to the logical fallacy "*pars pro*

*toto*⁹, insisting that (global) economy comes first and society in any country must adapt to the (neoliberal) economic precepts. Secondly and in terms of Luhmann, the demo-bureaucracy in any country is haunted by the ghost of political consensus, which bars the way of approaching the nature of things *before* any question of consensus is allowed to “arise”. According to Polanyi, the political consensus may only be guaranteed, if a particular political, social, cultural etc. goal can be presented in the disguise of an economic, or financial interest (*see*: Polanyi, 2001). In other words, under dominant global neoliberalism, firstly, any problem must be presented as a peculiar “economic interest” and, secondly, it may be included into the political agenda only and only if it may find support from numerous would-be “shareholders” within the political sects of a particular demo-bureaucracy.

Another problem is worth considering. The social reality, which is called “education”, is both whole (=integral) and very complex. As far as the wholeness of educational sphere is concerned, it cannot be fragmented in arbitrary parts in order to proclaim their absolute self-sufficiency, or “out-differentiation” (*see*: Luhmann, 1999). On the other hand, the complexity as the immanent feature of educational sphere constantly provokes political elites to commit blunders in the sense of absolute “out-differentiating” some aspects of the holistic educational entity. As a whole entity, any national educational sphere is a self-reference system. As such it is “out-differentiated” from political, economic, religious etc. spheres. The educational sphere as a self-reference system is focused on such values, as ‘knowledge’, ‘science’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘social solidarity’, cultural heritage’, socio-cultural memory’ etc. Nevertheless, the educational sphere may be presented as a bunch of fragments with the only nominal “unifier”, i.e. the adjective “educational”. In this case, we have to deal with education as an ‘external reference system’.

For example, the educational sphere must meet demand for medical personnel in the country. Here the system of general education is of no avail, because only doctors know how to teach future doctors. But, there is another, perhaps, more compelling example of the educational sphere relegated to the status of the external reference system. The political sphere also is in need of constant rejuvenation of “manpower” within civil service. Hence, the system of higher education must meet the yearly demand for newly trained public administrators. But, this demand is not akin to a commercial order. It is akin to a military command, which tolerates no shirking or any qualifications suggested by the “subordinate” universities.

National education as an external reference system may be easily disfigured into a literally *alien*-reference system. It is the case, when external goals marginalize and supplant the internal goals of national education as a self-reference system. More specifically, one may conclude, that the external reference educational system in Russia managed to marginalize the self-reference mode of education. Nowadays, the Russian educational sphere functions as a surreptitious alien-reference system. In other words, due to ad-hoc and inconsistent experiments with Russian education it became subservient to pernicious goals of neoliberal “economics”.

As Veblen would have it, “Plato's classic scheme of folly, which would have the philosophers take over the management of affairs, has been turned on its head; the men of affairs have taken over the direction of the pursuit of knowledge. To anyone who will take a dispassionate look at this modern arrangement it looks foolish, of course, -- ingeniously foolish; but, also, of course, there is no help for it and no prospect of its abatement in the calculable future” (Veblen, 1918, p. 57).

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic further aggravated the conflicting ‘internal vs. external’ tendencies of the Russian educational system. The classical university with its adherence to the self-reference model of education is increasingly giving ground to the external reference model of *online* education. By means of online education, the self-reference educational model is systematically suppressed. Thus, external and even alien goals of other social systems, first of all, those of neoliberal “economics” became dominant and determine not only *external* relations of Russian universities, but also their *internal* affairs.

⁹ Lat. “the part instead of the whole”.

It is true, that some kinds of vocational training, such as IT-professions, accounting, HR-management, architecture, landscape planning, etc. may gain from the paradigm change within the field of higher learning, where external goals are supplanting internal goals of the educational system, regarded as a whole (holistic) entity. However, the mentioned paradigm change is very “unfriendly” with the humanities. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt (*see*: Lauer, 2017) and Thorstein Veblen (1918) university education is not to be confused with the mere vocational training. From their perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic impact on classical university is rather pernicious, then neutral. The fact is that due to sanitary social isolation classical face-to-face education was flattened to unpretentious distant learning.

Under present unfavorable conditions, the so-called distant learning has virtually eliminated the classical face-to-face education. Furthermore, the interface phenomenon of learning via computer distorts the nature of human communication, depriving both teachers and students of the naturalness of immediate feedback. At any rate, no beneficial effects may be associated with the dominant system of electronic education, at least, if we focus on the humanities. Moreover, the computer interface drastically diminishes the quality of teachers’ monitoring and control of the adequacy of the students’ learning behavior.

The said paradigm change in the educational sphere simultaneously means the invisible “social revolution” within the electronic educational sphere. During the dominance of classical face-to-face model of education, it was the professor, who played the leading role in educational process. The absentee students were automatically presumed as would-be “non-students”. They were regarded as candidates for ex-matriculation after their almost inevitable failure during the examination session. But, under conditions of the ongoing pandemic the word “absentee” seems out of place. In the strict physical sense all are absent, because there is no common locality, where the presence or absence of someone could be easily registered. The mere fact that a student has joined the internet session, where his teacher is lecturing, does not mean, that - with his computer or telephone on - the said student has not gone to sleep, or gone to breakfast in the kitchen etc. Under these circumstances, there is no tool to discriminate between responsible minority of students and the ever growing irresponsible majority of them.

Legally the pandemic-induced dominance of the electronic education with its inevitable interface problem has generated the state of inequality between the academic staff and the corresponding student contingent. The point is that the professor is supposed to be not simply online, but also visible; he is not allowed to turn off his “picture”, when he pleases. But, the same rule is not applicable to students, they may freely manipulate their “interfaces”. They are also free to decide whether, when and how they are going to electronically contact their teachers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the inherent deficiency of the Russian educational model. The educational system in Russia is *legally* regarded as “one more” sector of services, akin to restaurant business, fitness business, tourism, entertainment business etc. The main principle of (private law) services boils down to the slogan: “The client is always right”. In other words, who pays the money for the service concerned, may question the quality of the rendered service. The client, so to say, hires those in charge for the corresponding service. In terms of education “the client” is an individual student, the “performer of services” is a corresponding teaching institution.

Thus, students qua “clients” acquire control functions vis-à-vis corresponding universities. If an individual student comes to the idea that he was not properly “served” in a concrete situation, then the university administration knows in advance, who is to blame. The scapegoat role is reserved for the academic rank and file. Thus, a dean of a law faculty may seriously flirt with the idea of eliminating Latin from the curriculum, because two or three notorious absentee students complained that Latin is a “very complicated discipline”.

As a **conclusion** one more verdict by Thorstein Veblen on the inevitable deficiency of university managerial staffs: “The salesman-like abilities and the men of affairs that ... are drawn into the academic personnel are, presumably, somewhat under grade in their kind; since the pecuniary inducement offered by the schools is rather low as compared with the remuneration for office work of a similar character in the common run of business occupations, and since businesslike employees of this kind may fairly be presumed to go unreservedly to the highest

bidder. Yet these more unscholarly members of the staff will necessarily be assigned the more responsible and discretionary positions in the academic organization; since under such a scheme of standardization, accountancy and control, the school becomes primarily a bureaucratic organization, and the first and unremitting duties of the staff are those of official management and accountancy” (Veblen, 1918, p. 167).

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