

How communists and liberals have been controlling science in Poland

by Piotr Jaroszyński

There was no shortage of debates in post-1989 Poland: about the fishing industry, power generation, unemployment, political vetting, emigration, privatization etc. etc. But there was no debate about the state of Polish science, its past or its future.

Polish science quietly went along with the so called systemic transformation as if bygones were bygones.

Despite its vividly red past, **Polish science was not subjected to decommunization** we witnessed in the former GDR where some 5,000 communism-supporting professors were sacked. In Poland things went smoothly. Too smoothly in fact.

Science in the Service of Socialism

Science was the darling of the state authorities throughout the Soviet bloc but not because the communist party officials were themselves exceptionally well educated disinterested seekers of truth. Communist ideology reserved an elevated position for science. Marxism described itself as a scientific world outlook, social change was being affected in a scientific manner, social awareness was being controlled scientifically, countries were managed scientifically and the entire world was supposed to be subjugated and subsequently run according to scientific rules.

On the other hand everything that was hostile towards communism or “backward” — e.g. Catholicism or capitalism — was branded as unscientific and condemned to elimination. Prime minister Józef Cyrankiewicz summed it up nicely during a ceremonial presentation of state prizes for scientific achievement: “The infertile ‘priesthood of knowledge’ is on its way out while the significantly social function of science is gaining appreciation” (*Życie nauki*, No. 5–6, 1951, p. 528).

While the authorities went about robbing the nation’s assets as part of the so called nationalization process, they gradually began imposing their ideology and centralized mechanisms on science. The ideological offensive consisted in injecting Marxism into science, mainly into the humanities — philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, Polish studies — at all levels of teaching and academic careers.

Marxism was an obligatory course in every field of study, including veterinary medicine and environmental engineering, while political (i.e., Marxist) economy was a course that had to be taken by every Ph.D. student. Centralization in its turn consisted in strict state controls imposed on all organized forms of academic and scientific life, which meant that the scientific community was effectively denied freedom and forced into a political straightjacket. Symbolic of those times was the naming in 1952 of Wrocław University after the then incumbent president Bolesław Bierut. This patron survived all the way up to 1989.

The Murdered Intellectual Elites

While visiting Auschwitz pope Benedict XVI recalled that one of the first things the occupiers of Poland tried to do during World War Two was “*eliminate the cultural elite*”, thereby preventing the Polish nation from remaining an autonomous “*historical subject*” and reducing it to a nation of slaves. Wrote a Polish professor just one year after the war: “*Having crushed the ten times weaker Polish army, the Germans, those vicious barbaric invaders who were fully aware of the unflinchingly patriotic stance of Polish scholars, deliberately turned on them in a bid to overturn this second, after the army, pillar of Polish identity*”. Hundreds of Polish professors, sometimes with their entire families, were murdered or thrown into concentration camps (G. Przychodzki, ‘Ogólne zagadnienia dotyczące zadań i potrzeb polskiej nauki’, *Życie nauki*, No. 1, 1946, pp. 69ff.). Then came **the Katyń massacre which symbolizes the Soviet assault on Polish intellectuals** — and which was something that could not be written or spoken about in post-war People’s Poland.

Ideology in the “Area of Professorship”

Despite the tremendous losses suffered by Poland’s academic community, scientific life was gradually being revived after the war. Higher education institutions reappeared and some 50 scientific societies were reactivated, including the Polish Academy of Abilities (Polska Akademia Umiejętności). However, the new political system quickly went about implementing its long-term designs.

The 1946 land reform stripped the scientific societies of their financial independence (by depriving them of their foundations), scientific research was subjected to censorship, the state monopoly in publishing was being expanded, and state authorities gave themselves arbitrary powers to remove professors from their university chairs (Ibid., p. 74).

The education system was reformed in 1948. The ideological framework of this reform was summed up by deputy minister of education Eugenia Krassowska at the inaugural meeting of the newly-formed Chief Council of Science and Higher Education: “*Universities must cooperate in the ideological process of upbringing the new man... We must throw the doors and windows of our higher education institutions wide open to the ideology of People’s Poland... The ideological transformation of higher education institutions can take place only in harmonious accord with the ideological transformation of our social and political life based on the ideology of the popular masses*” (E. Krassowska, ‘Ministerstwo Oświaty wobec nauki i szkół wyższych’, *Życie nauki*, No. 25–26, 1948, p. 20).

These declarations were applauded by president Bolesław Bierut attending the event. The message was clear: science shall be an integral part of the communist system which shall be enforcing its requirements institutionally.

These were still the early days of the pacification of the scientific community. A year later the very same deputy minister attending a plenary session of the same Chief Council delivered a paper titled “*Program Guidelines in the Area of Science and Higher Education*” containing this forceful statement: “*Science must employ its resources in the joint effort to lay the foundations of socialism. It must become a significant factor of progress in collective life*” (*Życie nauki*, No. 38, 1949, p. 130).

In her address she condemned the right-wing-and-nationalistic deviations demonstrated by some academic (and clerical) milieus, especially in the humanities. However, madam minister also noted positive developments “*in the area of science*” discernible in, for example, the

Institute of Literary Studies, the Łódź Institute of Sociology and the Warsaw Institute of History.

She said: “*We are observing increased activity of Marxist elements also in the humanities. The congress of historians held in Wrocław decided to set up a group of Marxist historians, with a similar group being formed by economists*” (Ibid., p. 134ff). There were also staff problems to overcome.

On the one hand care had to be taken not to brand all “*the old scientists as reactionaries*” and to be favorably disposed towards “*progressive*” professors, while on the other efforts had to be made to educate new cadres and put them in positions of authority. A turning point in these efforts to create new cadres came in 1963.

The authorities were very keen to promote “*processes of awareness transformation*” and “*higher ideological levels in the area of professorship*” (Ibid., p. 148) and also to modify study programs in line with the ongoing ideological changes. **Minister Krassowska** did not beat about the bush: “*We must definitely do away with the fiction of apolitical teaching at university level, and this will entail expanded teaching of world outlook-related subjects at all faculties (elements of Marxist philosophy)*” (Ibid., p. 156).

Polish Academy of Sciences vs. Polish Academy of Abilities

The authorities continued to face problems in their bid to take control of the scientific community, being confronted with opposition within the community itself. The country’s largest scientific organization was the Polish Academy of Abilities (PAU) boasting a fine tradition going back to 1815 when it was established as the Scientific Society, to be renamed the Academy of Abilities in 1872 and the Polish Academy of Abilities in 1919.

The PAU was not a state institution but a sovereign society of scholars who continued to offer stiff resistance to the communist regime, being very aware of the unfolding drama. This resistance prompted the idea to create “*a central organ coordinating scientific research*” and “*developing guidelines for scientific research planning*”. The result was the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), modeled primarily after the Soviet Academy of Sciences considered to be the leading institution of its kind in the world (Ibid., p. 143).

The Polish Academy of Sciences was established in 1951 at the First Congress of Polish Science — at the height of Stalinist terror in Poland. **Professor Jan Dembowski**, about to be appointed the first president of the PAN, ended his speech with this appeal: “*I call upon all participants of this Congress to speak out freely, to be creative and to join the efforts to transform our science, to bring it in line with the needs of our country which is toiling to develop a new social system, the socialist system, to the benefit of itself and the entire mankind*” (*Życie nauki*, No. 7–8, 1951, p. 650). Polish science was thus made part of the plan to install socialism globally.

It is puzzling to note that PAN’s official website contains a glossed-over account of the institution’s history. There is not a single reference to “communism”, “socialism”, “totalitarianism”, “ideology”, “Stalinism” or “Bierut”. One wonders why all this is being swept under the carpet. It is not enough to speak of “new systemic conditions” and “heated discussions”.

Back then the consciences of professors were being trampled, the backbone of Polish science was being crushed. Science was no longer to pursue truth but to serve an ideology.

The pressure unleashed on the scientific community must have been tremendous indeed if the two largest (and non-state-controlled) scientific societies — the Polish Academy of Abilities and the Warsaw Scientific Society — not only voiced their support for the establishment of a single, central state institution, but also threw the towel in, gave up their own activities, and handed over to the PAN “*their entire heritage, experience, operational scientific and research facilities and property*” (Ibid., pp. 663, 665). Today, when one reads the speeches delivered by professors Kazimierz Nitsch and Waław Sierpiński in which they declared that the societies which they headed had become “irrelevant” now that there was to be a single central organization, one feels shivers running down one’s spine. These were very intelligent people and they must have known they were witnessing a total reevaluation of the sense underlying Polish science.

The Chief Council of Science and Higher Education was subordinated to the relevant minister while the PAN answered to the Government Presidium. Both organizations thus acquired a strictly political character. The role model to be emulated by Polish scientists was the physicist and communist F. Joliot Curie, described by prime minister Józef Cyrankiewicz at the Congress of Polish Science as “*presenting an exemplary stance of the scholar-fighter*” (Ibid., p. 659).

Central Commission: Nothing but Concern for the Quality of Science?

The third organ used by the authorities to control the scientific community was the Central Qualification Commission for Scientific Staff established in 1951. The status, scope of operations and even the name of this organ kept changing right up to recent years. The legal regulations governing it were never collected in a single publication which makes it difficult to follow all these changes which were occasioned mostly by the various political breakthroughs that rocked post-war Poland.

Initially, the Central Commission was the organ responsible for conferring the scientific titles of assistant professor (*docent*), associate professor and full professor and for approving resolutions conferring the scientific degrees of candidate of science and doctor of science (M. Jaroszyński, *Prawo pracowników naukowych*, Wrocław, 1971, p. 117).

In 1958 the Central Commission was renamed the Qualification Commission and subordinated to the PAN which, as we recall, was itself subordinated to the Government Presidium. The scopes of operation of the Chief Council and Qualification Commission now began to overlap, and the people affected were the scientists which were being forced to scale an increasing number of steps in their careers, all the while struggling for positive opinions and reviews from the powers that be.

Titles and Degrees, Commissions and Reviews

The distinction between scientific degrees and titles is a veritable curiosity which the man in the street cannot fathom easily. Between the two world wars and immediately after World War Two the master's and doctor's degrees were the lower- and higher-level scientific degrees, respectively. In 1951, following the Soviet example, these degrees were replaced with candidate of science and doctor of science, while the master's degree signified only that its holder received a higher education school graduation diploma.

From 1920 to 1958 assistant professor was not a scientific degree but a function, and the post-doctoral degree (*habilitacja*) gave scholars the right to lecture at higher education institutions. In 1958 the doctor of science degree became the lower-level scientific degree and assistant professor the higher-level scientific degree.

The Education Act of 1951 introduced a new category, never before present in Polish science — the scientific title. There were six such titles: full professor, associate professor, assistant professor (*docent*), lecturer, senior assistant and assistant.

In 1958 the scientific titles were limited to just full and associate professor. Before that date professorships were being conferred by the education minister and since 1958 by the Council of State.

As of 1965 scientific titles were being conferred by the Council of State while scientific degrees once again by the minister (Scientific Secretariat of the PAN). All these changes are hard to trace and as far back as 1971 a lawyer loyal to the communist authorities had no qualms about referring to the whole situation as “a tangle of regulations governing scientific positions, degrees and titles” (*ibid.*, p. 85).

World Leaders

The situation begs the question, Why was this complex system, this “tangle”, put in place? The answer is simple.

All this had nothing to do with developing science or facilitating proper careers of scholars. The point was to provide the authorities with a means of controlling scientists during the entire period of their employment.

Such control was easier with this elaborate system of “scientific titles and degrees” in hand, which is much like the hierarchy of state positions introduced by the reformist tsar Peter the Great.

The situation that emerged was aptly described by W. Rolbiecki: *“The key ‘achievement’ in this respect was the extraordinary proliferation of formal scientific career steps, namely the various degrees and titles. There are now seven of these, not counting the master’s degree, which ranks Poland at the very top of the table, way ahead of Western European or North American countries. Scientific staff spend most of their adult life climbing these steps. The requirement to do so is one of the most potent controlling factors determining not just the research they do but indeed the way they behave. This in turn is no doubt ‘beneficial’ in terms of stabilizing and tranquilizing this social group, but it also has an equally obvious detrimental effect on the selection of research topics and the moral and professional stance of scholars. The system forcing one to continually strive to acquire one degree and title after another, with the attendant need to keep winning the favors of the ‘elders’ who may one day be-*

come examiners, reviewers or committee members judging one's academic achievements, breeds conformist attitudes, inevitably undermining one's moral integrity and being conducive to negative selection in this regard" (W. Rolbiecki, 'Walka o kierownictwo i organizację nauki w Polsce w latach 1944–1951', in: *Zagadnienia naukoznawstwa*, No. 3–4, 1982, p. 224).

Although written more than 20 years ago, these words remain eerily topical. We continue to live in this "tangle" of scientific degrees and titles which instead of promoting genuine creativity generates conformism towards individuals (reviewers, commission members), in subject matter selection and towards the currently reigning ideology (also within the scientific community itself). Once upon a time the stress in science was on "scientific nature" and "progress", while today "dialog" and "openness" are de rigueur. Words like "truth" are met with derision and embarrassment.

Science Control Today

All three organs established by the communist authorities in the blackest days of Stalinism to control science — the Chief Council of Higher Education, the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Central Commission for Academic Titles and Degrees — survived the 1989 political watershed. Today the least politicized of the three is the Polish Academy of Sciences. The Chief Council, subordinated directly to the minister of science, concerns itself with "*all matters relating to higher education and science*" (e.g. legislation, budgets, statutes of higher education institutions) and remains a political body. It "*helps develop the educational policies of the state*" but only provides opinions and does not make any decisions. The current situations makes for an unstable educational system in Poland. With politics present in science and teaching, each new cabinet strives to promote the ideology it espouses, cancels any ongoing reforms replacing them with ones of their own making— which in turn get thrown out the window by the next cabinet to assume power.

Lining Up For Titles

The most powerful of the trio is the Central Commission for Academic Titles and Degrees as this is in fact a decision-making body. As recently as 2005 it was still granting organizational units in the education system the right to confer scientific degrees, the higher doctor's degree (D.Sc.) and the right to propose candidates for professorships to the President of Poland.

Today the Central Commission has less powers with regard to post-doctoral degrees. Higher doctor's degree holders and professors are independent scientific staffers forming the essential backbone of faculties, departments and entire higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions must employ a certain number of such staffers in order to receive the right to confer master's and doctor's degrees. We are thus talking about the scientific elite, a highly sensitive element of the science and education system.

This issue is rarely taken up by academic staff because raising it could cause trouble for candidates aspiring to titles and degrees and for a given academic community, while master's degree holders are not interested and ordinary citizens do not understand the problem at all. Simply put, formulating controversial opinions about the Central Commission is like dancing on an upright razor blade. All the more reason to dwell on the subject.

Efforts to improve the scientific qualification of academics are very important for both the science and education systems. The problem is objectivity and reliability of opinions and decisions involved.

In communist Poland the Central Commission was very effective in controlling and, whenever required, blocking the award of post-doctoral degrees and professorships to objectionable individuals or members of objectionable milieus — especially right-wing and Catholic ones.

The question now is whether, all the recent changes notwithstanding, the mechanisms still in place continue to be effective tools of ideological, community or personal control. Can we say that the Central Commission is to some extent a relic of communist Poland?

Simple Control Mechanisms

There is much to suggest that this is indeed so, that the Central Commission is a relic from the days of communist Poland. Let us look at just some points. Professorships are supposed to be awarded primarily based on the candidates' work after the post-doctoral degree which must be deemed an original contribution to the scientific discipline in hand. This is a very sound requirement.

But who makes the relevant decisions? The decision-making body is the Presidium of the Central Commission. And are the Presidium members experts in the scientific disciplines involved? In most cases, the answer to this question must be no.

Let us see how the mechanism works in practice. The rector of a higher education institution submits a professorship candidacy to the Central Commission based on a petition from the relevant faculty council supported by three reviews provided by professors.

The Central Commission consists of eight sections and its Presidium comprising the chairperson, two deputy chairpersons and heads of the eight sections.

The Humanities Section numbers some 50 persons representing around 20 scientific disciplines ranging from management science to bibliology, psychology, sociology and philosophy. The "humanity sciences", as they are descriptively called, form a collection of diverse disciplines with diverse methodologies, objects of study and goals, a fact well known to all those who studied science methodology or wrote a master's or doctoral thesis. Are we to assume that the Commission members are sufficiently familiar with the achievements in all these disciplines to judge someone's work — at post-doctoral or professorship level at that?

This is not very likely. In fact I would say it is downright impossible. That said, the Central Commission may bring in reviewers to help make the required assessments. True, but it turns out the reviewers do not have to be experts in the discipline in question but may be representatives of related sciences! This means that the work of a philosopher may end up being reviewed by a sociologist. It may indeed, but only based on Marxist methodology according to which philosophy is a variety of sociology.

Following its latest amendment in 2005, the Act on Higher Education provides for greater leeway still in appointing reviewers from related disciplines. Marxist was retained in the science methodology being employed to select reviewers — which is not surprising if we look at the work of representatives of the humanity sciences and of the appointed reviewers and see

all their publications betraying a deep commitment to Marxism. It thus happens that a Marxist (ex-Marxist?) ends up reviewing the work of a candidate from the Catholic milieu while falling back on Marxist devices and methodologies which he or she assumes to be scientific.

Reviewers are in a comfortable situation in that the person whose work is being reviewed is left out of the process and cannot respond to the reviewers' criticisms, if any. It is a kangaroo court situation. Consider: persons aspiring to professorship, already recognized scholars conducting independent research, have no right to present substantive arguments against accusations being thrown at them!

This is not only an offence against the rules of scientific discourse and ordinary common sense but is in fact a violation of basic laws, to mention but Articles 10 and 11 of the Polish Code of Administrative Procedure referring to hearing of parties involved in a dispute. It is truly astonishing that such lawlessness should be taking place at the very pinnacle of science.

Applications are being processed by the various sections of the Central Commission but these have no decision-making powers, remaining just opinion-providing bodies. The decisions to confer professorships are being made by the Presidium comprising at best representatives of 11 out of the 80 or so existing scientific disciplines. This means that the Presidium may issue decisions with regard to the scientific accomplishments of a candidate while being unfamiliar with the scientific discipline involved. The Presidium too is in a comfortable position because it votes by secret ballot and therefore does not have to come up with any detailed justification of its decisions. To think of all the arbitrariness in this process! And there is just no way to challenge and discuss the verdicts!

Breeding Ground of Pathologies

The described procedure may lead to serious pathologies, leaving the affected professorship candidates quite powerless to counter the wrong being inflicted upon them. They are simply left out of the process. Candidates rejected by the Central Commission may appeal against the decision through their faculty council. Such appeals stand little chance of success.

The next steps involve litigation in the Administrative, Regional and, finally, the Supreme Courts. The courts are in a comfortable situation in that they do not review the substance of the argument to decide who is right and who is wrong, but merely examine whether the required procedures were followed correctly.

In most cases the procedure cannot be challenged and even if some irregularities are detected, these are soon remedied by the Central Commission which then reiterates its verdict. And we are back in square one, having spent months going through each stage of the legal process. Given the number of these stages, we are looking at several years of futile hassle.

trnasl. Hugh McDonald